LOST SUNRISE

KATHLEEN NORRIS

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To Nellie

Enchanting baby, charmed by the recital
    Of the long tale of Poppy and of Mary,
    Your story-teller, lest your fancy vary
And you demand a narrative more vital,
Being first among the many who adore you,
Sets for some later hour this book before you.

LOST SUNRISE

CHAPTER I

KENTHILL at last, and the bus stopping at East and Market streets! The sleepy little California town, snuggled down among vineyards and orchards on Putah Creek, with Napa forty and Sacramento eighty miles distant, was one of the hardest places in the state to reach, somehow! Unless of course one had a car, as everyone did have these days, and could flash along white wide roads with only an occasional glance at signboards and an occasional stop for gas. But Polly Henderson, assistant librarian in Sacramento's public library, had not yet risen to a financial position that justified the dignity of owning her own automobile. Tugging at the heavy suitcase, she came finally to a familiar corner of the town and gave an audible sigh of relief. This was the right place; that was certainly the old Washburton house over there under the magnificent rise of foliage on elms and maples. The quiet village street was lined with great trees that took something from its air of genteel shabbiness and decay on this soft June morning. But the houses all said "poverty" as only old neglected houses can say it.

They all needed paint; they needed new curtains; they needed the firm hand of a professional gardener. What repairing they showed on a mended gate here and a replaced porch step there was of an amateurish description. Old barns that had been turned into garages dated them unmistakably. There was even a windmill or two in evidence, its flanges standing still in the hot summer air.

Polly panted her way to a certain gate, opened it, went up a straggling path bordered with inverted stout bottle ends. Some of the bottles were missing and some of the fence poles were missing, but this had once been a handsome home, and it still announced the fact. The defective and paintless fence poles were delicate in shape and set in deep elegant curves; the house was built of brick and had a fine spread of library and parlors on either side of the wide hall; the door was of a good design, with fanlights above and slender many-paned windows set down either side.

The door was open now, and a girl crossing the hall with a newspaper bundle of dead flowers and rubbish and wet clipped flower stems stopped, gave a shrill scream of joy, set down her burden and flew at the arrival with open arms and wild kisses.

"Polly!" she shouted. And then to other members of the family unseen: "Mom! Kip! Polly's here! Oh, darling," she went on, having grabbed the suitcase and placed a welcoming arm about her guest, "we thought you couldn't get here until the two o'clock!"

"Like an idiot," the newcomer explained as, hot and still breathing hard, she wiped her wet forehead, "like an idiot I took the train to Newcome Crossing and waited for the bus. And of course the bus was late. I should have been here at eleven!"

She was addressing a larger audience now, for a stout beaming woman in a faded bungalow apron had come out to greet her, accompanied by a staring boy of ten, and another girl—this one older than the first—had skimmed like a beautiful bird of paradise down the stairway and joined the excitement with more kissing, exclaiming and embracing.

"Well, here's our bride! Let me look at you," said Polly Henderson, holding the last arrival at arm's length. "Sheila, you're thin! But darn it, your looks still make me *tired*!"

At this they all laughed joyously and sympathetically, for Polly was of the sweet, lean, homely rugged type that never by any chance is rated as pretty, and Sheila Washburton, for every one of her twenty-seven years, had been the prettiest girl in any group she happened to adorn.

"Oh, Polly," said the girl who had found her first, in a tone of fervent gratitude, "now you're here I really believe Sheila is going to get married tomorrow!"

Everyone laughed again, and Sheila said teasingly:

"Gwen's favorite compliment is that there isn't going to be any wedding after all!"

They were all going upstairs now, helping to install the visitor in the guest room, anxious to give her the whole story at once. How surprised everyone had been when Link Baker and Sheila had quietly announced it, and how plans had been suddenly accelerated by his acceptance of the big litigation case out at the mine, and how Sheila had said first that she wanted to be married in slacks and a bandana, by old Judge Spencer, and how Mother had been simply horrified and had insisted on a church wedding, and how it had gradually grown from a home wedding to a church wedding and from a going-away suit to white crape satin and Grandmother Washburton's veil . . .

Polly, listening and thrilled as she brushed her hair and cold-creamed her face and changed into something cool, could not hear enough. She had not been to the Washburton house for at least five years, but before that she had been a neighbor and Sheila's idol and closest friend. She had taken courses in library work and passed her civil-service examinations long before Sheila had, but for two years they had worked together in the Kenthill public library before Polly had been moved to Sacramento. Through the years they had kept in touch; seeing each other whenever Sheila went to Sacramento, and more than once going off for a week end or a brief holiday together. She had refused to be a bridesmaid, with Gwen and Maude Miller, but she was interested in every detail, and somehow her presence, as Gwen presently told her, made everything seem more thrilling than ever.

Sheila's mother, with a final warning that she wanted them to come downstairs on the stroke of half past twelve, because luncheon was eggs and they wouldn't wait, had departed, and Sheila's small cousin Kip had gone, too.

Gwen brought in the bridesmaids' dresses, very simple but as fresh and pretty, Polly said at once, as a June wedding deserved. Peach-colored mull with dark blue ribbons; there were peach-colored flowers on the broad dark blue chip hats.

"Miss Fuller's to be here all afternoon in case Maude's needs a little changing," Gwen explained eagerly. "Mine's the pinkish; Maude's a shade darker. Aunt Phil sent Sheila two hundred and fifty dollars, wasn't that delish?"

"Everything's delish now," Sheila explained, with a patient smile for Polly.

"Oh yes, we have that in the library, too," Polly answered; "this book is delish, and the other book isn't so delish. I suppose it'll pass like everything else."

"Like the miniature golf courses and putting mud on your face," Gwen supplied, with her own peculiar vitality and spirit. Polly looked at her sharply.

"Gwen, what have you done for yourself? You look sort of—picturesque," she said, hesitating for the word. She glanced at Sheila. "Is she pretty, or am I mistaken?" she asked.

"Nobody's pretty with Sheila in the family," Gwen complained.

Sheila stopped her as she was off to get some of the wedding presents to show Polly, squared her about with slender hands on her shoulders.

"I think my little sister's more than pretty," she said. Gwen flushed with pleasure and shyness. "And she's pretty good to me!" Sheila went on. "I couldn't get married without Gwen. Lists and announcements and checking this and that, and counting plates and washing china and answering the telephone——"

"But it's the most fun I ever had!" Gwen protested.

"She's getting as much thrill out of it as——" Sheila began, when Gwen had left the room. She stopped short. Polly looked at her with a keen, gray-eyed gaze.

"You weren't going to say 'as I am'?"

"Well, if I was, that wasn't what I meant!" Sheila confessed, laughing. "I'm getting everything I ever wanted, and I've had some beaus in my day! Link's everything. He's handsome in that gawky, honest, Lincolny kind of way that's been the only kind of handsome I ever liked. That's why they call him 'Link'; everyone calls him Link. He's thirty-five, eight years older than I am, which Mother says is perfect. He's a lawyer, you know, but somehow there's nothing stodgy about it. He was private secretary to the governor of the state while he was in law school, and he loves politics and making speeches! It sounds as if he might get into something thrilling someday, doesn't it? Washington perhaps, or maybe some consulate or mission, something like that. And then—this sounds silly, but Link's terribly good. Just old-fashioned *good*. I mean straight and square and serious and—well, everything! I've waited, and now I've got what I want. And I adore him!"

Tears came into her eyes. She laughed through them.

"What brought him to Kenthill, Sheila?"

"The big case at the Lone Star Mine. Link's representing the owners, and the prosecution is being carried on through the Federal courts. Some case! If he wins it, he says himself it'll make him famous."

"Fun for Mrs Lincoln Baker."

"His real name is James Gunther Baker. But even the papers, talking of the case, call him Link. I'd known him a week before I knew his real name. He's from a tremendously American family, Boston and Back Bay and all that, but he took his law work out here. They all moved out to Sacramento

about fifteen years ago. He's a junior member of a firm there, Cutler & McIntosh."

"He sounds our representative American. I see you in Washington giving lunches for senators' wives."

"I shouldn't wonder. Anyway, it'll be a career," Sheila said contentedly. "He's ambitious."

"You'll have to start right in and have four little boys, Sheila."

"Well—give me time!" Sheila protested, her face crimsoning despite her sophisticated drawl and shrug. "No, the only time we ever spoke of children," she added, "was once when there was a particularly darling little girl up in Haddon's Park one Sunday. Link and I were just beginning to find out how we felt about each other then, and we were sitting there—we'd been riding two of Kane's old hacks—and Link said—no, I said something about the child and what fun it would be to have a baby like that, and he went positively white—really he did!—and said, 'Your child, Sheila! That would be too much happiness, wouldn't it?' So you see," finished Sheila, "we really do love each other in the old-fashioned, romantic way.—There's the lunch bell. I don't know," she added gaily, "whether he ties my letters up in lavender ribbons or not, but considering the age we live in he's very satisfactory."

They were going downstairs now. Polly delayed her to say:

"I'm amazed at Gwendolyn. She's grown up."

"Hasn't she? She's really a wonderful person, Gwen."

"And she's so good-*looking*, Sheila. Her mouth is perfectly fascinating. I never saw such white teeth and such red lips and such a brown skin. And her eyes, too—we used to think they were small. But they're quite lovely! They've got so much expression."

"She's darling," Sheila said, almost absently.

"You couldn't call her pretty," Polly mused. "But what a—what a *woman* she is! How old is Gwen? Twenty?"

"Twenty-two last week. Yes, I know what you mean, Polly. She's got force somehow—character. She really has character. She can talk to anyone. She even keeps Dad in order."

"She was always like that. But she's got looks now."

“Yes, if ever there was an ugly duckling come to life, it’s Gwen. She had those awful bands on her teeth for years, all the time you knew her, I guess. She was always falling over things and biting her nails. She doesn’t like her looks now,” Sheila said. “She didn’t get the Cushing eyes, and she doesn’t think anything else counts. But I love Gwen’s looks, and so does Link.”

A tall man came in the opened front door as they descended the stairs, and Polly looked on with satisfaction and a little thrill as Sheila went into his arms. She heard their easy laughter.

“Do you happen to have an engagement tomorrow, Miss Washburton?”

“I’ll have to look at my book, Mr Baker!”

“Darling, the extra names have at last come from my mother. I thought I’d rush up with them. I just got the car back, polished and policed and all ready.”

“All but the rice and ribbons.”

“We’ll fool them on that. I don’t mind—— How do you do, Miss Henderson?” Link Baker said smilingly, as he was introduced. “I’ve heard more about you than about the cherry crop this month.”

“Well, you can imagine what I’ve heard about you!” Polly answered, flustered and laughing.

“Look in the sitting room, Link, and see what Gwen has done with the Billingses’ white lilac!”

“I had ’em in the bathtub all night,” Gwen herself said from the dining-room doorway, “and all that happened was that water leaked down through the ceiling of the library. However, nobody’ll see anything in there tomorrow except the presents, so it doesn’t matter! Come on, everyone. It’s eggs!”

Creased and battered shades were drawn in the dining room, but still the air was hot, and the arrows of sunshine that pierced through the creaks and slits were blazing like swords. Heavy new leaves drooped in the dooryard; an occasional fly came in from the kitchen on a wave of the scent of coffee and of frying. But the eggs, scrambled with fresh tomatoes, were delicious; there was plenty of brown bread and butter, plenty of iced tea, and tomorrow was Sheila’s wedding day, after all; the fact enough in itself to insure a sense of gala and gaiety in the circle.

The joyous, affectionate, talkative Washburtons, Polly thought, as she watched and listened. They had been like this years ago, sitting down ten or

a dozen to every meal, chattering and noisy, teasing their stout placid mother, infinitely generous toward the gentle unsuccessful inventor who was their father, adoring each other through all their quarrels and arguments. A lonely child herself, her only sister much older, fatherless daughter of an almost silent mother, Polly had once loved the Washburton house as a place representing all that her own cramped young life lacked, all that it wanted.

She saw more clearly today. She reflected that there must have been plenty of bad management, of slipshod inefficiency, to reduce the once substantial family fortune to almost nothing, to force nineteen-year-old Peter junior to a job, rather than a college career, to put eager, handsome Gwen into an office position. The Washburtons had once been the town's great folk; the Washburton Memorial Library, Washburton Street, Washburton Bridge all attested it. A portrait of the first Peter Washburton hung in the courtroom at the City Hall—bearded, pioneer Peter, who had come to Sutter's Fort in a covered wagon in 1849.

Polly saw the stained old wallpaper, the ragged carpet, the nicked fine cups and plates. She saw Gwen leap for fresh bread; saw Peter scraping plates quite as a matter of course when the first course was finished.

The second course was more iced tea, a fresh bowl of cracked ice, another enormous bowl of cherries, and some cubes of stale gingerbread. Supper, Gwen announced, as well as breakfast tomorrow, would be a stand-up meal in the kitchen. Those who didn't like it might go downtown to Mack's Cafeteria.

This was greeted with a shout of laughter. Having meals in the kitchen was all a part of Sheila's marriage, and they loved every phase of it.

They were ten today. Beside Peter senior—a quiet, white-whiskered old man with dreaming eyes, who told Polly in an aside about the patents that were going to make him a rich man—and the ruddy, sturdy mistress of the house, there were Polly herself and Gwen, Peter junior, rather tired and tumbled from work at the mill, but with his black hair very slick and his face and hands clean, and a younger boy, Kip, the child of Mrs Washburton's dead brother who had been a member of the family for several years. Then there were the dressmaker, silent, eyeglassed, pleasant, with a fat pincushion on her high breast; Link Baker; slim, capable, impatient little Aunt Sis, who was eternally attempting to bring the whole family, and her own lazy Washburton husband as well, up to her own standards of New England thrift and energy.

And finally, of course, there was Sheila, tomorrow's bride, and as beautiful in her flowered shirt and shabby old slacks as she would be even in her wedding finery tomorrow. Sheila at twenty-seven had hardly reached the zenith of her extraordinary beauty; it was not flashing beauty; there was nothing startling about it. But when the superficial glances of any newcomer to Kenthill had approved Maude Miller's flawless blonde perfection and Gloria Nuttall's statuesque brunette loveliness, he was sure to say, with all the pleasure of one who makes a unique discovery: "I'll tell you who's a beauty. That—Washburton, was it? That Washburton girl. Yes, sir, she's as good-looking as the others, if not better-looking. Why don't some of the boys go after *her*?"

At which Kenthill was apt to smile. For from her high-school days Sheila Washburton had enjoyed a male idolatry that came close to being universal.

Today she was a little pale, but all the lovelier for that. Her hair, already tied snugly into the waves and curls of the wedding hair-do, was of the same warm golden brown as her skin. But her eyes were purple-blue, and the deep fringes of her lashes and the clean line of her brows were almost black. The nose was straight and fine and the scarlet mouth was small—too small, Sheila herself thought. "It gives me a pouty, spoiled sort of look," she said.

But, as always with rare young beauty, it was not the separate quality of feature that made Sheila's face irresistible in charm where another of the same sort might have been a blank. It was the infinitesimal gradations in the placing of the wide, innocent eyes; the length of cheekbone that gave a hint of austerity to the shape of her face; the cloud of gold-brown spun silk at the temples that lay so lightly against the gold-brown skin. And it was the intelligence that animated the whole; the flash of her eyes; the quick laughing speech that was characteristic of the Washburtons; the superb consciousness of and indifference to her own loveliness that made it possible for her to come to this luncheon with the man who was so soon to be her husband and face him calmly from under the bandeau of fine cheesecloth that bound her hair. Sheila was too sure of her looks ever to consider them. Kenthill girls told each other that she was simply crazy to go to a picnic with poison-oak all over her face; that she was just an idiot to gray herself and wrinkle herself for the dictatorial aunt's part in *The Swan*. But Sheila Washburton calmly did these things and a hundred others that proved that the priceless gift that was her beauty was not her only gift.

There were not many eligible men in Kenthill. Sheila had had her pick—or might have had her pick—of them all. Other men, in town for a short or

long period, had burned incense at the shrine of the girl who handed them out their books at the public library, and advised the small schoolboys and the town's old ladies with just as much concern as she did them. But Sheila had waited.

And Link Baker, Polly thought, was worth waiting for.

"It's what she's always wanted," she thought. "A man so big that she can afford to admire him and be ornamental and have all the other men think how lucky he is. She'll only have to do one tenth of what I'd have to do as a wife, supposing anyone ever wanted me for a wife! If she gives him a son someday he'll be all reverence over the miracle, all admiration of her courage. And if it's a daughter he'll put her right beside her mother, up on a pedestal. 'Aren't they marvelous? Aren't they beautiful?' he'll ask everyone for the rest of his days.

"Funny," Polly mused on, as the joyous noontide babel went on about her, and Miss Fuller smiled demurely through her spectacles, and the man of the house muttered to himself as he studied a penciled list he had taken from his pocket. "Funny that just sheer beauty should make such a difference in a woman's destiny! Not that Sheila hasn't more than beauty. But actually—actually—I shouldn't wonder if Gwen turned out to be the more interesting woman!"

And she looked at Gwen, who was managing affairs at her end of the table, managing them with a force and capability that Sheila never had shown, even in such trifling matters. Gwen was running the haphazard luncheon definitely and efficiently, and Polly presently discovered that she was running the wedding as well. There was a great deal still to be done, and it was Gwen who was not only systematizing it and directing it but taking the lion's share on her own shoulders.

Presents and callers straggled in all through the afternoon. Great sheaves of white flowers arrived, sent from this neighboring garden or that; Miss Fuller's sewing machine never stopped buzzing. In the kitchen there was pandemonium; colored Tryrena Washington and her married daughter Goldina were there, working away among pyramids of plates, piles of napkins, boxes of food. Flies came in through holes in the screen door and were shooed and swatted at intervals; frosting hardened everywhere but on the big cake; the pan under the icebox overflowed in the confusion, and suddenly the laundry floor was awash.

Tryrena had made the cake two days earlier, and ordinarily there would have been no complications about the icing and about setting the silver bells

and the tiny sugar bride and groom firmly in its center. But Tryrena had determined upon extraordinary effects for this great occasion. A friend had told her to cover her cake first with inch-deep almond paste, and the shelling, scalding, blanching, chopping of these almonds had kept the kitchen disorderly for days, and in the end the frosting had refused to harden over the almond paste.

So Tryrena, with a thousand other things to do, was hanging absorbedly over the now somewhat squashed and sloppy cake, and perhaps the most arduous of Gwen's many duties was that of concealing the true state of affairs from Sheila, who was supposedly to cut the cake on the morrow. Sheila, fortunately, rarely came into the kitchen. She was very good and very thorough about whatever tasks were assigned her, but they were not often kitchen tasks.

This morning she had brushed down the long straight wide stairway and put signs at top and bottom to warn anyone with "spilly things like flowers or excelsior" not to use them. She had washed the panes of glass in the windows that framed the doorway; there was nothing small or snobbish about Sheila. She didn't care if neighbors saw her at this menial work on the day before her wedding day. There was a gentle nobility about her, Gwen had often thought, that made whatever she did dignified and becoming.

Polly helped Gwen place an improvised arch against the gracious bay window that jutted into the shabby front garden and had a white double banksia rosebush for an outdoor decoration. They continued this with an indoor decoration of the same flowers and set the magnificent old Dresden vases, from which rose the proud stalks of madonna lilies, on either side. Homelier vases, glass fruit jars and bowls set about the room, were wreathed with well-washed ivy leaves and filled with great branches of lilac, syringa, bridal wreath. The scent of the flowers was sweet in the dilapidated, elegant old rooms.

CHAPTER II

SHEILA was to be married at noon, the hundred guests to be entertained immediately after the simple ceremony at "breakfast." Breakfast, however, would not consist of the familiar homely toast and coffee, orange juice and scrambled eggs. No, it was to be sandwiches, chicken salad, coffee, cake and ice cream. And no earlier than this very afternoon of the wedding eve old Judge Spencer hopelessly complicated their plans by sending the bride a case of champagne. This threw everything out.

How much coffee to make now? Who would take it, who would take wine, who would take both? Old white-ribboner Mrs Berry would be horrified at their serving it at all, yet serve it they must, for Judge Spencer was an all-powerful influence in their affairs.

Champagne meant that all the glasses must be lifted down from long years of retirement on the upper shelf of the hall closet, washed and wiped and set on tables somewhere. It meant indeed that other glasses must be borrowed—the Renfrews' and the Rossiters' glasses. Almost everyone would want to toast the bride.

"No matter how much you think you've done in advance," Gwen said, panting, "Christmas and weddings are always a form of major convulsion!"

She stood, hands on hips, surveying the living room. A disheveled gypsy, in a faded cotton blouse and old flannel slacks, yet Polly, looking at her, realized that someday Gwen Washburton would be called beautiful. Never pretty, never blooming or girlish or June-like, no. She was not that type. She was tall, with wide shoulders and slim hips; her cloud of fine black hair was carelessly pushed back today; she wore it loose in careless curls with a deep black bang touching her black eyebrows. The deep-set eyes were fine, keen, intelligent, well placed, if they had none of the deerlike openness and clearness of her mother's and Sheila's eyes; her wide, sweet, mobile mouth was exquisite, and a perfect flash of white teeth showed dazzling in the even brown of her thin, rather long face when she smiled.

But, as with Sheila, it was in the contours of the face that the charm, a hidden and elusive charm, lay. The rather long cheek-modeling, the clean line of the chin and the hint of a cleft in its center, the molding of the low forehead under its picturesque fringe, and the blunt tip to the nose all had

made Gwen a rather odd-looking, serious-looking little girl, but were all somehow attractive now. Polly watched her today as much as she did Sheila, and wondered what her thoughts were, and what her life here was.

"You'll be next, I suppose, Gwen?"

"Who? I? Don't fool yourself. I'm a born old maid."

Polly looked at her steadily, unsmiling, and Gwen flushed suddenly, as if she were ashamed. She laughed defensively.

"Don't say things like that," Polly said. "No girl of—what are you? Twenty-two? No girl that age is a born old maid."

"You think every girl ought to marry?" Gwen was tired now; the afternoon had waned to a warm sunset; she was lying flat on her bed, resting for a few minutes before the supper preparations must begin and the whole group must file to church for a rehearsal. Into the big airy upper bedroom garden scents were drifting. Polly, tired herself, and sunk into a dilapidated old chair, sat where she could see high pear branches waving their new leaves. The two women were alone.

"No," Polly said hesitantly. "I don't think that—quite. But I know that every woman, given the right circumstances, would marry at one time or another in her life."

"Given the right circumstances," Gwen echoed. "But Kenthill does not supply the right circumstances," she said. "What boys are here? I could name them on my right hand. Fat Joel Turner; the snippy Carter boy who was born with—and will die with—a cold in his head; Phil Phillips. The Saunders boys, who'll have piles of money, flash home from Yale, bring two other boys and three girls here for a visit, come to one of the summer dances and are terribly democratic and friendly, and then go off to Catalina or Tahoe, and that's that. Sheila had the pick of the lot; she could have had Arthur Rice, or for that matter old Graham Rice, or that Major Routledge who was here, or Doctor Butler. But they're all alike, just—*men*. Link's different. He's—exciting."

"Here's a thing I was thinking the other day," Polly said suddenly, after a pause when she had continued to watch the girl on the bed. "Years ago Paul Kindler lived in Kenthill."

"I know he did. He came back last year, and the whole place went crazy," Gwen said, opening her eyes in interest.

"Exactly. He married a Kenthill girl, too, you know."

"I know. And a pretty dowdy, complacent, tame little party she is too," Gwen said with a laugh. "No make-up, and a sort of gum-colored dress and gum-colored hair, and every other word 'Paulson says' and 'when Paulson and I were in Europe.' Pretty well pleased with herself, Louise Lucas!"

"Well, she had smartness enough to marry him!" Polly said. "He was just a lumbering big boob of a boy over in the Lockwood Mill when Louise began asking him to supper, reading books with him, making him feel important. Of course all this was twenty—well, almost twenty years ago; I'm not speaking of your time. She couldn't do anything very exciting, being the minister's daughter. It wasn't a question of beer parties and night clubs and running around in a car. He was making eighteen dollars and fifty cents a week when they were married."

Gwen turned on her side, studied her companion curiously.

"And what makes you think that Louise Lucas—that bird-brain—had the sense to know that Paul was a genius, and was going to write best sellers?"

"She didn't. But there were five Lucas girls, and Louise was the homeliest. She wanted a man, and she quietly developed her friendship, her companionship, with Paul up to the point where he needed her and wanted her as much as she did him."

"And I'm to go and do likewise?"

"No, I'm not trying to say that, exactly. But what I do mean, I suppose, is that there are just as good men in Kenthill as out of it."

"Men don't—*stir* me," Gwen said, after a pause. "I like good times, and nice men to dance with, or open up picnic suppers, or go rowing or fishing or whatever's doing. But somehow I don't get—excited. I'd like to travel. I'd like to travel with Sylvia Nuttall for instance; she and I are great pals. Or I'd like to travel with my brother Peter. I'd simply love to see—oh, Westminster and the Taj Mahal and Paris and little Chinese villages—with Peter. But I can't seem to get up any enthusiasm over Phil Phillips or Joe Turner."

"You mean that they both like you, Gwen?"

"Indeed they don't!" Gwen laughed. "Neither one has ever so much as looked at me. Polly, you were engaged once, weren't you?" she added suddenly.

Over Polly's homely face, faded and tired at thirty-six, an odd reminiscent look came, narrowing her eyes, causing her to catch her lower

lip in her prominent front teeth.

"I was engaged to Frank Steele," she admitted slowly. "It was—heavens! —it was twelve years ago. It was just the time Mama had her first stroke. I think," she went on, speaking half to herself now, "if I'd known Mama was going on exactly the same for twelve years, except for that second little stroke, I'd have married. Aunt Lizzie was in good health then and perfectly devoted to Mama, and Uncle Robert died within a few months, so that she could have come over and taken care of Mama. But everyone was against it —the doctor, and my sister Rita, and everyone. Everyone said, 'You can't possibly leave your poor mother, now,' and Rita was just going to have a baby. What with one thing and another it seemed as if I had to put it off, and then Frank was ordered away—he was a lieutenant, and within a year he was married to a girl at Cheyenne. All for the best, maybe!" Polly finished, with a philosophical laugh. "Mama needed me, really; Aunt Lizzie herself isn't any too well, now. And I've had my library work, which I really love, and I have my cats. Poor Mama objected to them terribly when I first got Pudgy—that's the mother cat of them all. But I find good homes for the kittens, and gradually I think both she and Aunt Lizzie have come to like them. Only, Gwen," added Polly, in a lower tone, "I'd hate to have you—I know it'll mean more responsibility for you with Sheila gone, and I would hate to have you feel——"

"I wouldn't, really," Gwen assured her. "And I don't think Mother would try to hold me if I really wanted to get married. But luckily, I don't. I'm—this is an awful thing to confess—but I've come to the conclusion that the growing pains I feel all over me are ambition. Isn't that revolting? But I mean—well, wanting to travel, and wanting to be an actress, and wanting to write poetry, and wanting everything in general and nothing in particular. Isn't that ambition?

"Sheila's different," she continued, as Polly merely nodded and listened. "Sheila's ambitions are all through a man, as it were. To be a beautiful wife, and to help him along with his career, and to have a lovely home—that's what Sheila wants. I'd rather do it myself than have a man do it for me."

"But you've been in love, Gwen?"

"I think I was once, with a man who came here to lecture on 'Everyday Ethics,' " Gwen confessed with a cheerful laugh. "A young professor: George Pell. Isn't that a firm nice name for you? It was just after the hotel burned down, and he stayed at Mrs Keeble's, and I was staying there because Kip had scarlet and I couldn't go on in the office if I stayed at

home. We had one giddy session when I took him to the Museum and the 'Y,' and then he left. The women all went mad about him, and when he came back for a return engagement he was with us one night for supper, and what went on would fill a book. Mother'd just had a tooth out and looked like a Halloween lantern, and Betsy Kincaid—that's my little cousin who'd been having scarlet with Kip—quietly deposited a dishful of mashed turnip down his neck."

"You're making that up."

"On my word of honor! Mother felt terribly about it, and so did Bets, but the fact remained that my ideal had to finish the supper in one of Peter's shirts. I don't know why Mother wanted mashed turnips that night, anyway! Horse food, really. Anyway, he went away, without any of the moonlight last remarks that I'd been counting on, and my punctured romance went with him."

Gwen laughed again. Polly looked at her thoughtfully and said nothing.

"Dad," Sheila said, coming in wearily and flinging herself instantly on the bed, with her head at Gwen's feet, "is putting on an act."

"What about?" Gwen asked.

"Oh, he doesn't see how he can spare me, and he doesn't see why we don't wait until October and be married on Mother's anniversary and all that," Sheila said patiently.

"Why do you pay any attention, Sheila? You knew he would."

"Well, I don't. But it makes you so tired. He'll probably——" Sheila glanced at Polly, softened her tone. "He'll probably not be able to take me up to the altar tomorrow, he's already well started," she said.

"Peter'll be all ready," Gwen assured her comfortingly. "But I don't think Dad would give it up for a farm," she added. "Only, if he's—shaky, I'm going to lock him in the library and leave him at home. I talked to Doctor Larkey about it, and he said he'd stay here and quiet him down and get him all ready for the reception. So don't worry, Sheila darling."

"You're amazing people to be so patient with your father," Polly observed.

"Big families with lots of cousins and aunts have to be that way," Gwen assured her seriously. "Everyone looks on from the outside and says, 'Isn't a big family wonderful, the games they have at meals and the constant excitement and change!' But outsiders don't know that every member of a

big family has to put up with something from every other member. This one's lazy and that one's critical and someone else gambles and someone else drinks and there isn't enough money and enough co-operation."

"What do I do that drives you mad?" Sheila asked, catching at Gwen's hand and pressing the palm against her cheek. Gwen had gotten up now and had been gently fingering Sheila's forehead and pressing soothing touches against the back of her neck. "That feels so *good*!" Sheila murmured.

"You've nothing to madden anyone, Sheila," the younger sister answered, "and everything to make everyone love you, and everyone miss you! If Link wasn't so grand and everything so perfect, I'd be the one to get up in church tomorrow and yell——Doorbell!"

The last word was interpolated, and in answer to a persistent trilling somewhere belowstairs. Gwen, gathering her old kimono about her, fled to investigate, returning some moments later with boxes of newly arrived wedding presents, telephone messages, two telegrams and several letters.

"It's nearly six," she announced. "I'm so dead on my feet that I could collapse on that bed and lie there for three days, but I think we had all better get started. Mother wants me to get dinner because the Feltons and old Miss Cartwright are here admiring our decorations, and the rehearsal's at half past seven. Don't open these until tonight; I've got some others saved up, and we'll do it the last thing."

She had pulled a blue cotton apron over her head; now she hurried downstairs again and into the kitchen. Corned-beef hash pushed out of tins and cut for frying; noodles with tomato sauce. That was all, and easy enough to prepare, but there was always the business of hot plates and tea and butter and cut bread and sugar and cream. Gwen flew at the manifold details with a skill born of long experience, and was presently helped gallantly by little Cousin Betsy, who came in all athrill over tomorrow's prospect, and by Peter, who, while performing no specific service, indeed only sitting at the table and smoking a cigarette as he regaled the girls with nonsense and gossip, yet did somehow contribute enormously to the celerity of the supper preparations. Gwen adored her brother to such an extent that just to have him in her neighborhood, in this good-natured and amusing mood, was happiness for her. And little Betsy was more than half in love with "Cousin Peter."

When Sheila and Polly, Peter Washburton senior, Mrs Washburton, Miss Fuller, Kip, two aunts and a boy cousin materialized for the meal, protesting that it was an outrage for company to stay in a house the night before a

wedding, the great platter of browned hash and noodles was smoking on the table; the bread was buttered; the paper napkins fluted in a glass; regular places were not set tonight, and everyone fell to without formality.

Tryrena was still wrestling with the wedding cake in the laundry. By some miracle the frosting was at last hardening in places, and Tryrena, enormously cheered, had announced to Miss Sheila that she was "sho' goin' to have some weddin' cake." The white sugar roses and the little sugar bride and groom somewhat disguised the facts that the cake had rather collapsed under the strain of the long hot day and that the almond paste here and there showed through the snowy cover. Tryrena's complete concentration upon this job had doubled Gwen's responsibilities and labors, but nobody minded that now, and Gwen felt that if Dad was presentable when noon struck tomorrow, and if Nolan's could really get the ice cream to the house hard and shapely at the exact right moment, she would see Sheila off without a tear, and afterward bundle dead flowers and crumpled napkins into the nearest receptacles, secure three sandwiches and a wedge of cake, and retire to her room for at least twenty-four hours' complete rest.

"Sheila, shall you like to have your initials 'S.A.B.'? That doesn't spell a very pretty word," said Bets, keeping the conversation upon any topic that even remotely touched the miracle of having a beautiful cousin who was marrying her dream man tomorrow.

"But my initials won't be 'S.A.B.' I'm dropping the Ashe once and for all. Sheila Washburton Baker—I think it's stunning."

Her eyes met Link's, and Gwen saw the look and felt a little thrill go down to the tips of her toes.

"Gwen's initials are 'G.W.,' aren't they, Gwen?" Kip asked.

"I was named in anticipation of the Great War," said Gwen. "Born ten years earlier, at a time when Central Europe—or Mittel-Europa, if that means more to you—was convulsed with a fraternal——"

"Gwen was named for Gents' Washing," said Peter.

"Gwen was named for Glass Windows," Betsy said, laughing in pride of her inspiration.

"I was not. I was named for George Washington. You never can tell who'll go into politics, these days——"

Link and Polly and the little dressmaker were listening, amused. The man of the house spoke with sudden interest, lifting his face from the study

of a pamphlet on soap-making patents.

"You were named Anna Gwendolyn for both your grandmothers," he reminded her mildly.

"I'll tell you what Gwen's 'G.W.' stands for," Sheila put in suddenly, "it stands for good work, and great willingness, and—and—golden words, and glorious warm heart——"

And this time they were Gwen's eyes that her own met, and she saw tears fill them. Perhaps the others did too, for there was a sudden breaking up of the circle, a reaching for final doughnuts, a scramble for the car. The rehearsal was scheduled to begin in exactly three minutes.

"I feel like a dog, taking her away from you," Link seized a moment to say to Gwen at the church, when the important matter of marching and timing was over and the others had drifted away, except Polly and Sheila, who were deep in consultation with the organist. Altar lights had been extinguished now, and the church was dim and sweet with the scent of drooping flowers and the echoes of organ notes. At the high windows spring twilight was still soft and clear, but between the arches and pillars there was a golden gloom infinitely becoming to Gwen's pale face and ruffled mane of dark hair.

"She'd go after you and shoot you if you didn't take her away!" Gwen said gallantly.

"I know. But your father—he got me quite depressed today," Link went on a little anxiously, "after lunch, I mean, when he walked out with me to the car. He said that he was afraid your mother's health would suffer and that it would mean a heavy burden for you. It seems his invention is just at the stage when it really absorbs his full attention, and he doesn't feel he can take a paying position until he gets it approved by the patent bureau in Washington——"

Gwen's rueful laugh interrupted him.

"Link darling," she said, "I can't remember a time when Dad's patent didn't need his full attention, especially when there's been good reason for him to do something else. He's *always* working either at the burglar-alarm doorsill or the insect soap. He never does anything else. He never will. That awful room out in the windmill that smells to high heaven is his laboratory, and he lives out there. But when *we* want to do anything, then Dad works up this sad story of Mother's heart not being strong and his being unable, just at the moment, to shoulder the load!

“We’ll miss Sheila like blazes, of course,” Gwen went on, as they strolled in the direction of the others and toward the open side door of the church, “but, personally, I always hoped that she’d marry, and I was beginning to think she’d never find anyone she liked—anyone good enough for her.”

“I don’t think she’s found anyone good enough for her,” Link said seriously. Gwen glanced at him obliquely, answered only with a short laugh.

They joined the others, and Sheila and Link loitered behind the group and were presently lost somewhere in the quiet country-town streets, under the tall maple and eucalyptus trees. When they got home it was almost ten o’clock, and Gwen ready to call them from an upper window against which her slender broad-shouldered figure was silhouetted through pear-tree leaves.

“Come up and see presents! We’re dying to open them! Sheila, there’s a special delivery letter from Mother’s old friend—you know, the man whose wife wanted to adopt Kip! We think it’s a check. It’s got something folded up inside. Hurry!”

Sheila and Link obediently went upstairs to the big half-furnished room in which the presents were temporarily bestowed. Those that had previously arrived were already arranged in the library downstairs, but the disorder of unpacking and listing was managed upstairs. Sheila sat on the flat top of an old trunk, and Peter worked with a hammer and hatchet, and more place plates and more bouillon cups were unwrapped.

“You know we’ll have to give the value of every one of these back sooner or later,” Sheila reminded her prospective husband.

“I was thinking of that. It’s going to be nice, when we’re struggling to buy lard and onions and rice, to have to go pick out twelve-dollar mirrors and Sheffield trays.”

“Lard, onions and rice, of all repulsive foods!” Gwen protested.

“Well, it’s not my fault, really,” Sheila reminded them. “I was all for slipping away to a justice of the peace, and telling people when it was all over. Wasn’t I, Mother?”

“The idea!” said her mother and Aunt Sis together from their seats on a battered old couch.

“Sheila, you could change these salad things. It makes three sets. And these came from old Mrs Larribee, who’d never know.”

"I'll certainly take back the cups," Sheila said, smiling dreamily at some undertone from Link. "I'll not have such cups in my nice new house!"

"I've got two lists," Gwen announced capably. "One is all the things that get packed into barrels—things you won't need at the mine. The other is things you'll use right from the first. Now, if there are things to go back ____"

"Only a few," Sheila said, as Gwen paused, looking with a dirty face and troubled mien at her sister. "The cups and two pairs of carvers and maybe that awful Chinese platter. We'll never have a place big enough for that platter."

"You could bathe the baby in it," said Kip, and the women all laughed, properly scandalized. But Sheila commented calmly enough, "But you see we haven't any baby, Kip," and went on fingering beautiful old serving spoons, three of them, with Lady Susan Battle's monogram still faintly etched on their heavily foliated handles. Penniless, outraged, shamed, deserted by an unworthy husband, Susan Fleming Battle had crept home to Kenthill forty long years ago. But now, at seventy-five, she was a beautiful and dignified figure in the town; a gentle teacher of not-too-correct French, a gentle companion to any old invalid or delicate child in a domestic emergency, a gentle welcomer of the living or watcher by the dead. Somehow she had managed a gracious living all these long years, and when the child of an old friend was married some little piece of old silver invariably marked the event, with a coroneted card bearing Lady Susan's good wishes. The one poor little vanity life had left her was the title; Kenthill had long ago forgiven its innocent pretensions and accepted it.

Sheila read the message aloud.

"You are taking my initials tomorrow, my dear Sheila, so I want you to have these especially personal things, with all my love. S," said the words on the card.

"Old darling, I hope she comes!" Gwen said.

"I hope she does." Sheila spoke a little absent-mindedly, and Gwen suddenly appreciated that she was tired. What with parties and showers and dressmaker and shopping and planning the wedding and keeping Link satisfied with long evening talks and five telephone conversations every day, the last few weeks had been pretty full for Sheila.

"Come on, let's all go to bed!" Gwen suggested. There was a general stir and movement, but even then the group did not immediately break. Mrs

Washburton discovered with a great yawn that it was nearly eleven o'clock, and immediately announced herself as being so tired that she doubted if she could get to bed at all. Kip was asleep on the floor, with his head against the couch, and had to be dragged up, coaxed awake, and led stumbling away in an agony of drowsiness. Polly and Aunt Sis fell into a deep reminiscent talk about the Jewells who had all grown up and married, it appeared, since Polly had moved away. Link and Sheila drifted downstairs, drifted out the open front door and down to the gate, under the lilacs and maples, and the blots of spring moonlight, and the shafts of light from the big corner poles, and were to be discerned in the dimness, talking, talking, with her head on his shoulder and his arm about her.

Gwen, going to bed, looked out of her window and saw them, and thought it must be wonderful to be so much in love and to have everything coming right, and a wedding planned for tomorrow. Sheila would be Mrs Baker. It wasn't a very pretty name, but somehow it suited Link.

She went off to the bathroom and brushed her teeth and brushed her hair and came back to look out again. And they were still standing, Link and Sheila, down in the shadows by the gate; they were not talking now. Sheila's old striped cotton dress glimmered vaguely white in the strengthening moonlight; moonlight touched Link's dark wing of hair with a spear of silver white.

Gwen turned back into her dimly lighted room, ashamed suddenly of having watched them. She continued her night preparations busily. But everything spoke of Sheila tonight, and of the change that was coming so soon. Gwen and Sheila had shared this room for all the younger sister's life. Their books filled the shelves between their beds; it was by their arrangement that the dressing table stood in its own place; the curtains were hung in a certain fashion. Sheila and Gwen had combined finances to buy the wicker chairs.

A thousand afternoons had found them here, resting, talking, discussing or preparing for some festivity; had found them discouraged, blue, recounting to each other the difficulties of school and office life. Sheila had whirled in here, happy over some coveted invitation, to borrow Gwen's sweater and hastily bring out the electric iron and jerk down the little ironing table so that this costume or that might be freshened. Gwen had brought her high-school books up here to cram for the agonies of finals.

There was a second-story porch running like a deck outside of this room and the bathroom and Peter's room, and at various times the girls had had

plans, never quite completed, for the porch. They would screen it with blinds or canvas and sleep out there. Or they meant to make it into a tearoom, a lounge, deliciously shady among the rustling tree branches. Gwen felt a little pang of heartache. They seemed just to have been discussing these ideas; now abruptly they were dead. Life had moved them out of the future forever. She and Sheila wouldn't ever be lying here reading in their beds on bitter winter nights, with a fire going in the old steel-rodded grate, and their thoughts roaming away from their books now and then for a few minutes of planning or of gossip.

Sheila presently came in, her eyes stars. Gwen, by now established in bed and reading, watched her as she went dreamily about, creaming her fine ivory skin into even purer beauty, again pinning the thick short mop of her gold hair more snugly under the strip of cheesecloth; stopping to read the card tied to a pair of little crystal vases on the dressing table.

"Where'd these come from?"

"Doctor and Mrs Unger. The man made Pete open them for fear they were broken. Wasn't it darling of them?"

"They're sweet." Sheila sat looking absently at them, and Gwen watched her in the mirror. The older girl was in her pajamas now, her dark blue eyes fathomless with dreams. Gwen wondered if her sister was going to cry; brides did, sometimes, on the last night at home. She had never seen Sheila's eyes look so sad.

Suddenly Sheila came over to Gwen's bed and dropped on her knees, her arm laid across her sister. Gwen had already said her prayers, but this was old custom, and she scrambled out of bed and they gabbled their devotions together as they had since childhood, when the superior eight-year-old Sheila had taught little three-year-old Gwen the "Our Father."

Afterward, when Gwen was back on her pillows, Sheila knelt on, her hand in her sister's hand, and they talked for a while.

Gwen was reiterating all her plans for the wedding presents that must be changed, the presents that must go to the mine, the presents that must be stored in the basement, when Sheila said abruptly:

"Gwen, there's something I wish hadn't happened."

Instantly Gwen was all attention. Her thoughts jumped at several possibilities. The bridal-wreath that was already scattering petals on the parlor carpet; the deplorable collapsed cake; the exclusion of dreadful, drunken old third-cousin Elmer from the list of wedding guests.

“What, Sheila?”

“Oh, something——” Sheila said, her look and her voice drifted into space. “Something that happened years ago—seven years ago,” she began with a slight effort.

“Dad selling the Lyons Street lot to the railway?”

“Oh no, no, nothing like that!” Sheila laughed faintly, without mirth. “Something I did,” she said hesitantly, frowning slightly.

“Something *you* did!” Gwen was more surprised, more vaguely alarmed and made uneasy by her sister’s tone rather than her words. “What could you do?” she asked incredulously.

“What every other fool girl does,” Sheila answered bitterly, not looking at her. “What I’d give my life, now, not to have done!”

Gwen could find no words. She stared at the other girl in silence.

“I fell in love with Tony Lamont,” Sheila said flatly. Her eyes were fixed on space; it was as if she spoke to herself.

“But—but even if you did—” Gwen said, stammering, “even if you did ——Sheila? Sheila!”

The last was a cry of loyalty, of protest and unbelief. Sheila had not spoken. But she had moved her eyes slowly to Gwen’s eyes, and Gwen saw the look in them, and she knew.

CHAPTER III

"I DON'T know what you mean, Sheila," Gwen Washburton said after a long silence.

"Oh yes, I think you do," Sheila said, almost with an air of weariness, of indifference. "I was madly in love with Tony Lamont."

"In the office?" Gwen presently asked in a whisper.

"Well, that was where I first knew him, of course. I was working there, just as a clerk, but I was studying to pass my civil-service exams as a librarian. Remember? Perhaps you wouldn't. You were only about fifteen, and all worked up over high-school sororities and so on.

"Yes, he came into the office when I'd been there about a month, and I did some research in the files for him. I thought he was wonderful, of course. I was twenty. After that I saw him now and then, and he was always wonderful. Dressed for golf or tennis, you know, and coming in just for a moment on hot Saturday mornings, brown as an Indian."

"He was married then, Sheila."

"Oh, of course. He was thirty-three, I suppose. He'd been married about eight years to Rita Raymond. They had Rand and Margot—it was before Rand's accident. He was seven.

"For weeks—months, I suppose—we just looked at each other. He'd come in on some little bit of business, speak to someone else, and give me just one look as he went out. I'd live on that look for days—dream of it nights. I suppose I was going around with various boys—Tommy Sharp and Lew Lucas and Bunny Keating—but in my heart all the time the words were saying themselves: Tony Lamont. Tony Lamont.

"Well, just before Christmas that year they sent me into his office. He asked for me; I found that out later. He wanted a stenographer on a case he had had me work on before, and although I wasn't as quick as Miss Patterson or Sarah Moore, he knew I understood it, and that was the important thing. One afternoon when I stayed late we got talking, and I told him I was taking my library exams in March, and that I wanted a position in a library. He said then that his aunt was on the board of the library in Sacramento and she would do all she could for me if I passed. He was so

terribly kind and so interested; of course he seemed to me such a big person to be interested in me!

"Well, at Christmas time—Christmas Eve it was—he came in with a book and said he'd like to give it to me; it was one of his favorites. It wasn't an expensive book. He'd written my name in it, but I cut that page out and brought the book home and nobody noticed it. It's there—there in that bookcase. *Far Away and Long Ago*, by Hudson."

"Yes, I know. I read it," Gwen said with a dry mouth.

"Afterward, when I said I'd liked it, he said he would like so much to travel in queer places, and I said I'd always wanted to see the pampas of South America, and Buenos Aires. He laughed and said, 'Why South America with so many other places to see?' He asked me if I'd seen New York, and I said I'd not been as far as Los Angeles, even. Then he told me that he was not happy, that he and his wife had decided to separate when the children were old enough for boarding school. Margot was about five then, and Rand seven. He said that she was not happy as his wife, wouldn't be happy as any man's wife, that she hadn't wanted the children. She sang, Rita did, you know."

"I didn't know."

"Oh yes, she used to sing at concerts and go into San Francisco for lessons from Alesso. I don't know who Alesso was, but he spoke as if he was fine. He said they'd had separate rooms since Margot had been born, and that he was the loneliest and most defeated man alive.

"I can't tell you, Gwen, how hearing that from a man you like—oh, like terribly!—affects you. It made me tremble. He was so handsome and so serious, and he told all this in a philosophical sort of way, not whining. Just—just that it made him jealous to have me talk of my mother, and how happy we all were at home, because he'd never had anything like that in his life.

"Then—quite suddenly, we knew that we liked each other horribly, hopelessly. That puts something—something into your life that is quite different from anything else, Gwen. I mean thrill. Shimmer and glamour and trembling and—oh, I don't know.

"We didn't say much. It was all—almost businesslike. Just, 'You know how it is with me, Sheila. I'm terribly sorry,' and perhaps my saying, 'Oh yes, I know,' and then sitting there in the office shaking for hours. When I

had a bad cold he put a little box of tablets on my desk with a card that said, 'Plenty of orange juice, plenty of water, not much else.' I have that card yet.

"I don't know why I'm telling you this, Gwen. God knows I hate remembering it all, and the fool I was!"

"Don't, then!" Gwen said in a whisper.

"I have to," Sheila answered restlessly, her narrowed eyes far away. "Well, then I took my library finals, in March, and passed. And—if you remember?—almost immediately, without my applying, I had a card from this Mrs Paul Marshall—that was his aunt—saying that applications could be filed at such-and-such a date. I filled out the card and got the Sacramento appointment. Mother went up there with me and found me a nice safe boarding house, and off I went.

"Well, I hadn't been in the library three days when Tony came in. He was often in Sacramento, that part wasn't so surprising, but of course it started a new—a new phase of our friendship. He congratulated me on my job, and said he was sending me a present. He'd given me things before—perfumes and books and candy and flowers, and once gloves, and once or twice theater tickets—things like that; things any girl feels she can take from a man."

"Not a married man!" Gwen said quickly.

Sheila looked at her thoughtfully, with an air of infinite patience.

"Yes, I know," she said simply, and for a moment there was silence.

"Was this such a special present?" the younger sister presently asked, ending it.

"Was——? Oh yes, the present. Yes, it was an exquisite coat. My black coat, with the fur."

"But Mother thought you——I thought you——"

"You thought I bought it on the installment plan. I know you did. No, nor the blue velvet dress Mother loved so. Nor the rose-point collar."

"Oh, Sheila!" Gwen whispered.

"Yes, I know. But he loved to give me things; I couldn't stop him. It made him so—so terribly happy to have little lunches and talk and tell me about things, things he was reading or thinking, and to listen to me," Sheila said. "He never—he never suggested anything more, until one day we were suddenly talking about his divorce. He said, yes, that would have to be the

solution, and he was sorry because of Rand. Margot, he said, was like her mother, she'd be happy with her mother; he hardly ever saw her. But the boy was different. He was seven then, and Tony fancied his mother was rather unsympathetic to him. Anyway, Rand was shy and lonely and clung to his father.

"I simply went up in the air at the idea of divorce. I wouldn't hear of it! It meant scandal and talk, and breaking Mother's heart. We had a terrible discussion which left me almost fainting, and I went back to the library not knowing what was going on. I was beside myself. For two or three days I was in a daze. The telephone made me jump; every step in the library made me jump. And when the hours went by, and the hours went by, and there was no message, I knew that I simply had to see him again—I couldn't live without one more talk, just one more. And after that I'd be sensible and try to forget him, and never see him again."

"That was all in Sacramento?"

"Oh yes. I was alone. Perhaps if I'd been home—— Perhaps that's why mothers hate their daughters to go away from home.

"Well, anyway, in May we had terrific rains. Rain slashed against the library windows until the whole world seemed under water. Everything smelled of wet leather and wet raincoats; the books were all damp. I had a line of school children filing up to the desk; I was stamping and marking, when I saw Tony. He was sitting in a big leather chair near the door; he had on a light raincoat that was spattered, and his hair was spattered, too.

"I began to tremble. I didn't dare look again. I'd been seeing Tony everywhere, seeing him in every man who came through the big swinging doors, every man in the street. But here he was. I was going to hear his voice again, to have a chance to talk to him again. That was all that mattered. It was half past five, and I left the desk, and he came over and we stood talking.

" 'Got your raincoat?' he said. He'd given me a shiny raincoat and a little cap, and I said I had them both. 'And rubbers?' he said, and I said yes, I was all fixed. 'Then come on,' he said, 'we'll walk.' That was all. We walked out together, and it was heaven. Heaven, in the wet streets, with the lights streaming out, and everyone running and laughing in the rain.

"We didn't talk much. But he'd look down at me sidewise, smiling, and I knew he was as happy as I was. After a while he said, 'Nearly seven! Let's eat. How'd you like to get dinner?' I said, 'Where?' He said we'd buy it

first, and we bought—oh, ridiculous things. Sweet butter and caviar and crackers and a little fat steak and asparagus and everything. Then we got into a cab and went—not very far—to a four-apartment house, and he quite naturally unlocked one apartment, and everything was there. Flowers, and a fire laid; he said he'd had a Japanese boy in there all afternoon; that he came so often to Sacramento it paid him to have a little place of his own.

"He wasn't affectionate; there was nothing scary about it. He acted as if it was just an adventure, and I felt that way, too, that it was all fun. I didn't feel sentimental or nervous.

"We lighted the fire, and took off our wet coats, and I combed my hair and got started on dinner. Tony's a marvelous cook; he was plastering mustard on the steak and making the coffee in no time. The table was set by the fire, and we were terribly happy. I said we'd do it every week, and I telephoned Mrs Keane and said that my father had come to town and was taking me to dinner and a picture and I'd be home about ten.

"But then after dinner we got talking. He was smoking his pipe, and the sound of the rain coming down made everything seem so safe and snug, so shut away. We were so deliciously alone, and for the first time! Tony asked me if I'd like to go to a picture, and I laughed in his face, and he laughed, too. There wasn't any picture in the world that would tempt me away from that fire and from our talk.

"Quite suddenly, about ten, he jumped up and said he must take me home. He brought my coat and rain cap, and we walked home. It wasn't far, and the rain had stopped for a little and the moon was shining. I told Mrs Keane my father had to go back on the ten-o'clock train, and that we hadn't gone to a picture, we'd just sat and talked. And oh, Gwen, but I was happy that night! Happier than I ever will be again, as long as I live!"

"Ah, Sheila, don't say that!"

"It's true. Not that," Sheila assured her sister, smiling, "not that I don't expect to have plenty of happiness in my life. Children and travel—and Link, who is the finest man I ever knew. But that sort of happiness won't come again. Trusting Tony, and feeling that we could have so much and yet be so safe! Confident in myself. I was equal—more than equal—to this situation that so many women had made such a failure! I could manage men, even when they worshiped me. And it would all come back to me—I lay awake all night—how much he did worship me. I was simply a dream princess to him! It took his breath away to kneel beside my chair and have me rest my head against his.

"The next Sunday but one—about ten days from then—it was full glorious spring, and everyone was in white, and every garden was full of lilac and roses. I wired Mother that I had to stay at the library and couldn't get home for Sunday night and told Mrs Keane that I was going home as usual. That was all there was to it. In my mind I said that I'd be back at the boarding house that Sunday night, of course. I could tell Mrs Keane anything; she wouldn't question me! I'd say that they had needed me at the library on Sunday, anything. And even if I didn't come home I knew I could send Tony off to the hotel, so there was nothing to worry about. But just in case——

"I'm telling this horribly, Gwen. I wish to goodness I hadn't started it. There isn't much more. That Sunday Tony and I took our lunch off into the country and had a wonderful day. And when I was all tired and dusty and sunburned he said that he had had a little supper sent in to the apartment—cold chicken and stuffed eggs and a salad. Why wouldn't I come and freshen up there? We could have a bite of supper, and talk as we had talked before.

"I don't know why I hadn't any resistance that time, when I'd been so sure of myself before. I didn't suggest his going to a hotel; I didn't suggest anything. The whole thing, the whole feeling, was different. I knew—I knew as soon as I heard his key turn in the lock that—that I wasn't going to refuse him anything."

A long silence. Gwen was not looking at her sister. Her young face, pale with fatigue and shock and pain, looked years older than it had looked an hour earlier.

"Then what?" she presently asked in a whisper.

"Then—oh, such devotion, such gratitude, such humility," Sheila said, with a light irony that hurt Gwen more than any hardness could have done. "And then, on Monday, he was gone, and I was—my God, my God, my God! I walked the floor. I lay on the floor, wanting to go through it, down, down, down into the earth!

"It was better, of course, when he came back ten days later. He told me then that he would never love another woman, that sooner or later we would be man and wife. But all the happiness was gone, for me. I felt the falseness of calling that happiness, I felt—all wrong! And it was only that summer, June—when we'd had perhaps five or six of those little stolen suppers—that the blow came. Little Rand was all smashed up in a motor wreck. Of course his mother wasn't hurt and Margot wasn't hurt. If Tony's wife had been killed! But it was his boy who needed him. Tony lived for eleven weeks in

the hospital, and then took him to Arizona, and when I saw Tony again, I had been offered a better job here. We met almost like strangers, we talked like strangers. How was the poor little boy, and how was I, and was it true that I was to be librarian here?"

"I remember when you did come home in September, Sheila, you were so ill. You couldn't eat anything. Auto-intoxication, remember?"

"That wasn't auto-intoxication. That was heartbreak. Or, no, it wasn't heartbreak," Sheila said slowly, "I wouldn't have been ill if I'd said 'no.' No and no and no and no! It was shame that I almost died of, Gwen. Shame that I'd had to follow the path of all the weak and loving and trusting women that ever made utter fools of themselves, shame that I'd added just one more to the number of men who think every woman can be taken that way, if the approach is right! Perfumes and theater tickets and a little apartment with a fire. Oh, love, too, of course. The kind of love a married man can so easily feel for a girl he sees every day! He's so safe, Gwen. He's so *safe*."

"A married woman isn't safe having an affair like that, either," Gwen reminded her. "He *did* love you, Sheila. He wasn't so safe!"

"With a married woman it's different! But all a man has to do is say, 'She knew I was married.' Gwen," Sheila said, very pale herself now, "it was rage, it was desperation that at last made me pull myself together! I said to myself, 'It shall not spoil my life! It shall not make me less fine than I was, than I might have been! My husband someday will be a finer man than he, my children finer than his, my place in the community higher!' I told myself—I *prayed* that I would be a gainer by it, that the shame and humiliation would only make me a better woman!"

Her lips suddenly were trembling, her face wet with tears. Gwen held tightly to her hand; there seemed to be nothing to say.

"It's selfishness to have told you this," Sheila presently said. "I don't know why I did. Except perhaps that I wanted you to tell me that you think I was right not to tell Link. It's so easy!" Sheila interrupted herself to add scornfully, "so easy to say that you ought to tell everything, to have no secrets! But *when* are you to tell a man a thing like this? When? Not when you first meet him, and certainly not when you both begin to know how much you care. And then you're engaged, and how can you spoil it all, wipe away all the glamour, by bringing up a thing like this! I want to be absolutely honest with Link, Gwen, I want to begin that way. But this isn't anyone's business but my own—don't you agree with me? I'm not prying into Link's past life, I'm taking him for what he is today. And our faults

make us grow as much as our virtues do, don't they? You think I'm right, don't you, Gwen?"

"But Sheila, he knows—Tony Lamont knows. What if he ever——?"

"Oh, but no man, especially if he's a gentleman, and proud, like Tony, would ever tell a story like that," Sheila said confidently. "No, that part of it's safe enough. He's no more anxious to—to remember all that than I am. I wrote him very carefully, I never signed my letters. That much sense I did have, for I thought of his wife, though I wasn't afraid for myself. I'm horribly—*horribly* sorry it happened," Sheila went on, frowning faintly, staring into space, "but it was a long time ago, and there's such a thing as living a thing down, Gwen. I'm going to prove that it can be lived down, blotted out as if it had never been! I know women are supposed to have to pay for these things. Well, I've paid. It's over. Are you sorry I told you, darling?" she finished in sudden compunction. "Would you rather I hadn't? It seemed to me it would be easier if somebody knew."

"No, no, I'm glad to know," Gwen said slowly. She was trembling inwardly, but Sheila mustn't see it; not on this last night at home; this wedding eve.

"Don't think about it, will you?"

"I won't."

"We all have to make mistakes, you know, Gwen. The thing is to be sorry for them, to learn from them."

"I know."

They kissed each other, and Sheila went to her own bed and was swiftly asleep. Gwen closed her book and put out her light. Moonlight instantly came in to lie in white blocks on the floor, and touch with silver the wedding gown, swaying gently like a ghost against the closet door. Gwen lay awake for a long time, watching the light play upon it, listening to the gentle rustle of pear-tree branches, and now and then the far whistle of a train or the honk of a late motorcar in the village.

CHAPTER IV

FORTUNATELY for Gwen the wedding-morning excitement began almost as soon as the June sun was up, and absorbed her, whether she would or no, until long after the actual ceremony. A thousand details appeared to have been overlooked until this very last moment; Gwen wondered distractedly what they had all been doing this week, and all the weeks, that so much remained untouched.

"Miss Gwen, ef you'll jes' come tetch yo' finger tip to dis cake," Tryrena said at intervals, and Gwen would break for an instant the steady course of her wiping of glasses, or careful brushing up of scattered flower petals, to test once more the frosting that had hardened only in sugary patches and was for the main part liquid still.

The telephone bell trilled in every silence. White curtains, fresh from the laundry last Friday, ballooned at the open windows. Sweet cool morning air streamed in, and the ringing laughter of youth and the chatter of happy voices streamed out. Neighbors came and went; some to delay matters with idle talk and speculation; others to seize a dish towel or a mop and take their share of the preparations. Uncle Elmer, uninvited, turned up in a solemn state of inebriation, his aged cutaway green in the breadth and shiny at the seams. But Gwen's father, to her immense satisfaction and secret surprise, was his soberest and handsomest self. It would be an imposing figure that would escort Sheila to the altar; he wouldn't fail them. In fact, she remembered now, in real crises and on important occasions he really was more dependable than one might suppose.

Gwen's mother, her head tied up, was everywhere. But Fanny Washburton was at best an erratic and procrastinating worker; she started one thing and left it for another; went for a dustpan and fell into a long talk with Tryrena in the laundry; began to count borrowed spoons and left half of them still in the maroon flannel bags in which the Nuttalls and the Phillipses had brought them.

Link was on hand early and helped Peter and Kip bring in chairs and arrange still another card table for presents. There being a strong feeling among the aunts and cousins that it would be unlucky for Sheila to see her bridegroom before the actual moment of the wedding, a sort of game of "Cops and Robbers," as Gwen expressed it, went on through the early-

morning hours. The question of whether or not Sheila would wear a slip under her wedding satin was one of burning moment to the women of the family. In the shaded upstairs bedroom, to be sure, everything looked safe enough. But on the church steps in a flood of noon sunshine, and with possible shafts of bright light on the actual altar——

"A bride with her legs showing through her dress!" little Cousin Bets said, gasping.

"On the other hand, that slip's going to make her look real bunchy," Aunt Sis said anxiously.

"No slip!" Gwen decided it suddenly. Halfway between the arrangement of a great sheaf of last-minute lilies and the anxious inspection of the emergency napkins, she had paused at the bedroom, and now sent her sister an encouraging smile. The girls' eyes had not met before, this morning; both were pale, a natural enough condition in the untimely hothouse heat, which had come up early in the day, and the thrill of the occasion. Sheila was sitting on the bed, pretending to study the wedding dress, as Miss Fuller swung it back and forth on the hanger. But her thoughts were somewhere far away; no one could read the mystery of her eyes.

"Hold it up against the window again, Miss Fuller," Gwen directed. "Look, you could just as well see through a stone wall!"

"Well, I think so," Sheila agreed in relief.

"A lot she cares!" Polly said in affectionate scorn. "I never saw such a bride! She's just so absent-minded and loony this morning that she wouldn't care if the skirt fell off in the church!"

"Oh, Polly, don't!" said Bets.

"You do think there are occasions when a girl may be a trifle confused?" Sheila asked, laughing.

Gwen went downstairs again. Three of the big damask fleur-de-lis napkins were missing. It was very annoying. Year after year they reposed untouched in one of the deep drawers of the dining-room closet—that dark retreat that always smelled of port wine and mice and rotting wood and fruitcake. They had always been twenty-four; today they were twenty-one.

"Miss Gwen, now dat cake hardenin' up, I kin fix it for some lettuce sangwiches, too. We got mayonnaise lef'."

"Oh, I don't think I'd start anything now, Tryrena. Let's just get through what we have to do. Kip spilled some water at the foot of the stairs, carrying

those ferns into the front hall. Could you wipe that up? And take one more look in the pantry closet here for those napkins. They couldn't have been lost in the wash, because we never let them go to the wash; Mother or Sheila always did them."

"Here dey is," Tryrena presently announced triumphantly. "Dey worked into de lower place, wid all de papers."

"Oh, good!" Gwen said, in ridiculous relief. Ridiculous, because it mattered so little whether the wedding guests had the handsome old napkins or the paper ones that had been concealed in a convenient place in case of desperate need. Hammering incessantly at her heart were new feelings: shock, shame, fear. A shadow had come over the pleasant world of yesterday; it lay over every moment of what was to have been the unclouded happiness and thrill of today. The lilacs and the banksia roses, the garden and the old shabby house, so lovely in its new apparel of flowers, were just what they had been, outwardly, a few hours earlier. But it was all changed, and she was changed, and she would never go back to yesterday's Gwen Washburton again.

"It doesn't matter! What does it matter?" she said to herself a hundred times. And a hundred times protest sprang up in her very soul: "Oh, Sheila, not *you*! Not you of all the girls! Oh, why did it have to be like this, and why did I have to know!

"Mother, we found the napkins. There's one piece of hair hanging down over your collar, darling."

"Oh, did you find them? I didn't know we'd lost them. That's nice. Are you getting through down here, dear? It's after ten."

"I'll be done in ten minutes. We've only four dozen chairs, but lots of them will stand. Bets says we haven't had any answer from the Moons. I thought I'd checked them not to come. If they all come, all the way from Santa Clara, I suppose we'll have to give 'em some supper at least."

"Oh, I hope they don't. We've been so rude to Caroline," Mrs Washburton said, sampling a salted almond. "Poor little thing, she came here a bride and we never did a thing for her."

"She got off the train as tight as new shoes," Peter contributed, carefully coiling a long lamp cord, "and she and Johnny Scales went in heavily for the polo-club and the night-life crowd. Your dinner, Mother dear, with spiced currants and hot biscuits would not have appealed to Caroline."

“Well, I suppose not,” Fanny Washburton said, laughing. “However, if they come we’ll be extra nice to them and make up. Gwen, is that a burn on your arm?”

“Dirt,” Gwen said. “I’m going up to take a bath now.”

“Sheila’s taking a bath. I wish and I always *will* wish we had two bathrooms.”

“I’m off with Link,” Peter announced. “I’ll see if I can get a shower and get into my clothes without letting that Johnny out of my sight. His aunt and uncle are here from the city.”

“How d’you know?”

“They telephoned. They drove over, and they’re at the hotel. They said they didn’t want to complicate matters here.”

“Miss Gwen, that cream ain’t turned?” Tryrena said, appearing with a balanced spoon.

“It isn’t, quite. Beat a little soda into it and get it right back on the ice.”

“I could sen’ Kip for another quart.”

“Bangs didn’t have any more. He said every bit of yesterday’s cream soured. It’s this sticky weather. Oh, Sheila,” Gwen’s thoughts ran, as she went upstairs for the great business of dressing for the wedding, “why spoil it all? Why not have this really be what it seems to everyone except you and me, a girl all in white with a veil, being handed over from her father to her husband——?

“But it doesn’t really matter. Nobody cares, nowadays. Tony Lamont, and he has the nerve to send her a silver vegetable dish! ‘Mr and Mrs Anthony Prager Lamont.’ No message. Just a beautiful card. The correct thing. When he—when he——

“Oh, but perhaps he loved her. Perhaps he really would have gotten a divorce if it hadn’t been for poor little Rand. Everyone saying what a devoted father! He’s lived for that boy for all these years; took him to the Mayos’; everything.

“But it doesn’t really matter. Link’s so sensible. He’d merely feel—I wonder what he’d feel? Sheila’s wedding day, and I look like Banquo’s ghost—— Oh, Maude, is that you? Come up, come up! Maude, you look perfectly exquisite. Sheila, Maude’s stealing your stuff. Polly, you know Maude Miller; Polly Henderson, Maude, who lived right next door years

ago. Mother, Maude's here; come and look at her! The flowers are here, darling, but we're not going to open them until the last minute; they're downstairs in a laundry tub, and I hope Tryrena hasn't turned the hot water onto them. Kip, you go wash. Mother said you were to wash immediately. Go on, darling, and then I'll take my bath."

"Uncle Peter looks simply divine," said Maude.

"Dad's been a perfect darling all day. He and Pete went over to the church, and now Pete's gone to dress, at Link's. Come in and see Sheila."

Sheila was sitting before her dressing table, fully dressed, but without her veil. Her gown was creamy satin, full and plain, with long sleeves touched at the wrist with narrow bands of rose-point lace to match the rose-point at the square high collar. The waiting veil was only a scarf of rose-point, worn by her mother at her own wedding thirty years earlier, and by her grandmother long before that.

Sheila was still pale, but there was a faint tinge of apricot in her smooth cheeks; her deep eyes looked very blue; the scallops and waves and ringlets of her shining crown of hair were all in place. She looked serious, and yet happy. One of the women said there was a sort of glow about her today, an aura that seemed to set her apart from other moods and days. The folds of the simple gown spread about her feet. In the mirror Gwen saw her against the open window and the green leaves of the high pear branches.

"You've never looked so lovely, Sheila!"

"That," said Sheila composedly to her reflection, "is the least I expect of you!"

The other women drifted away to put the final touches to their own costumes; Bets and Polly Henderson went downstairs to add two more presents to the collection; when Gwen came back from a quick bath she and Sheila were for a few minutes alone.

"Gwen dearest, it was selfish of me to talk to you that way last night," said Sheila then. "I know—I've seen today—how it upset you!"

Gwen smiled gallantly. But she could say nothing to this. Her throat felt thick and dry, and words would not come.

"I suppose I've thought of it so much and so long that I've become accustomed to it," Sheila went on. "I've tried sometimes to say it didn't matter, and at other times that whether it mattered or not it couldn't be

undone. Like losing an eye, or an arm, it was simply a fact. But I didn't think how it would seem to you."

"I know," Gwen answered a little huskily. "I've been saying, 'It doesn't matter—it does matter—it doesn't matter,' all day long."

"And both ways it's right," Sheila said, half-smiling, looking down at her engagement ring, twisting her smooth tanned hand slowly so that the diamond glittered against the background of jars and boxes and silver trays. "To some girls, perhaps it doesn't matter what they do before they marry. Whatever it is, it doesn't keep them from being happy wives and good mothers. But I'm not one of them. To me it does matter. To you it would. It would be as if Link had forged a check or stolen money from the cash register, somewhere along in his first jobs. No one would know it, but he would. It would put a sort of—of flaw in his own integrity, his own confidence in his integrity. I love—fineness, and purity's part of it. Part of the essential set-up—you know what I mean, the indispensable making of a gentlewoman. I've thought it all out: this is the wise thing to do. Link's going a long way, and I'm going with him. If I'd told him all this it wouldn't make any difference. I'm the woman, the wife, he wants, and he'd still want me."

"Oh, Sheila, I'm sure of it!" Gwen said fervently.

"Yes, I could have told him," Sheila said thoughtfully, still watching the hand that was so soon to wear another ring.

"Ah, but then why didn't you, darling? Wouldn't it have made it all easier, simpler all along the line?"

"I don't know. He would have thought it more important than it was. Men are like that. He might have thought I was marrying him while deep in my heart I cared for another man. It might always have been in his mind. Even today. Even tonight.

"And it's all so much over, Gwen. So much as if it never had happened. I mean as far as any feeling I have is concerned. That love—that breathless, glamoury feeling, that ache to have him telephone, have him write—those things all happened to another woman! Link might not ever have understood that. He wouldn't know how different, how complete and whole, my feeling for him is. And it would always mean that if I criticized any woman—said I thought she wasn't playing straight—Link would look at me—or might look at me——

"He wouldn't of course. But he'd have to hide what he was thinking.

“There’s just one more thing I want to say, Gwen. It was a selfish, stupid thing for me to do, to tell you all this last night. But you can’t think how it helped me—eased my soul.”

“It’s the Catholic theory of Confession, I suppose,” Gwen said in a low tone, her hands gently spreading and opening the delicate lace of the wedding veil, her lashes lowered. “You tell it and it’s off your mind.”

“It’s more than that. It’s facing it,” Sheila answered. “It’s saying, ‘I was wrong and I’m sorry.’ That’s a sort of house cleaning; it means you acknowledge something. Loads of people never say, ‘I was wrong,’ all their lives long. No matter who else was wrong, they were always right. And for a while I was like that. Tony and I loved each other; we said that justified itself. We said that if a man, frustrated and disappointed in his marriage, couldn’t ever love a woman again, and if a grown woman couldn’t decide what she would and what she wouldn’t do, then there wasn’t any real civilization, we were still all slaves to convention! Everyone was saying that women didn’t have to be pure any more, that seventy per cent of high-school girls were taking chances all the time. I wasn’t afraid. We weren’t robbing anyone, we were just taking a few hours of happiness where we happened to find them.

“But afterward—almost immediately—what a fool I knew I had been! I could have torn myself to pieces. The instant Rand was injured he was a different human being. Tony was, I mean. It was as if he had awakened from a dream to reality. He was the boy’s father, and Rand had no one else. Weeks in the hospital, suffering, trying to be brave, Tony saw it all with that first telegram. I didn’t exist. He was all father then, and it was weeks and weeks after that that we met each other, and were like strangers. Well, you know what a fool I was, now, Gwen, and that’s the end of that. But I’m going to make up for it all, you’ll see. I’m going to make Link the happiest and proudest man in the world. I’m going to turn it to good instead of bad!”

Gwen did not speak. She picked up Sheila’s hand and lifted it to her cheek, and Sheila bent her beautiful head, and their two foreheads touched.

“Now, don’t muss her!” cried Aunt Sis, coming in with white boxes of flowers. “It’s eleven minutes to twelve, Sheila, and I thought Gwen would be fixing your veil all this time! Your uncle has the car at the door, and your father and mother—no, here’s your mother now. I thought they’d gone.”

“I have to give my girl a last kiss,” her mother said, in tears. “We’re walking, dear; it’s only a few blocks. Daddy will be at the door. That’s about

right, Gwen, only that point over her eye ought to be fixed. You look beautiful, darling."

"You look wonderful, Mother. And as for Aunt Sis!"

"Oh, Sheila, it's really time!" Maude said in an exultant cry from the doorway. "You're to get into the car last, your mother says, because then you can manage your skirts better. Polly's gone, and Kip and everyone! And Tryrena's husband and a lot of people from Mill Bridge are down on the sidewalk watching, and Tryrena's husband has a camera and he says——"

"Perfect! And here are your flowers, darling, take your flowers," Gwen was saying. "You have yours, Maude. We're off!"

The June day was hot with a burning heat that meant hotter months ahead. After all, the frosting on the wedding cake was none too firm, and the ice cream so much affected by the weather that Aunt Sis, nervously helping to serve it out in the laundry at one o'clock, sent in the trays with a sharp whispered injunction, "Pass those quick!"

But these things were not serious. The bride was so lovely, the groom so obviously proud and happy, the company so harmonious, the dresses and flowers so successful that the first Washburton wedding in many years went off to a chorus of praise and enjoyment. Poor or rich, successful or failures, the Washburtons were numbered among the town's first families, and everyone, Nuttalls and Saunderses and Carters and other great folk from Crescent Manor all came and were cordial and familiar, calling Sheila's father "Peter" and Sheila's Aunt Sis "Isabel" and generally adding glamour to the gay scene.

The old house looked its best, too. Shabby, of course, but airy and spacious and elegant in its faded way, and the old silver and china were not to be eclipsed by any in town. The junior Peter was everywhere, handsome and helpful and amusing, and the senior Peter behaved with remarkable dignity and charm, escorting old ladies in laces and feathers to comfortable seats, going upstairs with arms full of wraps, remembering names and faces and occasions, keeping the conversation astir.

Lady Susan came, with her haunted ashen face warmed into a smile today, and Uncle Elmer disappeared early from the scene and did not come back until discovered in the basement, where the drinkables had been stored, long after the last guest had disappeared.

Sheila came running downstairs in her brown silk at about two o'clock, and was snatched and kissed and passed, laughing and breathless, from hand to hand. Then Link got possession of her, and they raced down to the ribbon-trimmed car, in a storm of rice, and went around it to a quiet little car parked just on the other side, and so departed in gales of protest and merriment for their new home and their new life.

"And how perfect it would have been if only—if only——" Gwen's thoughts said over and over, as Gwen's voice said, "Yes, wasn't it? . . . Wasn't she? But then she's always beautiful, Sheila. . . . Miss her? Oh, I began missing her days ago."

The company drifted away. Tired, happy girls and ushers sat on talking for a while, nibbling sandwiches and saying how wonderful it all had been; then they too began to scatter. Polly had gone on the three-o'clock train; she was on night duty in the library tonight. Peter junior escorted Maude home, and there was talk of going somewhere to dance later on. But Gwen did not want to dance. She went upstairs to the room where her mother, who had cried herself into a headache, was being soothed with aspirin and ammonia sponges by Aunt Sis; she went downstairs to the disorderly dining room, where her father and one or two other old-timers were discussing today's wedding and many others' weddings and many long-ago events.

"Dad, hadn't you better lie down awhile?" The group obediently broke up, and Gwen emptied the dregs from glasses into a bucket, carried away trays of plates. Bets had taken off her gala dress and put on an old smock, and was helping valiantly. "We can't do all of this, Bets," Gwen said, "but if we can just break the back of it, it'll mean Tryrena and Flo-Ann get through hours sooner."

Tryrena who had been at the church, and very active since behind the scenes at home, had now departed to change her dress, take her little girl some of Miss Sheila's cake, and get into easy shoes. When she came back she would have Flo-Ann and Reely and perhaps her mother with her, and they would charge through the accumulated work like snow plows after a storm.

Meanwhile, Bets and Gwen attacked the dining room and living room, carried out plates and crumpled napkins, folded card tables, brushed up crumbs, drew shades, and reduced the place to its usual quiet and order. Then Bets and Aunt Sis departed, and Gwen selected three sandwiches and a broken end of chocolate cake, and went upstairs to her own room.

There was much to do here, too, she discovered to her disgust and surprise. She was so tired now that she ached, but she gallantly began the inevitable hanging up and straightening. Frocks were placed on hangers, wilted flowers relegated to the wastebasket, chairs jerked into their appointed positions, and at last she could succumb to the temptation of the wide couch, the pleasant afternoon light streaming on her book, the first food she had eaten since a sketchy and hasty breakfast tasting delicious to her.

She could not read. Her eyes wandered from her book, and her thoughts wandered as idly back and forth through the events of the day. This detail had been perfection; that one had been not so fortunate. What Dr Persons said after he married them had been just the right thing.

The sting came quickly, like a physical thing, a quick stab of pain. Oh, if only—if *only*——

Not that it mattered. But to think of Sheila as anything but the most scrupulous, the most fastidious and dainty of all mortals—but it didn't matter!

Only as she lay there thinking about it her face flushed hotly and uncomfortably. She knew then as clearly as the years were to show it to her, that she could never go back to the Gwen of yesterday. Something trusting and simple and clean in her had been destroyed. Life was not what one liked to think it, with everyone fundamentally fine, everyone doing just a little better than the right thing, sticking to the code, practicing self-control as a matter of course. No, not like that. Secret things and wrong things were all about, under the surface, and the finest persons sometimes——

Poor little Sheila, poor little thing! Away from home, and so much in love! Once more: what did it matter? Men were always marrying widows and thinking them just as wonderful, as wives, as the most innocent of girls. And what good would have been accomplished by telling Link? Gwen kept coming back to that, to her own impatience and intolerance. What good would that have done? People married for the present and the future, not for the past. If Sheila had gone into a raging temper on some special occasion, had struck someone, had used rough language or had taken a dollar from the cashbox at the library, would she supposedly have had to confess that to Link or any other man she had honored by marrying? Sheila was too fine for the finest of them, she was going to be one of the tender, beautiful, gracious wives who make husbands successful and happy no matter what life brings!

And after all that, and after resolutely opening her book, it was maddening for Gwen to find her attention wandering again, to find herself saying, “I won’t think about it. It’s over and buried and done with; it never happened as far as I or anyone else is concerned. It was a beautiful wedding and a wonderful day, and the best of all was Dad being so nice. . . . She must never tell Link. That would be a fatal mistake! But she knows that.”

And so on and on with her mind twisting and turning and repeating and rearranging the facts until she felt more tired than ever, and got up and decided to go downstairs and see what was happening in the family. After all, someone might want supper.

CHAPTER V

As she descended the stairs, a man who had been standing in the open doorway, looking out into the shadowless, soft late light of the garden and street, turned around and came toward her.

He was a squarely built man of something less than thirty with a rather square heavy face that somehow matched his wide shoulders and strong square hands. His thick curly hair, brushed back recently with a wet brush, was black; he was dark-skinned, with a blunt-tipped nose and a strong wide mouth. But the eyes, framed in heavy brows and black lashes, were surprisingly blue, and rather contradicted the almost stern expression of his face. He did not smile as he came forward to shake hands. Gwen guided him into the living room.

"Dick Latimer!" she said, pleased. "I didn't know you were in town! But what's the matter?"

The last phrase was added with concern, for his look had warned her that something was wrong, even though he was trying now to smile.

"Nothing," he answered somewhat unsteadily. "I just thought—I came down yesterday—I thought I'd come in."

He spoke so confusedly, his words so inadequate to whatever the situation was, that Gwen merely continued to regard him expectantly and anxiously and said nothing.

"How—how are you all?" he asked.

The Washburtons had known "the Latimer boy," or at least had known who the Latimers were, from the beginning of things. Gwen had always thought of Dick as awkward and uninteresting. But she did not remember him, she reflected, as being as bad as this. This was simply pathetic. What on earth was the matter with him?

"You came down yesterday?" she asked, as brightly as she could, making an effort to ignore his obvious agitation. "But then why—why didn't you come to Sheila's wedding? We had a wedding here today, I want you to know! Bridesmaids, cake, everything. Dick, what's the matter? Is your mother ill?"

He looked at her, tried to speak, gulped. Then he walked quickly to the window, and Gwen, after watching him bewilderedly for a second, followed him there.

"Dick, what is it?"

"Oh, it's Sheila, it's always been Sheila!" he said grimly, between clenched teeth. For a moment Gwen stood perfectly still in amazement.

"What had I to offer her?" he said thickly, trying to laugh. "I've got a lot more intern years to do before I can marry! Even then I'll have to pay back a loan I got to help through medical school, and maybe Mother to take care of. I'd have a swell chance at a girl like that!"

He was still staring out of the window, speaking as if he were talking half to himself. Gwen, after a moment of stupefaction, sought desperately for words of comfort.

"Dick, I am sure she never knew! I never dreamed it!"

"What, that I liked Sheila?" he said gruffly. "How would you? I never told her. I used to go into the library and watch her, when I'd be home week ends. I was taking my premedical work at Stanford then. Just the way she'd look up——"

Gwen remembered it, too. The big window filled with plants and curtained in fresh swiss, and Sheila silhouetted against it. Always so gracious, always so sweet——

"She never looked at me," the man was saying. "I was always borrowing books that I couldn't afford to buy, and she'd tell me I couldn't take them out three times in succession, and then she'd smile and say, 'Well, perhaps this once we can stretch the rule a little!' "

"I can hear her!" Gwen said, smiling.

"For three years I've thought about her. I've never thought about anyone else," the man said. "Every look—every word——

"Someone wrote my mother that she was going to marry Link Baker long before the wedding invitation came. I tried to stay away. I couldn't. I thought about her—laughing and happy and having you all make a fuss about her——"

He stopped again. Gwen did not speak.

"Did she look lovely?" he asked.

“She looked beautiful. But then Sheila would.”

“I got leave yesterday,” Dick presently said. “I came over here and watched this house. Once I heard her speak; she came to the door to take a package in, but it was sort of dusky and the light was behind her, and I didn’t see her.”

“Oh, Dick, why didn’t you come in!”

“And meet him?” Dick said. “Tell him I hope they’ll be happy? Yes, I could have done that. My God, I hope he knows how lucky he is! I hope he knows what he’s got. What has he done, to have her love him, and smile at him——

“I stayed over there, sitting on Tillman’s fence, all night,” he presently went on miserably. “I saw your lights go out around midnight, all except Pete’s. Then, Lord, I thought they’d never be done! She came down to the gate with him and stood there, talking. Then Pete came out, and walked home with Baker, I guess.”

“You didn’t stay up all night!”

“Yes, I did. I sat there, thinking about her, and that she’ll have dinner with him alone somewhere tonight, and they’ll talk, and he’ll put his arm about her, and tell her what a good husband he’s going to be to her. And what’s he ever done, what’s he done, to get *her*?”

Bitter. Who else had been bitter, just recently? Oh, Sheila. There was a lot of bitterness lying around everywhere. Now poor, pitiful Dick Latimer, of all people, was bitter!

“I was watching your house when dawn came this morning,” Dick presently resumed. “I heard you all laughing. Then I walked downtown and had a cup of coffee. I didn’t want to go to the church, I didn’t know what to do—I took a long walk——”

He had been staring out of the window, now he turned and glanced at Gwen over his shoulder, and in that instant she felt as staggering a blow to mind and spirit as she could possibly have sustained in the flesh. Why—this man—Dick Latimer, whose mother had been a practical nurse taking cases here in town a few years ago—his voice—and his manner—and that look in his keen eyes—that casual look over his shoulder——

What was happening? She didn’t know, except that nothing like it had ever happened to her before. She couldn’t answer him, she couldn’t speak,

she could only stare stupidly—he'd notice of course that she was goggling at him like a fool——

"What is it, Gwen?" he asked, sharply, and his voice went through her like an electric shock, and her senses began to go slowly round and round. To have him say her name like that! "Gwen." So carelessly, so easily. "You're tired?" he said, putting his hand on her arm.

"No, no, I'm not tired," she answered, in dreamy faraway tones quite unlike her own. She would gather her wits together presently and make him come out to the kitchen and have something to eat. He mustn't know, of course; he was in love with Sheila. But she knew! She knew that whatever it meant to her life, whatever agony it was to cost her in days to come, the look in his eyes, the touch of his big gentle fingers, the tones of his concerned voice would be with her to her dying day.

He wanted her to go up to the hotel and have luncheon with him, but Gwen, still dazed and shaken, was not quite sufficiently confused to consent to that. Go to the hotel late in the afternoon, with the Washburton house still filled with wedding feast!

"You come right out to the kitchen, Dick. There are sandwiches enough to last into the middle of next week. . . . I adore you. Whatever you've got, it's what I can't live without! Dick—Dick——" Gwen added in her thoughts. Pinwheels of gold and crimson and dazzling white were going off in every direction, and her legs felt weak. "I'm in love, I'm in love!" she thought, her teeth chattering.

"You're all in," Dick said, catching at her cold shaking hand as she put a selection of the inexhaustible sandwiches before him.

"You are the most wonderful person I've ever seen," Gwen said in her thoughts. Aloud she managed to enunciate at the same time, "Weddings are rather—exciting. Everyone's tired out and resting, except me—— No, I don't want to, I've been resting!" she protested hastily as he half-rose to go. "Mother's lying down, and Dad—I don't know where Dad is, but Kip carried off a lot of food to play pirates, and Peter—I don't know where he went, but Tryrena's gone—— This is sheer imbecility, he'll think I'm the idiot member——" Gwen thought. But she could not seem to get command of herself. It was all too new, too thrilling. This big dark creature, so much a man already, so much a boy still, sitting here ravenously devouring food and drinking coffee—and herself one quiver of ecstatic discovery——

"Scrambled eggs, Dick?"

“No, this is perfect!” He had had nothing since early morning. He was really hungry, a symptom she had time, in the confusion of her thoughts, to consider encouraging. “I’m terribly sorry I came in and bellyached about this,” he said repentantly. “I was a little giddy, I guess, and the whole thing seemed to get me down. I’ve loved her for a good many years, and it’s been in the back of my mind that someday I’d get a scholarship or something, maybe go to the Mayos’ or Johns Hopkins, and perhaps—I don’t know, inherit some money from some relative I never saw, and that then I could come for her. It—it sort of chokes me to think of her being Link’s.”

“It sort of chokes me, too,” Gwen said simply.

He looked at her with narrowed eyes, as if he saw her for the first time.

“I’ll bet it does.”

“I’m crazy about her myself,” Gwen said, her eyes watering.

“I guess everyone is. He’s—all right, isn’t he?” the man asked awkwardly.

“Link? He’s magnificent.”

“He’s in politics, isn’t he?”

“Oh no, no. He’s a lawyer. But he’s sort of in politics too, chairman of something—the party, I think.” Gwen’s voice steadied as she talked. “Chairman of the state, or maybe it’s the county. Anyway, he’s sort of an expert on mining laws, and he’s out there at the Lone Star Mine trying to settle a Pennsylvania claim, whatever it is.”

“They’ll live out at the mine?”

“For a while, anyway. Sheila has the house the superintendent had. His wife died, and he lives at the company house, and she has this darling place. But Judge Spencer was here for the wedding today, of course, with Marie Louise, and he said that they want Link to run for Congress against Miller. He said the gambling scandal had pretty well finished Miller, and he said that if they could raise funds enough for a real campaign they’d send Link to Washington! Imagine, and he’s only about thirty-five!”

“She’d like that,” Dick said slowly, his eyes on Gwen’s face.

“Well, I think anyone would! But of course that was just talk. If something like that doesn’t happen, he’s going to practice law in San Francisco. There’s a firm there that has made him a wonderful offer. And Sheila’s always wanted to live there, she loves the city.” Gwen suddenly

began to shake again. “You like the city, don’t you, Dick?” she asked, hearing her own voice like a stranger’s voice.

“Oh sure. It’s foggy, you know; you don’t get tired the way you do here in the valleys. But they keep us too busy to care much about where we are. Last year I was on night duty; I never slept through a night.” Dick laughed cheerfully.

“But you had time to sleep daytimes?”

“Oh sure, if you can. Except when you’re on obstetrics. Then you’re on day and night.”

“Thrilling?”

“Oh yes. I’m on a new service Monday, and it’s going to be the stiffest yet.”

“And you’ll be glad of that, won’t you, Dick?” She spoke gently, with sympathy and understanding, and saw the immediate response in his eyes.

“Yep,” he said. “It’ll help me get over it. I’ll be working hard, and maybe going somewhere else after I graduate—one of the fellows is going to Hawaii, and he said he thought he could get his uncle to ask for me there. Wilson’s going to London.”

“That sounds so exciting!” the girl said wistfully.

“What do you do, Gwen?” he asked suddenly.

“I’ve an office job. Keane & King, insurance.”

“Like it?”

“Not very. But Dad isn’t working at all now, you know, and without Sheila we’ll not have any too much, as it is. I’d want to work at something, anyway,” said Gwen. “But of course you always hope it’ll be what you like to do.”

“And what would you like to do?” he asked, so seriously and with such concern that she laughed, and felt tears prick her eyes.

“I’d like to exhort,” she said, after a moment.

“To what?” Dick asked, so puzzled that she laughed again.

“To make speeches. To be in some cause. There was a woman who came here talking for world peace—she gives her life to it. She was all agog. We had her here for dinner, and she couldn’t talk of anything else.”

“Well, it’s something like that in a profession,” he said.

“I suppose so. I mean to be absorbed, and excited about your work, and getting tired and discouraged all the time, and going about staying in cheap little hotels and meeting commissions—I’d love that.”

“You’re a crusader. But the worst of it is,” he said, “that most of the people you’d meet would be stuffed shirts. You’d be in earnest, all right, but they wouldn’t be! Now, a fellow and I went to a meeting the other night ——”

“Hello, Dick, I’ve not seen you for thousands of years,” Peter said, coming into the kitchen from the yard.

“Hello, Pete.”

“Didn’t get here in time for the wedding, huh?”

“Nope. Gwen’s just been telling me about it.” He seemed quite composed now, Gwen thought, and surprisingly at ease.

“I thought you and some of them were going to supper somewhere, Peter,” she said, wondering if she showed anything.

“We were all too sunk. But if you and Dick want to go downtown——”

“Oh, heavens, I’m dead! And Dick has to make the six-o’clock.” It sounded brusque, unsympathetic.

Peter glanced at the kitchen clock.

“I’ll run you over to the train,” he said. He stretched his arms at full length on the table and buried his face in them, yawning. “I’m nearer dead than alive,” he moaned. “Did you know we dug old Uncle Elmer out of the basement about four o’clock?” he asked his sister, suddenly looking up to grin at her. “The old boy was having a swell time. Tryrena went down there to put some bottles away or something, and there he was. She gave a yell; she thought he was a tramp.”

“He *is* a tramp,” Gwen said, laughing.

“Is that old Elmer Wall?” Dick asked, smiling in sympathy.

“Yes. He married Dad’s sister, my Aunt Gwendolyn, who died. He has a pension of about thirty-six dollars a month, and he works—sometimes. He’s a hot sketch,” Peter said lazily. “He thinks the only one of us who amounts to anything is Gwen.”

“He’s right. I have the highest respect for his judgment,” Gwen said. “He gave me two darling old onyx-and-pearl bracelets that belonged to his mother.”

“You wouldn’t think he was so swell if you had to go along River Lane looking in all the saloons for him,” Peter observed. “They had him at Agnew for a while,” he told the guest. “He was absolutely coo-coo. They discharged him as cured. But darned if the old man hasn’t still got delusions of grandeur. He brought Gwen a lot of old papers one day, remember, Gwen? Deeds and documents, he said they were.”

“Deeds and documents. He was very proud of that phrase,” Gwen said, laughing again.

“What became of them all?”

“Oh, they were all burned, I think. I don’t know. Every little while he asks me if I’ve got them safe. Hadn’t you boys better be moving? It’s quarter to six.”

“I’ll bring the car round to the gate.” Peter departed, and Gwen walked down to the garden gate with Dick. The warm lingering spring twilight was soft and shadowless; birds were fussing their way to bed in the oak tree. A great acacia, loaded with tiny fragrant tassels, hung over the gate.

“I feel a hundred times better, Gwen, just talking to you and Pete,” Dick said suddenly and awkwardly. “I’m sorry if I worried you, on a day when you were all tired out anyway. Forget it!”

“I must be simple and friendly,” thought Gwen. “Well, you helped me forget something that was worrying me,” she said aloud, surprised to realize that she had not thought of last night’s shadow for all the time Dick had been with her. “And that means that after a while I can forget it completely,” she told him.

“Thanks a lot,” he said. He went around the front of the car and got in the front seat beside Peter, and they drove away. Gwen lingered on, watching the car out of sight, thinking what a strange power was Sheila’s, to win men to whom she had hardly spoken. Certainly there had never been any personal feeling between Dick and her; for the Latimers had never been friends of the Washburtons; he knew her only as the gracious and beautiful young clerk in the library. Yet that had been enough to change his life, wreck his happiness, embitter his soul. And Sheila had never dreamed it!

CHAPTER VI

TRYRENA was coming back tonight, but in her own good time. Gwen presently roused herself from a dream, reflecting that probably her father would like something to eat, and her mother enjoy a tray of tea and toast. She worked away busily for an hour or two, serving her father as she put the kitchen in order, finding more food for little Kip when he came in flushed, untidy, weary. They discussed the events of the day tirelessly. Aunt Sis telephoned. Other persons telephoned. The glamour of the wedding still lingered over everyday events and scenes. Mrs Washburton came down to the kitchen and drank her tea at the end of the kitchen table, and sighed with pleasure and weariness and satisfaction as she reviewed the long day. And through it all Gwen moved like a person asleep.

"Dick Latimer came in, did he, Gwen?"

"He was here an hour. I fed him. He'd skipped lunch."

"Wouldn't you know that big clumsy boy would be late?"

"He's not so bad." She wouldn't say more than that. She wouldn't tell anyone what he had told her of his feeling for Sheila. It didn't seem quite fair to him. "Pete took him to the train," she said.

Her father came into the dining room and opened the sheets of the evening paper, settling back under his accustomed lamp in his usual chair. Mrs Washburton announced that she was going straight back to bed but remained to rock in her own chair, occasionally observing that Flora Terman had been awfully nice, and that she had never liked young Alan Saunders' wife so well, and other matters of the sort. Gwen too lingered on, not very anxious to return to the room that was so insistently stressing the absence of Sheila, or to the thoughts that for a while she had held at bay. But there was Dick now: she could think of Dick.

"Oh, and Tryrena found the fleur-de-lis napkins," she reminded her mother, as she went to one of the deep pantry drawers, still left partly open, and knelt down to close it. "They'd worked their way to the back of the drawer and fallen down into the lower one."

The drawer that had held the table linen was almost empty now; the wedding had made heavy inroads upon it. But the lower drawer was still half

full of papers. Gwen, sitting back on her heels, began to sort and arrange them.

"How does all this junk get in here?" she demanded. Nobody heard her. She went on straightening the papers, throwing out old school exercises with Kip's sprawling penciled signature at the top; reading through newspaper clippings of economical parties and family breakfasts. " 'Tea or coffee for adults, chocolate or milk for children,' " she read half aloud. "Wouldn't you think they could leave that much out?"

"I wonder what Peter did. Funny he isn't home," her mother said on a yawn. "I *must* go to bed," she added in an admonitory undertone. But she made no move.

"Uncle Elmer's stuff," Gwen said, coming upon a sheaf of papers enclosed in a set of sodden, limp, old brown paper envelopes. " 'Deeds and documents'! 'Last will and testament.' I didn't know this was in here. I suppose he's leaving someone his alarm clock and his other pair of socks. 'To my beloved friend, Gwendolyn Ashe Washburton, daughter of my late wife's brother, Peter Washburton of this town, I bequeath . . .' "

Gwen was silent now, reading. Uncle Elmer had always been ridiculous, but somehow a last will and testament never was quite absurd. She must have known, at one time or another, that this document was in existence, but it had probably seemed merely a joke to her younger years. Utterly unimportant. Just crackbrained Uncle Elmer, who was always embarrassing and shaming his relatives with his intemperance and his harmless delusions of importance.

Uncle Elmer, when occasionally encountered downtown or reluctantly entertained by the family, would allude to the most valuable pieces of the town's property as once having belonged to him. "Sold that to Jim Saunders for about one tenth of what it was worth," Uncle Elmer would say. Or, "Told Joel Turner that he'd better buy that whole tract. Turner didn't have a cent then. But he's driving his big car today and he don't know I'm alive."

He had his petty feuds, his indignations, his pride, even now, did Uncle Elmer. Disreputable and dirty, sauntering into barrooms and pool parlors, sitting in the spring sunshine on a bench in City Hall Park, he would buttonhole anyone who would listen to his sputterings against someone who had cheated him, someone who had sneered at him. Rarely in funds, when he did have a dollar or two he treated his friends generously, magnificently indeed. He had sometimes embarrassed Gwen almost to anger with gifts.

Uncle Elmer, eternally borrowing money from Dad, having the nerve to bring her a mosaic brooch or a monogrammed handkerchief!

And this packet of untidy, stuffed legal envelopes, the famous "deeds and documents" he had some years earlier confided to Gwen. Now she turned them over incuriously, only intent upon flattening them together, binding as many as she could with a stout band of red elastic, packing them away as neatly as possible.

"I should have put this drawer in order months ago," she said, crumpling some newspaper clippings into a ball.

"It's a funny time to do it now, the night after Sheila's wedding," her mother commented. "I wonder what's keeping Peter."

"It says here that Griggs is going to build an extension, where the old coalyard was on Second Street," observed the man of the house, over his paper.

"For pity's sake," Mrs Washburton said.

"I'll certainly miss that bearded old troll at the coalyard," Gwen said absently. "When I was little he used to frighten me out of my wits."

But she was not thinking of what she was saying. She had suddenly become interested in the papers in her hands.

"Dad, here's a regular last will and testament, witnessed and everything."

"Elmer's?" asked her father, with a little indulgent laugh.

"If Elmer Wall had anything to do with it, it probably isn't legal," her mother added firmly.

"Well, but it is. It leaves everything of which he dies possessed to Gwendolyn Ashe Washburton," Gwen said. "This especially to include his interest in the Hamilton Wall property hereinafter described and designated . . ."

Her voice died away. Nobody was listening. She continued to read to herself.

"Dad, did you ever hear of 'Wallbestos?' " she asked suddenly.

"Yes, I did," her father answered, looking vague, and frowning in an effort of memory. "Elmer used to talk to me about it quite a lot, years ago; it was some invention of his father's, old Ham Wall. He used to think it ought

to be kept a secret, and I don't know that he ever did anything about it. But someone told me—maybe he did—that it was protected by a government copyright or patent or something. Why, is there a lot about it there?"

"Papers, dozens of them. And the designs of a hopper or mill called 'The Wallbestos Refiner.' What did it do? Was it a machine?"

"It was a scheme to get more asbestos or different asbestos out of mines, I believe. I never quite got it through my head what old Ham Wall did claim for it."

"Why, I should think an invention like that would be right up your alley, Dad."

"Well, I was a very busy man at the time. I was managing the dairy interests for the whole county, and I never had time for old Ham's pipe dreams. He was always going to make a fortune out of something, and always, like Elmer, borrowing two dollars. I swan, Fanny," Peter Washburton said mildly, "I do wish that feller would sometimes borrow either more or less than two dollars. No, sir, it's two dollars today, and it's been two dollars for years."

"He probably divides it, in that bird's brain of his, into one dollar for meals and one for tobacco," Gwen offered, an open paper still in her hands.

"I don't know what he pays Carrie Foster for his room, then," said his brother-in-law.

"Well, do you know, I don't believe he pays Carrie a cent!" Mrs Washburton said in sudden animation. "For one thing, Carrie Foster always admired the Walls, she thinks they're terribly important, and when Elmer was down at Agnew she used to go down there Sundays and see him. I know she did! And Elmer always makes her ice cream for her Sundays, and carves for her nights, and Lou Cutter told me that one morning when she was going to early Mass she saw Elmer Wall washing down the sidewalk at Fosters'——"

"Dad, would it be any use to have Link look at these papers?"

"No, it wouldn't," Peter Washburton said decisively. "Just as soon as you got someone interested, and the whole thing started, and your patent rights renewed—because I suppose those have run out—Elmer Wall would get some crackbrained notion that he wanted to improve the machine, or he wouldn't take five thousand for it, he'd stick out for fifteen, or he'd imagine someone was cheating him and get two or three lawyers as loony as he is on the case and you'd just be wasting your time!"

This was quite a speech for her quiet father, and Gwen looked up, impressed.

"I've watched Elmer all his life, and I've had my run-ins with the law and the patent people, too," the man said, "and my advice to you is to wait until Elmer Wall dies——"

"Uncle Pete, when people get married why does everyone throw rice and make fun of them?" Kip demanded, from his comfortable position on the floor, when there had been a moment of silence.

"I don't know. Just a custom, I guess."

"I think they were going to the Fairmont," Gwen said, suddenly reminded that, after all, this was still Sheila's wedding day. "Link sent a telegram there last night. Oh, Sheila, Sheila——" her thoughts went on, half aloud.

"You certainly are going to miss your sister," said her mother.

"Won't we all?"

"I don't know as that's a very sensible way to talk, Mommy," the man said mildly. "I believe," he added, "that I'll mix myself——"

"No," said his wife briskly, "it's after nine, and you'll not mix yourself anything more to drink today! I wonder where on earth that boy is!"

"I'm here," said Peter junior, coming in with rather an odd expression on his tired young face. He sat down next to his mother and took her hand. "Now don't get excited and blow up, Mom," he said. "This'll kind of shock you, but you might as well know it now as any time. Uncle Elmer got mixed up with a truck about an hour ago, and died on the way to the hospital."

"Peter!" Mrs Washburton whispered.

"He did not!" said Gwen.

"Take it easy now," Peter went on, patting his mother's hand. "Clem Richards saw me driving across Main Street, and he yelled and I went right over. We've got him moved to Mhoon's, and it's all right," he said, "but I knew you'd feel sort of sorry for the poor old boy. He never knew what hit him. It was Leonard's truck; he'd just gotten gas at Pond's, and was starting out across the sidewalk, and Elmer just walked right across him. There was a lot of screaming and yelling, and your friend Mrs Minter who was right there had him taken into Lockwood's drugstore. I got there then and asked her why someone didn't rush him to the hospital, and she said, 'Oh, I always

thought they took them into drugstores!' She seems to be a quick thinker, and a good old girl to have for your club president. But the poor old boy went out like a light, anyway; they couldn't have done anything."

"Well, well, well," the elder Peter said heavily, shaking his head. The women exchanged glances; looking slowly from face to face.

"Uncle Elmer!" Gwen said in an awed whisper. Death surely couldn't come as quickly and simply as that! Uncle Elmer disgracefully maundering in the cellar among the wine bottles a few hours ago, and now stretched out in utter peace and final dignity at Mhoon's! Not to come around at any and all hours any more with the eternal, "There was a little matter of business I wanted to discuss with your father." Not to boast to all the town loafers and parasites that he had once owned this piece of property or that, and sold it to Jim Saunders for a song.

Well, she had often wished in moments of boredom and emptiness that something would happen. Now things were happening with lightning speed. That strange talk with Sheila last night was a happening; perhaps the most startling of Gwen's life. Its stark outlines were somewhat softened now, but still Gwen's thoughts went back and back to it, always with a little pang of reluctance, a sense of shame and pain.

Sheila's marriage, the little ceremony that made Sheila Washburton Sheila Baker, was a happening. This day had been full of happenings; and not the least of them, Dick Latimer's appearance and his awkward confession of feeling for Sheila. And the strange, strange wave of emotion that went over her when she thought of Dick. Finally had come this shocking sudden change that would take Uncle Elmer forever from their knowledge. Poor, pretentious old good-for-nothing Uncle Elmer, stumbling drunkenly to his death even while she sat here on the floor in the dining room and looked at the papers he had annotated and changed and made important for so many futile years!

"Well, I'm an heiress, Pete," she said whimsically to her brother, when her mother had extracted from him every detail of the recent catastrophe and had hurried around the corner to tell Aunt Sis all about it. "Here is Uncle Elmer's last will, leaving everything to me."

"Gosh, I hope that doesn't mean you have to go clear out the rats' nest he slept in at Fosters'," Peter said. "No?" he added, curious and amused. "Did the old fellow leave a will?"

“Isn’t it funny, Pete, we were just talking about it, and Dad said he advised me to wait until Uncle Elmer was dead. Yes, it’s all willed to me. Look, there’s a diagram of some sort of washer or mill or whatever it is! Look, the ‘Wallbestos.’ And here, look, here’s a letter I was just reading from a firm in some place called North Valley, in Dakota, offering him thirty-five hundred for the patent rights. I wonder what he did with the thirty-five hundred, Dad?”

“Here, let me see that!” her father commanded, suddenly interested. “He used to say he’d had an offer for it, but I never believed him. He was holding out for fifteen thousand. He was down at the Institution the day he talked to your mother and me about it, and we just thought it was one of his nutty ideas. So he really did have an offer, did he? Three years ago, eh? . . . Sure enough, they wanted it. But according to what he used to say, he turned them down.”

“Dad, without a penny in the world would he be idiot enough to turn down thirty-five hundred dollars!”

“I guess he would, dear.”

“I suppose that by this time they’re using something else?” the younger Peter mused.

“Who?” Gwen’s eyes suddenly flashed blue fire. “Oh, Pete,” she gasped, “d’you suppose there’s a chance that they might still want it? Oh, Pete, if we could get that thirty-five hundred—think! Back interest on the mortgage—we could send that two hundred to the bank——”

“We could pay off the mortgage, sap!” her brother interpolated, almost as excited as she. “It’s only twenty-eight hundred.”

“Peter!” Gwen gasped, electrified. “Oh, we could, couldn’t we? And then that rotten hundred and sixty-eight a year would be done with! Whose would the money be, Pete?”

“Gwendolyn, come to life, darling. Wake up, it’s morning, and birdies are caroling a lay!” Peter informed her gently. “It’d be *yours*. For a woman who’s been in an office for more than a year, you seem to be singularly dense.”

“Dad, Pete and I have been thinking that Link ought to see these deeds and documents!” Gwen said eagerly, as her father returned to the room. “If this firm really offers thirty-five hundred we could clear off the mortgage ____”

“I’m walking over to Mhoon’s,” said her father. “I’ll stop for your mother on the way home. As far as that patent goes, Gwen, I should think you’d know that it isn’t ever going to amount to a hill of beans! If you’re counting on anything poor Elmer Wall had to do with, I can tell you it’s just going to give you a lot of trouble for nothing.”

“Just the same, I’m going to talk to Link as soon as they’re back!” Gwen said, when her father had gone. She gathered the papers carefully together and carried them upstairs. They had lain neglected in the pantry drawer for years, but a sudden fear that they might be stolen tonight possessed her.

Comfortably in bed, she found that she could neither read nor sleep. The long panorama of the day’s events wheeled before her vision. Now she was putting on Sheila’s veil; now against the window of the sitting room she saw the square-built silhouette of Dick Latimer. Now she was receipting a check for thirty-five hundred dollars and they were all planning a camping trip into the Sierras on what was left after the mortgage was paid.

Now Dick Latimer was telling her that he had merely thought it was Sheila he loved—it had been Gwen all along—wonderful to marry a famous doctor——

“I feel a hundred times better, Gwen. . . . Thanks a lot!”

Dick’s words were in her ears as she dropped off into exhausted sleep.

CHAPTER VII

It was on a foggy morning, three weeks after the wedding, that Gwen and Peter set forth in the family car to go up to the mine and spend a Saturday night with Sheila and Link.

Gwen was in wild spirits. To her any expedition was exciting, and this had all the requisites of an event: early rising, special clothing, new country to see, presents for Sheila carefully wrapped and messages for Sheila carefully memorized.

"I simply love to have to set my alarm clock for anything!" she whispered to her brother, when they met in the kitchen at dawn for breakfast, before setting forth across the dewy lawn to unlock the garage and take out the car. "Pete, isn't this fun!"

A delicious morning of fragrance and silence and high fog; the day would be warm, but Gwen at the moment wore Sheila's old white coat over her linen dress. White gloves, a white crash hat very becoming to the sun-tanned face and blue eyes, her old white buckskin shoes newly cleaned for the event all helped to put her into a gala mood. And she was going to see Sheila again, after the separation, and she could tell Sheila all the news: the aftermath of the wedding, and about Uncle Elmer, and everything!

The patent papers, the famous "deeds and documents," were safely packed in enormous brown envelopes and arranged for Link's professional inspection. Gwen had been warned more than once by her father that any hopes founded upon their evidence were doomed to disappointment, but still Gwen hoped. The thought of thirty-five hundred dollars danced in her mind. It was a larger sum than any member of the family had had within the memory of man, and this morning, as they drove happily along, she asked her brother if he knew how much of it would be taken in taxes, should she ever get it.

"I don't know. Five hundred maybe," Peter said. "Here's the sun!" he added in satisfaction as the fog parted and the dewy and flashing beauty of the world began to come into view.

"Pete: I think that's outrageous!"

“Well, you’re not a regular relative of Uncle Elmer’s, you know. It might be more than that.”

“It’d leave enough to clear off the mortgage?” the girl asked anxiously.

Her brother laughed, turning from his wheel to give her an oblique look.

“You’d be terribly decent to pay off that mortgage!” he said. “It isn’t your responsibility. And it’d be your money. Why don’t you go abroad with Mary Lancaster?”

“Oh, Pete, you’re talking as if I might really *get* it!”

“Well, I suppose that’s because we have these loony inventors all over the family. You count on mirages and things.”

“It’d belong to all the family,” Gwen decided, after thought. “Only I certainly wouldn’t want Dad to put any of it into more barrels of tar. His laboratory smells worse than a pigpen now, when the wind is right.”

“No, it’d be a great thing to have the mortgage cleared off, to have them own the house outright,” Peter was presently rambling along comfortably. “It’d mean I could get married—you could get married when you felt like it ____”

Gwen listened in a happy dream. It was heavenly to be driving along through the sweet morning lights and odors, half listening even while her eyes missed no turn of orchards or mountains, half absorbed in the magic that one word “marriage” evoked. Being in love, even with a man who hadn’t the slightest idea how one felt about him, was an occupation in itself. It filled all her quiet moments; it carried her off to sleep at night as if it were a galleon with flags flying; it colored her dreams. She felt utterly content, sitting here beside Peter; hearing him talk of taxes and rents. Mom could rent rooms, as easy as pie, way downtown. Sheila and Link would always lend a hand financially, if times got hard. Link, Peter opined, was going to get somewhere.

“And you’ll marry, Gwen.”

“I suppose so.” Spring sang in her voice.

“Picked him out?” Peter asked, surprised, with an oblique glance.

“I don’t know.” She had flushed rosy red; she began to laugh. But upon Peter’s questioning her seriously, she suddenly sobered and would tell him nothing. “I haven’t informed my young man yet,” she said demurely. “I have to work on him. He may die of the shock if I break it to him too suddenly.”

"Someone in Kenthill?" Peter asked.

"I'll not tell you. He's in love with someone else at the moment." But Gwen had begun to laugh again, and Peter, finding her gaiety infectious, laughed with her.

"Peter, when you're doing a thing you like to do, do you sort of pity all the other people you pass, who aren't doing it?" Gwen asked youthfully, after a while. "It seems such fun to be going up to visit Sheila and stay at the mine and everything! I feel sort of sorry for everyone who's doing just the usual Sunday things. Chicken dinner and washing the car, and movies."

Peter laughed.

"I always used to feel that way when we went to the circus," he admitted. He gave his sister an affectionate look. "We're having kind of fun, aren't we?" he said.

"Oh—*fun*!" Gwen said.

The orchards and farms had dropped below them now; the road was rising steadily and winding into the cool blue mountains. It was noon when the scaling of a wooded spur and a precipitous descent into a hidden valley brought the harsh, enormous buildings and the gashed hillside of the Lone Star Mine into view. It was a long hundred and fifty miles from Kenthill to Sheila's new home; for an hour they had driven in the solemn green shadow of the redwoods; had emerged on dizzy cliffs below which the river rushed, crossed great granite stretches lying hot and bare in the sunshine. Now and then across the clear air drifted the scent of the tufted tall red pines as strong as ether and infinitely sweet.

Sheila, the sunlight dazzling on her bright hair, rushed out to meet them, and the sisters laughed and cried as if their parting had been one of years rather than days. There was everything to say, everything to see. Gwen linked her arm in Sheila's, and they went through the house together, and looked out on pine-covered mountainsides and the granite-gray buildings and shafts, and looked inside at all Sheila's pretty housekeeping arrangements—the disposal of wedding clocks and chairs and linen.

"We're having lunch here at our house," Sheila announced, "and dinner over at the company house. And I've a woman coming in to serve lunch and do the dishes."

"Good Cheer Bulletin Number One," said Gwen. She had been talking almost steadily, for there was nothing Sheila did not want to hear, and Link listened indulgently, as amused as she. "And Tryrena sent you a chocolate

cake," Gwen announced, producing it, well wrapped, in a cardboard hatbox, "and she said to tell Mister Link that he could eat all he wanted of it because it was made of such pure materials that it would lay good on his stummick."

"Well, that was charming of her!" Link ejaculated, with a startled laugh.

"He still isn't used to being married into a family of idiots," said Sheila. "But he's learning."

"Sheila, I should think you'd love it here. The air is simply like champagne!"

"It's the most wonderful thing. You're on your toes all the time. Isn't my kitchen darling? We aren't really in yet. We only got here last week, and last night the staff here gave us a picnic up at the waterfall—nine miles, and we rode it, and it was too beautiful!"

"But Sheila, you've always said you can't ride!"

"I know I can't, but I stayed on, didn't I, Link? And I loved it! We're going to ride a lot!"

"Oh, fun!" said Gwen. Sheila was completely happy; that was obvious. It was wonderful to see her so. Sheila had always been gracious and lovely, but there were a softness and sweetness, a quiet gaiety in her manner today which were new. Gwen loved to see her look toward Link when any little question of what they were to do, where they were to go, was raised. There was adoration as well as confidence in the lifted beautiful eyes; there was much quiet laughter, there were many little casual asides between them. Evidently the happiest sort of companionship was already established.

"Link, did you take Gwen's bag upstairs? . . . Thanks, dear." "Sheila, I was to remind you that something in the oven might burn." "Link, save me, save me, *what* is the name of the superintendent? . . . I have to ask him about once every hour." "Link, have you a dollar and fifteen cents? Mrs Casey is here with the wash already."

"He really," said Sheila of her husband when luncheon was over and the sisters were resting on the spare-room beds, "he really is the finest man I ever knew. I've never dreamed a man could be so clever and so gentle and so full of fun. And so simple, too. I mean he'll listen to anyone, even if he knows twice as much about anything! And we have such fun, Gwen, planning, and saying what we'll do if we settle in San Francisco, or whether we'd rather go to Rio."

"Was Pebble Beach fun, Sheila?"

"Oh, Gwen, the loveliest place you ever saw! We drove down there from San Francisco. Right on the ocean, of course, with these wonderful cypresses, and cliffs running out to sea, and we had a cottage to ourselves, and the most wonderful meals! And we fished, Gwen, we fished for salmon, and it was wonderful, rocking in the boat in a sort of a soft fog, just Link and I. But do you know, Gwen," Sheila broke off to say, laughing, "we loved our wedding so, and we had such a good time at it, and Link got so intrigued by every separate member of the family that while we were driving down to Monterey he said suddenly, 'Oh, let's go back and hear what they're all saying about us!' and I said, 'That's what I'm simply dying to do!' However," Sheila finished, always with the little new air of dignity and poise that Gwen found so charming, "we decided that that wouldn't do."

"If you'd come back you would have found an admirer of yours," Gwen told her; Dick always in her thoughts.

"Who was that?"

"Dick Latimer. He came all the way from the city to your wedding, and then discovered that he hadn't the nerve to come in."

"Hadn't the nerve?" Sheila asked, widening her eyes.

"It seems that he's had the most awful crush on you for years."

"Dick—Dick who? Dick Latimer? I don't even remember him, I wouldn't know him if I saw him," Sheila murmured, amused.

"A square, dark-looking sort of boy. He's a doctor, he's an intern in San Francisco."

"Oh yes, I place him now. But I don't remember ever speaking to him except about books. He used to take out medical books."

"That's the one. . . . And if you *knew*——!" Gwen thought.

"And he liked me?" asked Sheila.

"He was all broken up about your marrying anyone else."

"Oh well!" Sheila said, laughing. "And now I've got to go change my clothes," she added, "and you try to get a nap. I think we can just let Pete sleep on, on the couch, until Link comes back, anyway. Then we'll walk over and take a look at the mine."

After dinner Gwen produced her packet of documents and deeds, and the four discussed and considered them. Link was impressed.

"D'you mean to say that that wavering old man actually invented this process?"

"His father did. His father was quite a scientist."

"Well, I should say he was! But look here, Gwen," Link said, scowling at the papers, "he sold it."

"Find a receipt?" Peter asked alertly.

"No, but here's some notice, clipped out of a newspaper, see? It says 'the Johnson Wallbestos process, now operating at the Johnson-Polk Mills, is to be made the subject of experiments by a group of British scientists.' "

"Then he *did* sell it!" Gwen said, dismayed.

"Well, evidently. But since he preserved so much trash, you'd suppose the old man might have kept some record of the transaction," Link commented, shifting the papers about.

"The receipt might easily have been lost, Link, or used by Kip for exercise papers. Goodness knows how long the deeds and documents were drifting around in that drawer! I wish," Gwen said, "that I'd paid more attention to them or to what Uncle Elmer kept saying about it. But I know," she added emphatically, her face brightening, "I *know* that he didn't sell it, because up to the very end—up to the wedding day—he kept telling me that he wouldn't take one cent less than fifteen thousand for it."

"But wasn't the old man's mind pretty well a blank for a while?"

"Well, yes, it was. He was in an asylum, you know. He was always as mild as milk, but they thought they might cure him, and he was there—oh, a couple of years, wasn't it, Sheila?"

"I can't remember. It was a long time."

"I'll tell you what I can do, Gwen," Link said, still scowling as he studied the rumpled and much-fingered and -annotated papers. "There's no date on this clipping, nor on anything else, as far as I can find out. But you leave all this with me, and I'll see if I can get in touch with the Johnson-Polk Mills and find out if they have any records there. If this Wallbestos thing is worth the time of a lot of British scientists to investigate, it's possible you might have some royalty claim; I don't know. Anyway, I'll send out a feeler and we'll see what we get."

"For a liberal percentage, and sweeteners," said Sheila.

They all laughed, and Gwen said, "What's a sweetener?"

“It’s what the English pay their solicitors all along the way.”

“You’ll get sweeteners,” Gwen promised.

“I only learned that word this week; I love it,” Sheila said.

When Sunday morning came, and Gwen and Peter had to start for home, she clung to her sister. “Ah, Gwen, do this soon again! I hate so to have you go.”

“I’ll ask for another Saturday next month. And Mother and Dad are coming up, and I suppose they’ll bring Kip.”

“We’ll be all ready for them. But of course that won’t be so much fun. I haven’t laughed so much in years as I have in the last twenty-four hours,” said Sheila.

“I’ll never forget the bridge game!”

“Yes, somebody turned over in his grave when Peter led that spade.”

“And when Link revoked twice in one hand!”

“Oh well, I think if you revoke once you’re very apt to revoke again,” Sheila said exculpatingly.

“And if Link kidnaped the Cadogan baby it would be because the parents are absolutely unfit to care for a baby!” Gwen added, laughing.

“Oh well——” Sheila began, with a shamed happy smile. The glory of young wifehood was about her like an aura, and it was with this aura surrounding her that Gwen thought of her during the weeks to come.

Sheila’s marriage, and the thought of Dick Latimer, had somehow made life quite different, different from what it always had been, and infinitely more exciting. When a girl was thinking of a certain man all the time, she did things and felt things in new ways. Little things became important; just the way she arranged her hair or pronounced some certain word or wrote her name had significance now.

Gwen was the only daughter at home; she had her room all to herself. She moved Sheila’s bed up to the attic, had new bookcases built, went on foraging expeditions all over the house, collecting her own individual possessions to make more personal her own apartment. Her old silver bowl; the Kipling set; her grandmother’s upright desk with the green-lined pigeonholes and the little sunken inkwell. She got a heavy card box down from a closet shelf and pasted photographs into a book and lettered them neatly in white ink; a job that occupied several evenings.

All these activities seemed somehow to be connected with her new feeling for Dick; she could not have said why. But she felt definitely that they enhanced her personality in some way; they made Gwen Washburton more important, more distinctive.

"I think I'll just eat vegetables for a while, Mother," she said. "Fruit and vegetables."

"I don't know what's got into you, Gwen," Mrs Washburton commented mildly. "You're not too fat. There's nothing the matter with your figure."

Gwen laughed. She was not worried about her figure. Her figure was all any girl could ask. Her legs were slender and her shoulders broad; the small breasts firm and high, the hips so slim that any frock had to be narrowed there. No, when the girls of Kenthill were exchanging compliments, girl fashion, they might envy this one's gold hair or that one's straight nose. But when it came to figure there was always envious mention of Gwen's, and the usual word was "divine."

CHAPTER VIII

She was in the kitchen one Sunday morning, with her just-washed hair bound into a rag, and a dozen culinary operations under way at once, when Richard Latimer walked in. The world took a sudden dizzying spin for Gwen; she laughed in a manner she felt even at the time to be completely idiotic, put a hand to her hair, and laughed afresh as he said in compunction, "You've gotten it all floury!"

With her first glance at him she came down to earth. He was a perfectly ordinary person, of course. He was just a square, dark young man not too smartly dressed. She had been spinning a lot of silly dreams about nice, ordinary, penniless Dick Latimer, whose mother used to be a trained nurse. Shame reddened Gwen's cheeks; she decided that she didn't care that he saw her in her old coolie pajamas with her hair bound up. If anyone had to, it might as well be Dick Latimer! "Lucky for me he's not a mind reader!" thought Gwen.

"Well, Dick!" she said cordially. "Nice to see you! What brings you to Kenthill? I'd apologize for my hair," Gwen went on gaily, "but when a gentleman walks in on me without warning——"

"I rang the bell. The door was open, so after a while I came in." He had flushed so uncomfortably that she saw he really suspected himself of annoying her, and was quick to put him at his ease.

"No, you didn't ring the bell, dear child," she said maternally. "That bell hasn't rung since Cleveland's first administration! You pressed the button, but Peter took the wire out about ten years ago to experiment with a radio, and it hasn't been healthy since. I've just washed my hair," Gwen went on, "and I'm starting chicken fricassee and upside-down cake and everything! Sunday is my day of rest."

"I can help with the dishes anyway," the man said, picking up a towel.

"No; you sit down. These are nothing. Peter was late, and he just finished. Did you walk from the train?"

"Nope; I drove all the way. A feller in the hospital has a car he lets me use while he's laid up."

“Tubercular?” Gwen’s hands were constantly busy; she assumed an air of kindly interest. He wasn’t what her imagination had made him, perhaps, but he was very attractive just the same. Nice voice, nice expression in his blue eyes.

“Oh no. Smash-up. As a matter of fact he was smashed up in this very car. I tinkered with it for a while and saved him a garage bill, and so he lets me use it.”

“Pleasant associations for you!” She was laughing, but she was conscious of a sudden disturbance of pulse. “You’ll stay for dinner, Dick? You’ll have to amuse yourself while I get dressed, but Tryrena ought to be in any minute, and she’ll take over. . . . I wish I knew what he does to me, just sitting there,” Gwen thought. “I wonder if I’m one of those women who get worked up when any man is around?”

“I can’t. That is—I oughtn’t, really. Your mother—— No, I oughtn’t,” Dick said, in the irresolute tone that shakes the heart of a hostess. “I drove up today,” he explained, “to see about my mother’s tenant in the old house. You know the place—over by the Mill—well, the tenant just got out, apparently——”

“You’ll have dinner with us,” Gwen decided, interrupting.

“No; what I wanted was for you to come up to the Arcades and have lunch with me,” Dick said, flushing suddenly, and speaking with a sort of awkward determination.

“The Arcades? Oh, why?” In imagination it would have seemed to her thrilling to have Richard Latimer here in the home kitchen urging her to go off and have lunch with him at the famous Italian resort. But in actuality it seemed oddly flat and disappointing. He did not seem at all the man of her dreams, nor she the girl who had dreamed them. There was no sense of sympathy or ease between them this morning. Why shouldn’t she go to the Arcades if he asked her to? Why had she questioned the plan in that half-amused, superior manner? Gwen felt her own face grow hot; she wished angrily that she didn’t so often act like a fool when alone with a young man.

“Why not?” he asked.

“Why not——? Oh, the Arcades?” Gwen murmured, aroused from thought. “Well, but we have dinner here at half past one. . . . I suppose we could keep this idiotic fencing up indefinitely,” she said to herself resignedly.

“But it seems like imposing on your mother. I know my mother’d not like it.”

“Mother’d love it. And look how good it’s going to be!”

“I know. But here’s the thing. I didn’t come here to——”

“Now I’ll tell you!” she interrupted again definitely. “You go see about your tenant, and I’ll finish up here and get dressed. Then you come back and have dinner with us. Mother’d be wild if you didn’t.”

“I think he’s moved out,” Dick answered to this, looking at her oddly, as if not thinking of what he was saying.

“He——?” She was completely at sea. “Oh, the tenant?” she asked, enlightened. “Oh well, then, who can you see? . . . This is probably as imbecile a conversation,” Gwen added, in her thoughts, “as ever took place between two human beings.”

Dick had seated himself at the kitchen table.

“Here’s what I wanted to ask you,” he said, and came to a full stop. Gwen looked at him, her cheeks burning. “Did you ever think and think about a thing, and not know just what you were thinking, until it suddenly came to you?” Dick presently resumed. “Well, I’ve been thinking like that,” he said. “I’ve been thinking ever since that day when your sister was married.”

“You told me how you felt about Sheila,” Gwen reminded him, in a mere breath of a voice.

“Yes. I was in love with her, I guess,” Dick said, adding the last phrase after a second’s hesitation. “Anyway, I know I never was in love with anyone else. But I’ve been thinking about you, and that you said that day that you weren’t—well, going with anybody. And what I was wondering was—you see, I keep thinking about you as if we were married. That’s a pretty dumb way to put it,” he interrupted himself with a laugh. “But I guess you kind of know what I mean.”

“Kind of,” Gwen agreed in a whisper, her eyes not moving from his.

“What I mean is,” he floundered on, eagerly, “that you’re—you are everything I ever wanted—I mean I’ve said to myself all this time, ‘That’s the way I wanted her to be.’ But not being in love, you know.”

He came to a pause, his eyes appealing for understanding.

“Not being in love,” she repeated slowly.

"D'you think it would work?"

Her steady gaze met his. They looked at each other, unsmiling.

"You mean our being friends—seeing each other—all that?" the girl formulated it. Dick nodded, and she laughed without much mirth. "We could try it," she said.

"Would you?"

Gwen didn't know why consenting to this made her feel a little affronted and hurt deep down inside. She kept outwardly calm; even a little amused.

"Why not? For a while anyway."

"For a while, yes. You might find someone you liked better," he admitted.

"I know. But so might you." Gwen was standing perfectly still at the sink, facing into the kitchen, a hot clean cup and a dish towel in her hands. Every few seconds she wiped the cup again.

"I won't. Because it all—just came over me," Dick assured her. "I've got a lot of intern work to do, I've got no money," he went on. "But I thought—if I came up here, and now and then you came down and stayed with Mother—not being in love, you know, or anything like that, but just feeling that you're—you're different——"

"I understand," Gwen said in the pause. She looked at the cup, wiped it again.

"I don't know what you'd get out of it," Dick said suddenly, with an uneasy laugh.

"It would be friendship, anyway," she answered. "That's something. What would *you* get out of it?" she countered suddenly.

"I? Oh well, gosh!" Dick said. "Why, I—— But you see, that's what I want. To be married someday, and have a family, and be a married doctor somewhere. Rio or Hong Kong or somewhere. Does this all sound crazy to you?"

"No, it doesn't. But I can't see that now," Gwen said temperately, "I can't see that *now* it means anything more than our being friends. . . . Oh, God help me, how fast I'm falling in love with him!" she thought.

"*Will* you?" he asked, as if he could not believe it.

"Will I try that? Seeing you, and visiting your mother, you mean?"

“Would you, really?” His face had so brightened, his voice was so eager that she felt her whole being respond. But she spoke calmly:

“Well, why not? Nobody but ourselves need know. And if we decide that there’s nothing—nothing romantic about it, we can always be friends, anyway.”

“Then I’ll beat it, and you get dressed!” he said, getting to his feet, his face radiant. “And we’ll go up and have lunch at the Arcades!”

“But that’s a dollar lunch, Dick, and we’ve plenty here,” she protested sensibly. His great laugh rang out joyously; she had not heard him laugh before.

“I can stand it,” he said. “I’ll be back in an hour. You be ready!”

When she came downstairs he was waiting. Gwen looked her best now in white and blue; a brimmed white hat pressing her dark bang down above her dark blue eyes; her crisp striped frock short enough to show slim legs, slim ankles and fringed white buckskin shoes.

“It’s six miles to the Arcades, Dick. Want me to drive? You’ve been driving all morning.” Gwen spoke sensibly; quietly. This was going to be a friendship, not a love affair.

“Nope, I’m not tired. Jump in!”

“What are you laughing at?”

“Laughing at you. To think that a girl who can look as—as swell as you do now would make herself look the way you did when I came in.” He was being sensible, too. She felt a little dashed.

“That was to point the contrast. That was a device!”

“Yes, it was,” Dick murmured good-naturedly, driving along through the quiet Sunday streets now, under the thick foliage of the trees. The day was warm; there was no wind; the eastern mountains trembled hazily into a sky only a shade bluer than themselves. Other cars were making their way to Antonelli’s famous Arcades, but Dick and Gwen found a table under a grapevine, tucked away in an inconspicuous corner, and panting and perspiring young Antonellis at once brought them checkered napkins and glasses of water. It was cool under the oak trees; the peppers were hung with scarlet tassels; the tiny tufted blossoms of the fringed eucalyptus scented the air with a sharp, sweet, spicy smell. Antonelli’s formal establishment

consisted of a few dark wine-scented rooms in an old mansion, where there was a bar flanked by rosetted mirrors decorated with soap scrolls. But his kitchen was in a separate shed, and all the tables were out among the trees at the side of a dry creek bed.

Dick and Gwen were not embarrassed now, she told herself rejoicingly. Their awkward moment was far behind them. They were friends. This was going to be fun!

"Why 'The Arcades'?" Dick questioned, looking about him in great satisfaction.

"I've always wondered. They have redwoods, and a stream up there in the woods, and view, and grapes. But I've never seen an arcade. I might not know what it was if I did see it."

"In Italian I suppose it would be '*arco, gli archi*,' " Dick said musing.

"Do you speak Italian, Dick?" He was always surprising her.

"Pretty well. I used to hear it a lot when I was a kid. Mother worked in the Mill hospital, you know, and we lived among a perfect bunch of wops. I wish it was German!"

"Would German be of more use to you?" Her eyes, under the dramatic white-and-blue of her hat, were very blue. She was a little pale from the heat; she had rested her elbows on the table and was giving him her full attention. The soft early-summer light, filtering through grape leaves, spattered her dress with soft patches of orange shade.

"Oh yes, lots more use," Dick said, carefully giving her more than half the *minestrone*. "Lots of medical books are in German, and then of course if you go there, you get five times as much from the lectures and all that."

"And will you really go to Germany, Dick?"

"Well, I don't know. None of us know. You may get a chance there or you may not. It depends on what you want to do. You've never been in Germany?"

"I?" she laughed. "I've never been anywhere. You can't think what funny pictures of a place you make in your mind," Gwen said, musing aloud, "when you've never seen it. New York, now. I've got a perfectly definite picture of New York in my mind, skyscrapers and subways and everything, and when I go—or rather, before I go—I'm going to write it all down and see how it matches!"

“And when are you going?”

“I don’t know. Sometime.”

“Oh? Sometime. I’ve been in New York,” Dick said, “and I don’t like it. I went with a corpse.”

Gwen widened shocked and affronted eyes. He really was a rough diamond, Dick Latimer. It sounded awful, somehow. Traveling with a corpse. For a moment she didn’t like him at all.

“You mean someone died on the trip?”

“No.” He went on eating his soup ravenously, laughing. “Someone had to travel with the coffin,” he explained. “And Kennedy asked me if I’d go. I went tourist and stayed four days, in August it was, and I didn’t like it.”

“And the—the coffin?” she asked, still with a face of distaste. “Who was in it?”

“I don’t remember,” he said with cheerful indifference. “It was met at the Grand Central Station, and that was the end of it for me. I wouldn’t have stayed—the heat made me sick—and I didn’t have any money for roof gardens or beaches or anything. But while I was there I thought I might as well see something, so I went down to the Statue of Liberty, and saw the library and Bellevue Hospital, they let me wander around there all one day. And I saw the buildings. And by golly, it was hot!”

“Well, in August.” She defended the heat, even though he had somewhat disillusioned her in spite of herself. “I’d love to see it, just the same,” she persisted. “Are you going back there?”

“Sometime. I graduate next week,” Dick said. “Then I’m staying on a year at the City and County—intern.”

“Will that be fun?”

“That’ll be hard work. Good practice. Then it depends. I might get an offer from an eastern hospital, if I can pass their state boards all right. But—here’s the catch. Even if you get a scholarship it doesn’t pay much. So it means about five years before I get going.”

“But why so long, Dick? Won’t you be able to practice as soon as you graduate?”

“Well, you could. But nobody does. The more intern years you can pack in, the better. Some fellers can’t because they have to support themselves right off the bat. But if you’re going to specialize you’ve simply got to.”

"And you're going to specialize?"

He nodded, looking up from his plate.

"Spine," he said briefly.

"And a very good basic thing to specialize in."

"Well, pretty damn fascinating," he said, laughing at her thoughtful little pronouncement. "And not as crowded a field. But I don't know that I can work it. I'm only doing it now because my mother helps me."

"I can see you as a doctor," Gwen said slowly, as if half to herself. "I really can. You'll be one of those gorilla doctors," she added, "who terrify people into getting well! I can hear you being rude to frightened women in your consulting room, and saying, 'Very well, madam, if you're an idiot, by all means go on this way and die!' "

"Well, people are fools, sometimes," he said, unprotesting.

"No, but seriously, Dick," Gwen said, "I envy you. I envy you your having to work so hard, and *knowing* that you'll come out of it 'Doctor Latimer,' and have the right to take out those little blanks and scribble things on them. I think it's—fascinating that, in spite of not having a rich father or anyone to help you, you've gone straight ahead and are graduating next week."

"Lord, there are a lot doing it!" he said. "Nothing unusual about it. Except that I get such a kick out of it!" he added simply. "I went to school when I was seven—that's twenty-two years. You ought to learn something in twenty-two years. But I was out two years, while my mother was sick. I was working for the Standard Oil. Then I went back and worked teaching, nights."

"Teaching? Teaching what? You mean you teach in a night school?"

"I did, until last Christmas. And I would now, except the service is going to be pretty stiff after graduation."

"Why, Dick," she said in admiration, "you sound as if you might someday be President!"

"Nope," he answered, with a little half-grin for her nonsense, "I know what I'm going to do. In four years I'll have done four years' intern work, and then——" He looked at her, laughed. "Then it's going to be travel for a year," he said. "I'll have five thousand dollars, and I'll go to six cities. Amsterdam, Rio, Stockholm, Gloucester, Hong Kong, Budapest and Cork."

“Why Budapest and Cork and Rio and all those?” she asked.

“Because I want to see all those places and decide which one I want to live in. And when I’ve seen them all I’ll settle down in the one I like best. I’ll be ‘the American doctor,’ see? And the Americans will come to me.”

“There may be an American doctor there already.”

“There may be ten,” he conceded. “But there won’t be. And if there is an American doctor he’ll be old, or he’ll be retiring, or he’ll give me part of his practice.”

“I should think Hong Kong—— Did you say Hong Kong?”

“Well, I’ll see Shanghai and Singapore if I get to Hong Kong. It might be one of them.”

“I was going to say that I should think Shanghai or Hong Kong would be a better place for stomach troubles. Chinese food, you know,” Gwen said. “Their trouble probably isn’t spines.” Dick’s eyes lighted approvingly.

“There’s something in that,” he agreed. “But bad food makes bad bones. I can do research, anyway. Conditions there would be unusual. I don’t know whether kids can get fresh milk there. I know it’s all boiled in Rio and comes to the door hot. I read that. There’s no ice.”

“Why isn’t there any ice?”

“I don’t know. But maybe it’ll be Baltimore, or even Charleston,” Dick mused. “Or Gloucester.”

“You mean Gloucester, America?”

“Yep.”

“But why Gloucester, more than—oh, Martha’s Vineyard or Point Comfort or any one of those places? Point Comfort sounds so nice. Or Gettysburg. Or Yorktown. I’d love to live in Yorktown, and discover more about colonial America than anyone else knows, and then write a book.”

“Well, I just like the sound of Gloucester.”

“Barnstable,” she said.

“Gosh, yes, that sounds good, too. But I don’t know that that’s big enough to get me started. After I once get started,” Dick resumed, “I’ll be writing things, so that will help.”

“But Dick, look. Where’ll you get your original five thousand to go around and see all these places?”

“Oh, I’ll get it.”

“I may get thirty-five hundred dollars,” Gwen confessed suddenly.

“Who from?”

“My uncle. Dad’s brother-in-law. Uncle Elmer . . .”

She launched into the story of Uncle Elmer, hurrying along at first with some embarrassment. It would be horrible if Dick fancied that her immediate mention of her financial prospects was meant as a sort of supplement to his! Gwen made her description of her late relative as touching and amusing as she could; she ended on safe ground, observing that when the mortgage was paid and the family bills settled, she had hoped that she might travel.

“Get married and travel?”

“Well,” she said, flushing and laughing. “I hadn’t thought of the getting married.”

“But you will now.”

“I’ll think over what we’ve been talking about. I don’t see how I’ll think of much else,” Gwen answered quite simply.

“There are some awful nice fellows here in Kenthill,” Dick said.

“Not any that I like.”

“You mean that?”

“Yes, I do. There are some nice boys, we all went to high school together, we had fun then. But afterward all the interesting ones went off to college somewhere. Including you,” said Gwen, with a sudden smile for the blue eyes opposite her own.

“You’d never remember seeing me. I don’t ever remember seeing you, specially,” Dick confessed. “I’m older than Sheila, I guess.”

“Sheila’s twenty-seven.”

“And how old are you?”

“I’m five years younger than Sheila.”

“And you’re not going with anyone?”

"No."

Dick mused upon this with a thoughtful expression. His serious, appraising glance made Gwen's color rise.

"I should think they'd all want you," he said simply.

Yesterday she might have answered him differently, flippantly. Today she had grown from girlhood to womanhood in a few hours. She answered as unaffectedly as he had spoken, suddenly drawn to him:

"They don't."

"I've never been able to afford taking a girl around," Dick confessed, on the same honest note. "But you—I should think——"

A silence. Gwen looked up.

"I go to movies and dances with boys," she said. "But I wouldn't go with any boy—any man—unless I liked him."

"And how soon will you know if you like me?" Dick demanded with a boy's exultant laugh.

"I wish he'd always be the way he is sometimes," she thought. "I hate him when he acts high-schooly." Aloud she said, "I know now that this is fun, that we like each other. I mean—why not just let it go along naturally, and take care of itself?"

"Our friendship, you mean?"

"Why not?"

"Oh well, because I'll always be thinking—well, anyway, we'll have to make it definite. I mean, write each other," Dick began, looking at her for encouragement. "I won't have an awful lot of time off, in this service. We'll have to write."

She loved letter writing, as any good letter writer does. Gwen's thoughts went to stationery; the lovely paper at Morse's, thin granite paper with a dark blue edge.

"Let's write?" she said, warming.

"Once a week, huh? About what we're doing and reading—all that. I'll write once a week if you will."

"Well——"

"And my mother'll write you and ask you to come over to the city, and you'll see the hospital and we'll go to movies."

Gwen wondered why she had ever fancied herself in love with him. He was like all men; he wanted everything exactly his way and he didn't care what she thought. She assented with seeming enthusiasm.

"And a year from today, Gwen, we'll write each other the honest truth, huh? This is July first. On July first next year we'll write each other exactly what we feel. And if it's off, well, then it's *off*."

"But suppose one says 'on' and the other says 'off'?" Gwen said with an outward smile, but with inward coolness.

"Well, then I'm out of luck, for I'll be the 'on' one," Dick answered promptly. She couldn't but like his attitude. He seemed in no doubt of his own position, if he was so careful to assure her that love wasn't an element in the situation. "We'll mail our letters just at midnight," he went on, and Gwen laughed out suddenly with a pleasant sound of unexpected bells.

"Imagine us staying up to midnight to solemnly mail our letters!"

"We'll mail 'em when we finish 'em," the man said literally, and Gwen laughed again.

"Will you do it?" he persisted. And Gwen, with a sudden bright flush, nodded. It seemed a rather ridiculous thing to say in words somehow. It was only what all other men and girls did, without this absurd solemnity. However——!

Her mood changed so rapidly that she felt confused and exhausted with emotion. At one moment the nearness of this big, gentle, affectionate male would flurry her senses and she would remind herself that she could marry him, could be Mrs Richard Latimer, could enter the mysteriously initiated ranks of wives, discover what they felt and talked about, and how their status changed so quickly, so entirely from that of girlhood. At another moment she felt bored—profoundly bored by all this. Trial engagement, that was what it amounted to, and she and all the other girls had decided years ago that any such arrangement was an insult to a girl.

Yet here she was at the Arcades having lunch with Dick Latimer and consenting to what was practically that, and confused in spirit because she was really in love with him, and in no position to make terms with him. This was all very different from the beauty and dignity of Sheila's affair, and somehow it made her face feel flushed and uncomfortable, and her soul feel cheap.

However, she mused on, her spirits suddenly rising, there was no harm done. This compact with Dick was their own secret, and his mere presence in her scheme lent a certain novelty and excitement to life. If at the end of a few months they parted, it wouldn't kill her, for she might very easily, by that time, have come to the conclusion that she didn't like him at all——

"What are you smiling about?" he asked.

"I was just thinking that this is—a funny sort of thing for you to do."

"What? Wanting you to like me?"

"And wanting to like me yourself." Gwen was silent a moment, laughed. "I always thought I'd like to marry a writer with a British accent," she confessed.

"I always thought I would like a girl with yellow hair."

"Well, that makes it all the funnier that you should see me, on the very day Sheila was married, and like me!"

"That *was* funny," he agreed. "It sort of stayed with me. The kitchen, and you giving me sandwiches. And it all began to slip and slide around in my mind, so that I'd wonder why on earth I was thinking about you so much."

She liked this better, and she was enjoying the good plain food. Delicious sour bread; delicious broiled chicken as tender as white cheese. Radio music playing, and all about them the chatter and laughter of other lunchers. Gwen and Dick began to notice some of their neighbors.

"Look at the size that's drinking red wine, Dick. Not three years old!"

"Look at Papa changing plates with Mama because she got the biggest Fujiyama of spaghetti."

"Look at Idiot Sister out for an airing."

"Idiot or not, he's crazy about her. Maybe those kids are ten months apart and maybe they're not!"

"They're twins."

"Oh, that's it. There are no twins in our family."

Gwen's dancing eyes met his; she was suddenly having a good time.

"Interesting."

The dry little monosyllable made him laugh.

"I thought you might like to know."

“I’ll inform you in plenty of time if the subject seems to concern me, Doctor. By the way, are you a doctor yet?”

“Oh yes. My mother gave me my cards for graduating day. I’ve not used one yet.”

“Dick, tell me, just for fun, if you could do exactly what you hope to do, what would it be? What kind of a home would you like to have, and where?”

“I’d like to live in a queer place, wouldn’t you?”

“How do you mean, a queer place?”

“Well, say Peiping. Or Nome. Or Madeira. Places where you have big advantages and big disadvantages. Sunsets, you know, but no movies. Mail twice a week, but all the native servants you want for almost nothing? See?”

“It does sound fascinating. Instead of doing exactly what everyone else does. And would you want a house or an apartment, or live in a hotel or a club, or what?”

“Married people can’t live in a club!”

“I see. I forgot that.”

“Well,” said Dick with a glance, “from now on you might keep it in mind.”

CHAPTER IX

And this was one of the remarks that she was destined to remember with a warm little thrill of excitement and pleasure, when the long strange Sunday ended, and Dick was gone, and she had time to straighten out her feelings and decide what was good and what was bad in the situation.

While he was with her she had no such opportunity. She was alternately attracted and repelled, chilled and warmed by him. Even while he talked to her, and while they strolled about the grounds of the Arcades after luncheon, she tried to remember Juliet's lines. "I have no joy in this——" This what? This adventure or enterprise; no, it had to be a two-syllable word. "I have no joy in this compact tonight, it is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden!"

"Dick, do you like Shakespeare?" she asked suddenly.

Dick turned upon her a startled glance. They had stopped at the monkey cage, in which a few bedraggled little simians were springing alertly among the nude branches of a tree.

"What's this? Origin of species?" he countered. Gwen laughed.

"I don't know how my mind got that far away! But do you?"

"Kind of. Anyway, I'd want our house to be full of books, wouldn't you? Kipling, you know, and Conrad. I'd want one room always to be sort of untidy with books, wouldn't you?"

"Millions of them," Gwen agreed, with another little sputter of laughter.

Before three o'clock they had to start for home. Dick had the long drive to the city still before him, and must report at the hospital tonight. They talked about old Kenthill friends and acquaintances as they drove along, and Dick said that he would always think Kenthill a darn nice little country town, and Gwen that she would be glad, someday, to have a chance to compare it to any other, of any size or type.

When they got to the house various members of the family were drifting about or idling in repletion after the day's heavy meal, and Dick talked to Peter, and described a lung operation to Gwen's mother, and sustained a casual-caller manner with them all that diverted Gwen, so thrillingly aware of the compact between them. When he said anything or did anything that seemed to her smart or impressive, she felt a sudden pride in him; when he

expressed any opinion that might grate on her father's or mother's prejudices, she looked in quick apprehension from one face to the other.

At about four o'clock she went out to the car with him, and they had a few words in parting. They would be friends, anyway. And in just a year, after a twelvemonth of friendship, they would write the truth to each other. And they promised mutually to abide by what those letters said.

"If I want you and you're sick of me, that's that," said Dick.

"And suppose I'm madly in love with you and you want to end the whole thing?"

"Well, that's that, too."

"Promise now, Dick."

"Sure I promise. It's a pipe for me. The thing is that if you—if you did like me, you'd probably go feminine on me and be afraid to say so!"

"I wouldn't. I'll come right out with it whatever it is, and you can show the letter to your wife someday and say, 'Look how girls used to write to me!' "

"I'll marry you or I'll not marry," the man said, very low. He got into the car and started the engine, and with only one more look, with a somewhat rueful smile on his dark face, he was gone.

"Well!" Gwen ejaculated, standing alone in the shade at the gate, looking down the country-town street under the maples and elms, suddenly seeing the fences and gardens, the plain houses and the background of California Street's encroaching warehouses in a new light. The afternoon was very warm, and families with rockers and untidy litters of Sunday papers had moved out to steps and dooryards and were idling in the pleasant still greenness. Toward the east the mountains were already assuming the blue gauziness of summer; the sky was high and pale and cloudless.

With an almost solemn sense that things were happening, and that to have things happen was all she asked of life, Gwen went back into the house. The domestic round could go on for a long time without seeming dull, now. No more lying on one's bed on a Sunday afternoon worrying because week ends were not bristling with dates!

The events and conversations and moods of the day began to revolve in her memory, without order or sequence. At this moment he had seemed such an odd, unpolished boy. At this other he had taken complete possession of

her, flooded her senses with that breath-taking, slow-moving ecstasy that is life itself to a woman.

"Maybe I love him but don't like him," Gwen mused, as she set her bookcase in order, rubbed up her white shoes for tomorrow's office day, changed her dress for a fresh faded cotton, ran a wet comb through her thick dark hair and descended the stairway cool, comfortable and more than a little complacent, at half past five o'clock, to set a charming supper table as a surprise for her mother. Mother did not like kitchen meals.

She even carried her felicities so far as to go out into the garden in the languid summer sunset to pick bridal wreath for the center of the table. It was growing cool in the garden; the shadow of the windmill lay over the strip of lawn and the apple trees. Once the Washburton place had been a farm on the edge of the village. Now it was cut down to a scant acre and hemmed in with other houses, but this little strip was country still. The bridal wreath smelled of childhood; delicious free Saturday mornings of spring, when mud pies and climbing fences and potato roasts were all one's happy world. Well, a girl grew up, and married, and went away from it all. Strange!

"Maybe I like him and don't love him."

"Did you have a nice day?" her mother asked at supper.

"Well, really it was lovely," Gwen said in a tone carefully surprised.

"He's all right, Dick. I shouldn't wonder if he was going places," Peter said. Gwen did not comment. She returned to her own thoughts.

Dick's first letter reached her a day or two later. Enclosed with it was a note from his mother, written somewhat uncertainly in pale green ink on lined tablet paper, hoping that Gwen would come to them either that week end or the next, and "promising your Mama that Richard and I will take good care of you." It was signed "Mrs T. Latimer."

Gwen felt a little dashed at the sight of it. It was—well, a little flat, somehow, to have a beau whose mother was so obviously unsure of herself. The Washburtons were quite as poor as the Latimers, and lived in a part of the town that had been, for more than a generation, socially deplorable. But still, Gwen's mother knew enough to sign checks and letters, even when they were sent to complete strangers, with her firm strong "Fanny Ashe Washburton."

Dick must have seen this letter, as he had enclosed it in his. Why hadn't he said: "Mother, don't you want plain white paper from the five-and-ten, and won't you sign it 'Mary Latimer'?" Perhaps he didn't know, either.

His letter was delightful, however, and did much to restore her equilibrium. He wrote her a minute account of just one hospital day, from the time his alarm clock went off at half past six every morning until the last emergency call was answered at night. He tried to have dinner with his mother every night, but if she was tired he took her out to dinner instead. There was a "Home Cafeteria" they liked, over on Mission Street, with the movies right near. If he telephoned the hospital at eight, and wasn't needed, then he could take his mother to a movie. His mother worked in the linen room in the hospital, and sometimes it was pretty hard work. Everyone worked hard at the "County." Next week they were going to vaccinate about eleven hundred school children. The kids were all right, but the mothers often made a fuss.

In return Gwen amused herself by sending him a careful account of her own day. She wrote a fine square hand, and shared with almost all the girls she knew a fancy for fine writing paper. For this occasion she selected a pale blue with a tiny white stripe for edge; her ink was very black, and she regarded the finished epistle with satisfaction. Any man would be glad to receive such a letter.

"I get up at seven," she told him, "and go downstairs at once and light the oven and start the percolator. Dad and I usually have coffee together, and Mother comes in in time to take care of Kip and Peter and clean up. Tryrena doesn't come on until half past ten or eleven. At eight I go upstairs and put my room in order, and then have my bath. I'm at the office at nine, usually walking downtown, it's only seven blocks, and then I have the rare excitement of taking Mr Graham Keane's letters, and correcting the grammar of those of his promising son, Art Keane. Nobody in the office can stand Art. He stays away at lunch for three hours every day, returning at four, and suddenly getting interested in dictating a few completely unnecessary letters at five. He loves to stand rolling phrases over on his tongue. 'Hoping that this change in your plan meets with your entire approval as in case it does not we will of course make every effort to supply this data although it is at present unattainable'—that sort of thing.

"Madge Parsons, who is in the inner office, usually goes to lunch with me at the Saddle Rock. We have oyster stews all through oyster season, and tomato salads all summer. We may not be bright, but we seem never to tire

of them. Oyster stews are thirty cents, and tomato salads fifteen, so winter is our splurging season."

She explained to him that she could not come to the city for the next two week ends. On one Sheila and Link were coming down to spend the night; on the second Mary Pearsall was getting married to a Marysville doctor that she met when her car turned over driving up to Oreville, and he set her leg. His name was Leonard Lillie. Did Dick know him?

If it was agreeable to his mother, however, Gwen would be delighted to come to San Francisco on the eighteenth. Unless someone she knew was driving in she would take the two-o'clock train on Saturday, and should be at his mother's house at about half past five.

Dick answered at once that he loved her swell letter, and that he would surely see her before the eighteenth, and Gwen lived in a nervous tremor for fear he would deliberately come when Sheila was there, and the home atmosphere become one of secrecy and strain.

But he did not come at all. On the night that she expected him he sent her a telegram that he could not come, would come on the following night. And on the following night there was another telegram. They were crowded and shorthanded at the "County." It was a rotten break; he felt terribly sorry. He wrote quite a letter explaining the situation, and assuring her that he would be at the station to meet her on Saturday, but Gwen felt that some of the glamour had departed from their relationship nevertheless, and the whole arrangement began to seem silly.

However, when the appointed Saturday came she found herself packing her bag with an enjoyable sense of adventure. To go to the city and be anyone's house guest was sufficient excitement, and after all, there was Dick in the picture, and Dick's proposition. It wasn't like going to visit a girl friend. A beau was a beau, after all. She told Madge Parsons where she was going.

"Latimer?" said Madge, interested. "Oh, I remember him. He was in my class. A black sort of boy. But they say he's awfully smart."

"Who says so?"

"Minnie Rogers, Larry's aunt, is a nurse, and she works at the City and County. And she told Larry's mother that everyone liked—what's his name? Doctor Richard Latimer."

The train trip delighted Gwen. It was so rare an experience for her that just to choose the seat she liked, and establish her bag at her feet, and settle

herself to look out of the window was entertainment. She had a magazine, but she did not read it; it was more exciting to sit and think of herself and Dick, and wonder what sort of an experience lay ahead of her.

But instead of Dick, his mild little mother met her at the station in the late-afternoon light. Gwen had forgotten San Francisco's climate, and the foggy airs and sharp wind smote her disagreeably. She was a little tired and jaded now, and conscious of feeling hungry. She had eaten a light lunch, and the train being late, it was now long after five o'clock. Dick's mother was a small, faded wren of a woman with a tired voice. She explained that Richard had been delayed and could not get away from the hospital, and guided Gwen to the cable streetcar. They had to transfer, it appeared, but presently they reached the drab little apartment house on a Mission side street, and Gwen could take off her hat in a small bedroom which obviously she was to share with her hostess, and grit her teeth for a visit that promised her small pleasure.

"I'm here, and I'll go through with it," she said to herself.

Dick arrived in a rumpled white suit a few minutes later, apologetic but not particularly ruffled, and announcing regretfully that he had to go back to the hospital after dinner, as Wasson, a name he pronounced as if it stood for one of the immortals, had asked for him in the surgery tonight.

They dined at a small restaurant some four blocks away, walking there briskly in the cool twilight, the little mother between Gwen and Dick on the littered windblown sidewalks. Gwen was cold; she shuddered with cold. She heard Dick ask his mother in an aside if she had plenty of money, before he left them to their apple pie and coffee. After dinner she went to a poor movie with Mrs Latimer before going back to the cramped little apartment to stretch herself gingerly on the couch for the night.

Street lights shone in the windows and street noises kept her awake. In some adjoining apartment a group of hilarious folk were celebrating something with drink and song. Despite her most courageous determination she could not make this visit seem a successful adventure. It was shabby and narrow and disheartening.

The sparse poverty of Dick's mother was unlike the wasteful plenty of the Washburton family. Somehow there was always an effect of comfort at home, though it might only be that the remains of a fire were turning to gray ash in the sitting-room stove, and that the cracked old icebox contained cold biscuits and jam.

Here in the city it was different. Mrs Latimer snapped off the lights in one room when she went into another; there were but four rooms anyway, and they were all small. Only the kitchen was bright; the bedroom window opened on an airshaft, and the sitting-room shades were drawn to conceal the view of a particularly unappetizing side alley. Gwen was conscious of pangs of irrational disillusionment and homesickness. An enormous gray cat close to her eleventh experience of motherhood wandered disconsolately about the rooms all night, her quavering croak and occasional leap upon Gwen's person adding nothing to the girl's comfort.

In the morning matters looked a little brighter. The kitchen was pleasant with timid sunshine that was bravely attacking the onmoving battalions of the fog, and Dick came in while the two women were peacefully talking over their toast and coffee and lent his own note of vitality and enthusiasm to the hour. He wanted some coffee too, and Gwen could not but like the sight of the hearty kiss he gave his mother and the brisk accustomed way that he set about attending to his own wants; she liked the way he teased the faded, forlorn little woman, and his obvious affection for her. On the mother's part there was of course blind adoration. Her son, her marvelous doctor, the vital, vigorous, enlivening element of her world, her reward for years of loneliness and sacrifice, was the very light of her eyes.

"Mom, how about taking lunch out to the Cliff? I've got to go back at ten, and after that I'm free. Gwen, ever been out to the beach?"

"Never."

"Richard, I have to be on duty today," his mother said mildly. "We are moving from Ward Eleven, you know. They're going to paint in there and cut a door through and I don't know what all."

"On Sunday?" Gwen asked.

"Well, that's the usual day, because we don't have rounds," the little woman answered, with that assumption always displayed by hospital folk that their unique vocabulary is everywhere comprehensible.

"Well, then Gwen and I'll go," Dick said. "Want that hotted up?"

The last was in solicitous reference to her coffee. When all their cups were freshly filled, it was arranged that Gwen should go with Dick and his mother to the hospital at ten; that if he could get Jordan's car, well and good, and if he couldn't, he and Gwen would use the streetcars for their picnic; that since Mrs Latimer might not be able to get back to the house before Gwen had to leave at five, they would say good-by now.

“And you’re awfully kind to have had me,” Gwen said, gratefully. She told herself inwardly that the words were sincere. “If I lived in a burrow like this I wouldn’t ask any strange girl to come sleep in my room,” she reflected.

They walked a block or two in dimming sunlight under a thickening fog, walked another block or two on their way to the right entrance to the enormous building that spread itself against a low line of sparsely populated hills, each one of its apparently endless and enormous wings housing a very city of pain.

Shabby-looking hallways and shabby-looking, rattly elevators were characteristic of the older part, into which they went, but everything was very clean and sharply scented with carbolic and ammonia over subtler smells of sickness, and everyone they met was very cheerful. A very pretty nurse carrying two hot-water bottles swathed in the much-washed unbleached linen that was in evidence everywhere, stopped Dick.

“Bad news for you, Doctor. Hear about Wally?”

“What’s the matter with Wally?”

“Pains in his tummy,” said the nurse, with a glance for Gwen. “He’s in bed up in G for observation.”

“Appendix, eh?”

“I don’t know,” the nurse said virtuously. And her smile at Gwen now had a wicked significance. Nurses were not supposed to know, it said. Gwen smiled back. “But I do know,” the nurse went on, “that Brubacher is hopping, and that he wants you upstairs right away.”

“Oh hell, I was up all night!” Dick said with a sigh. His mother had disappeared. He took Gwen to a characterless waiting room and left her there. “I’ll be down pretty soon,” he said. “I’m sorry!”

Gwen chose the most comfortable of several shabby armchairs. There were also two benches, and shortly after ten a few quiet, plain folk filtered in, all visibly anxious, except one small boy who beamed at a burdened-looking mother and tied strings contentedly from chair leg to chair leg.

Visitors’ hours were later. These were all special cases, evidently. A nurse came in and quietly reported to an old man and a younger man that they couldn’t tell anything yet; she had been pretty badly shaken up. If they would telephone later they could get a report. And she added soothingly, in

answer to some agonized inaudible query: “Oh no, no; I’m sure not. It’s just that she’s so shaken up and they’re working over her. She’ll be all right.”

Another nurse came in and told a frightened-looking elderly woman that the doctor would like to speak to her, please. This way, please. The woman got up and followed the nurse obediently, without seeming to know what she was doing.

“Don’t be so silly, Edna,” a young woman kept saying to a friend, who sat gulping and twisting her hands. “It may not be nothing, rilly. It rilly may not be nothing, after all!”

Gwen listened to these conversations and occasionally glanced stealthily at the speakers. She looked betweentimes at an old magazine, and at the room, with the dim, foggy sunlight coming in at the high, clean, clean-curtained windows. It was a room of tragedy; there had not been much joy in this room. Its visitors crept into it stealthily, humbly, shepherded by strangers, obedient and quick. They waited in fear; they answered a summons, a question, breathlessly. What was it? What did you say? It was a place of crises, this room, and humiliations, and losses.

“She can’t see anyone today.” A nurse was speaking to a meek, shabby little woman who had been waiting a long time.

“She’s not so well?”

“I don’t know. ‘No visitors allowed.’ ”

“That would mean she wasn’t so well, wouldn’t it?”

“Oh, I don’t think so. You could telephone the doctor.”

“Is he here now?”

“No; he’s not here.”

“I’m her mother, you know. Could I just go to the door and look in at her?”

“I couldn’t—— I’m sorry, but we’re not permitted to let you. You see, it says, ‘No visitors.’ ”

“They moved her into a room by herself yesterday, my husband said?”

“Yes; she’s in a room by herself.”

“Would that mean she was not so well?”

“Oh no; not necessarily.”

“Well——” The visitor stood still, checkmated, and the nurse waited politely. “Well, I might’s well go home,” the sick girl’s mother finally said.

“You could telephone. I’ll write down for you which extension to ask for.”

“Well—I guess I needn’t wait.”

The mother went away and the nurse went away, and everyone began waiting again. The mighty walls and endless corridors and closed doors shut them all away from the living, beating hearts they loved. The room was as impersonal as a streetcar.

Smells of mutton and coffee and potatoes began to percolate even here. The lunch wagons were going the rounds. Gwen went to the doorway and wandered about a little, returning from every brief expedition to the waiting room. It was quarter past one o’clock when Dick reappeared; he made no apologies, had changed from his doctor’s white to an ordinary suit, and observing that he was starving, caught at her elbow at once and steered her to the Potrero Street car. They went to a downtown restaurant for luncheon, a delicious dollar luncheon that was better even than the lunch at the Arcades.

“Too late for a picnic, and I couldn’t get Jordan’s car, and it’s so damn foggy out there you couldn’t see your hand before your face,” he said.

“Dick, that’s a terrific atmosphere, that hospital atmosphere. I wonder you can ever get your mind off it.”

“Some fellers never get used to it. I don’t mind it. It’s never cleared up; it’s always like this,” he said. “The minute I’m in it I forget everything else. I’d like always to be in it. I’m not so keen for private practice. This is where you get the *cases*.”

She saw that he was very tired. Feeling herself something of a dead weight on his hands, she meditated suggesting that she take the three-o’clock train for home, but after all, Gwen reflected, that would be to remind him that her long-anticipated visit had fizzled out into failure.

“Suppose we go back and get my bag, Dick, and then slide into one of the smaller movies somewhere? The big ones will be so crowded we’ll have to wait. And then you can take me to the train?”

She saw that the proposal was welcome. What he wanted was sleep, but the next best thing to bed would be the quiet and dark and comfort of a movie loge. Gwen felt deeply disappointed in her visit, but there was a sort

of maternal satisfaction in watching two long pictures unfold themselves on the screen, in feeling Dick's shoulder heavy against her own, in hearing his snores. Presently he awakened and asked if he had been asleep, and she whispered back that he had, and that she knew he was dead, and he gripped her hand in the dark as if he felt comfort in it.

That handgrip somehow saved the whole experience from utter flatness. There was something in the firm touch of that warm, hard hand that stayed with Gwen all the way home in the train, and kept her heart beating with a new sensation. She wondered if Dick would write her; she knew he would. A great pity for him possessed her. It had all been so different from his plans; it had all been so drab and ordinary! Gwen thought she would ask him to come to Kenthill in a week or two for a real week end, and show him what a real picnic would be like.

Home again, she concealed everything except what sounded well, in recounting her adventures, and back in the office on Monday she made as good a report as she could to Madge.

"Seen this man Bellamy?" asked Madge, informative in her turn.

"What man Bellamy?"

"Dark, middle-aged, nervous kind of feller. He was in here late Saturday to see you. I think he married a girl from Falls Hill, who got killed."

"What does he want to see me about?"

"Well, it seems they're going to try to squeeze old Miller out at the primaries next year—whatever that means—and run Otto Linherr for Congress."

"Doctor Linherr getting into politics?"

"Seems so. And they want you to run this end."

"Who does?"

"This man—I have his card here somewhere; he left it for you. Bellamy. Something Bellamy. He's going to run Linherr's campaign for him."

"But elections aren't until next year!"

"I didn't even know that. But anyway, they're getting things started. They're going to have meetings and barbecues and I don't know what. They've got headquarters already in Sacramento."

“They’ll never bump Miller,” Gwen said slowly. “He’s got a big machine behind him.”

“That’s what this man said. That’s why they’re starting early. Here’s the card. N. Vandyke Bellamy—some name! He’s cooking up the whole thing. He’s a terror; you can see that. Snappy. He makes you feel as if you were on the witness stand.”

“What about my regular work here, Madge?”

“Oh, that’s all right. The old man,” Madge said, in customary reference to her employer, “is in it up to his neck. He’s put up a thousand for a starter. He’s always hated Miller.”

“Link was the one that showed up Miller, you know. And they were saying Link might run against him. But he’d be the other party, of course. Linherr and Miller are on the same side. It’s a primary fight, for them.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Madge stated contentedly, “but I know the old man picked you because you worked on that Frank Bell case, and he said you understood something about it. I can’t do it; Archie’d cut my throat if I was away evenings.”

“Would I have to go places?” Gwen demanded, stirred to sudden interest.

“Oh well, to all the little places round, making speeches and working up meetings, all that. You know, Willows and Butte and Colusa—places like that. The women get up dinners and decorate the table, and the men talk.”

“Fun!” Gwen ejaculated, her eyes dancing. “He may not get it. Miller’s got a regular machine,” she added, suddenly doubtful.

“I don’t know anything about it,” Madge said contentedly.

Gwen took the card and studied it thoughtfully.

“My new boss, N. Vandyke Bellamy,” she said. “He’s an attorney-at-law. Offices National Building, Sacramento. Vandyke Bellamy, eh? It’s a hard name to remember.”

She could not know, in this idly interested, commonplace hour here in the too familiar, dull office in the heart of the too familiar quiet town, what this name was to come to mean to her, and how well she was to remember it and this day when first she heard it.

CHAPTER X

THREE weeks later Gwen and Dick tried it again, the girl going to the city with a sort of mental chorus of "You're a fool and this is very silly" keeping time in her mind with the rattling of the train. She carried with her a jar of her mother's ginger-and-apricot preserve and a damp shoebox filled with glowing zinnias: bronze, cream color, orange, deep maroon.

Surprisingly, the flowers stirred Dick's mother to actual enthusiasm; the weather was clear and windless, and the restless cat was contentedly settled in a padded grocery box, with five small stumbling bunches of gray-and-black fur to keep her company. Dick was free this time. He had borrowed Jordan's car, and he and Gwen drove on Sunday down the shining and sparkling coast, found a heathery shoulder of hillside just above the rippling blue Pacific, and shared fried chicken and cookies and a bottle of milk in the most complete harmony and pleasure they had ever known in each other's company.

Afterward they scrambled down among the rocks, his big hard hand always ready to help her on the steeper bit of the rough path. Flushed and laughing, with her soft dark mop rumpled, Gwen was at her prettiest; whether he looked his best or not she did not know, for Dick was Dick now, and his looks were no longer a matter of importance. His deep voice, his sudden little spurts of gruff laughter, the glow in his pale blue eyes when he talked of his work were all part of her world, and mere outside details were no longer of consequence.

They dug in rock pools to disturb starfish and sea anemones and the floating fringed transparencies that were jellyfish. They slid and slipped from age-old boulder to boulder, and watched the solemn irresistible tides swell over into the pools, and recede in draggled ribbons of creamy foam, only to be met and carried back by the oncoming rush of the newer wave. Their shoes were soaked, their faces stung to burning color by the wet spray.

Gwen had seen the ocean before, but not often. She had never been so free to shout back at it, to return its salty kiss with her own kiss of outstretched arms and the cries that rivaled those of the sea gulls that circled in blue hot air overhead.

Dick had a slim volume of poetry in his pocket. It was as delightful to her as unsuspected that he should love verse; he said rather embarrassedly that he hadn't known he did until he had come upon some of this feller's stuff. Gwen, who loved Emily Dickinson and Vachel Lindsay and Louise Imogen Guiney, had never read Housman. She heard the enchanted crystal clarity of the magic words for the first time, with the gulls overhead and the rough gorse beneath her, and the sea surging and receding eternally just below. Dick read the lines "To An Athlete Dying Young" more than once, and when they looked at each other their eyes were full of tears.

"*So lay, ere yet its echoes fade*
The fleet foot on the sill of shade,
And hold to the low lintel up
The still-defended challenge cup."

"Dick," said Gwen, "how good is your memory?"

"Lord, I wish it was better. I can read a sentence in a textbook six times and shut the book, and I'll be darned if I can remember a line of it."

"I don't believe that."

"Well, lots of times when I study I'm tired to start in with and my mind doesn't seem to be functioning," he apologized.

"What I was thinking was," Gwen said animatedly, propped up on one elbow on the sea grasses and weeds, "that we could memorize this, and have it forever, to remember today."

"Maybe *you* could. I couldn't."

"Well, let's try. Sheila says that that's really the only thing to do with a poem you like. Memorize it, and then nothing can ever take it away. And if you *do* go blind," Gwen said cheerfully, "or if you get a life sentence, there you are!"

She took the book, pored over it for a few seconds. Then she handed it to him, and presently he was ready to hear her lesson, and as they drove back to the city they stumbled on through the seven short verses until they had them haltingly complete.

"I wonder how many of our fellow holiday-makers are memorizing Housman," the girl said with a laugh, as car after car of Sunday parties passed and crossed them.

“I can wait,” Dick said briefly. His tone and his glance brought the hot color to her face, and her second laugh was a little less assured. “I can’t look at you,” he added, “without wanting you. The shape of your hand lying on the rock, and your ankles crossed in the sun, and the sound of you laughing, and the way your hair grows around your forehead——”

He stopped. Gwen was silent for lack of breath.

“Don’t think I don’t see you,” Dick finished quietly, and for a little space neither spoke.

But in Gwen’s heart joy stood at full flood. This dark man in the old brown tweed suit was her world now. This companionship, so easy, so quiet, so infinitely satisfying, was like none other that she had ever known. The course of true love was going to run smooth for her and for Dick. What could interrupt it now?

But a cloud had come over the sun, and a strange chilly little breeze ruffled her hair.

“Dick——” she said in a frightened tone, and stopped.

“What is it?” he asked quickly, with a half-glance.

“Nothing. Premonition,” she said.

“Premonition of what?” He was driving carefully in the heavy Sunday traffic. His voice sounded amused.

“Nothing!” she said again.

Time was singing and dancing for Gwen now as she had never dreamed it could sing and dance; life was too full of sweet. Every dawn was a burst of glory; every day swam in a new world of iridescence and joy. Trifles—but there were no trifles now!—loomed significant; the beauty of autumn, its far blue haze, its nearer fires scented with eucalyptus and fallen orchard leaves tore at her heart with a felicity that was like pain.

She could not brush her black silky mop now without thinking that Dick someday would love this tumbled hair, would perhaps put his lips against it and grip her shoulders with his big arm. And thinking this, her brush would stop, her very breath would stop, and she would stand dreaming, marveling at the eternal miracle of a man’s love for his woman and a woman’s love for her man.

“Not marry for four or five years!” Gwen would say half aloud, with a scornful laugh. Why, she and Dick were not the sort to be stopped in their glorious rights to life and to love by any considerations of mere ways and means. She was a money-earner; she could manage. Once the great words were said between them she could make short work of this ridiculous talk of prudence and calculation and delay!

His mother knew that, if Dick didn’t. Gwen had begun to like Dick’s quiet, patient mother; had begun to try to win her affection. Gwen and Dick, the girl reflected, might talk about a year’s friendship and a time of trial, but the older woman wasn’t fooled. She knew these two were being drawn to each other with every hour and every minute that passed, and Gwen began to hope, with a little faster heartbeat because of it, that Dick’s mother was not sorry. Mrs Latimer had said once, rather pointedly, that someday she could move into the hospital; there was a room for her there if she wanted it. But she had always felt she wanted to make a home for Richard, and of course it was nice to have her own things about, and his father’s picture in the parlor.

This picture, of a hard-looking man with a mustache and a turndown collar, had provided one of Gwen’s first shocks and disillusionments upon meeting Dick’s mother and seeing his home. It stood crosswise in a corner of the already crowded little parlor, and was embellished with a purple ribbon and a little stack of wheat, half of which had been cut down by a miniature scythe.

But when she found that Dick regarded this pious memorial exactly as she did, and when she saw that his consideration for his mother and loyalty to her included silence on this point as on a hundred others, the dreadful picture took on a new significance and became a monument to the son’s character as well as to the memory of the father. Whatever Dick did was not merely right, it was infused with a sort of nobility and inspiration and bigness to Gwen; the mere sight of his square handwriting on cheap hospital stationery was enough to set her senses on fire.

He wrote her two or three times a week, enclosed newspaper and magazine clippings in every letter, sent her occasional presents that showed her that he was thinking of her, shared with her, perhaps half consciously, she suspected, every mood of his life. The gift might be only a monogrammed handkerchief from the five-and-ten, or a fountain pen that his mother had given him years before and that was too fine for him, or a rolled magazine with “the darnedest murder case you ever read on the page I’ve marked,” but whatever it was, its reception made Gwen’s day

miraculous; she felt herself already in a world apart from all the girls who had not yet entered into the Kingdom of loving and knowing themselves loved.

She and Dick had not quite opened that door. But there was a trembling ecstasy for her in the knowledge that it was there, ready to be opened; that in any one of their hours together he might turn to her, tell her to forget the old silly pact that they had made, to let him skip that year of waiting, and tell her now what she meant to him!

And after that, the Kingdom. The Kingdom of two; two always together. Two at the breakfast table, planning, planning, while the city's slow fogs rolled away and the telephone tingled to hurry Dr Latimer to the wards. Two beside the fire in the evening, tired, quiet, utterly content. Mrs Latimer chatting with nurses in the hospital while she waited for the doctor.

"Is my husband still upstairs, Miss Smith?"

" 'My husband, women say,' " Gwen mused, repeating the beautiful lines of Emily Dickinson, " 'Stroking the words. Is that the way?' "

Autumn turned slowly toward winter; the last orchard leaves fell; the redwoods lost their shabby yellow fans. Morning came later now, with thinner air; twilight was early and blue. Pumpkins lay on the bare ground in a blackened tangle of stringy leaves; the mountains receded into winter silence and whiteness.

Before Thanksgiving rain fell. Gwen danced through it to the office, with the drops glancing like crystals from her hooded dark hair, and her cheeks glowing. Sheila and Link were coming down on the Wednesday before the feast, to stay until Sunday, and Sheila had written her that they had some news of the Wallbestos patent at last. On the following Saturday Gwen was to go to the city for her fifth stay with the Latimers, and she and Dick were going to the opera. To the opera—grand opera! Even Sheila had never been to the opera! Altogether, everything was going very much the way she wanted it to go, and her spirits, inclined to be high even under discouraging circumstances, were continually at a glorious pitch.

She planned meals with her mother, helped to brighten the old house with greens and flowers, personally selected the great turkey around which Thursday's main meal was to be built.

"I don't know what's come over you, Gwen. I think you're going crazy!" her mother said.

When Sheila and Link came down for Thanksgiving there was great rejoicing, and a babel of welcome and outcry in the kitchen. It was a bleak cold afternoon, and both the Bakers looked chilled and weary from their trip. Link was immediately relegated to the warm blankets and the warm air of the spare room to have a good sleep before dinner, and Sheila had a cup of hot tea in the kitchen, and afterward, belted into a thick wrapper and comfortable in slippers, crept into Gwen's room for a gossip.

"Link didn't tell you, but we had an accident at the mine yesterday, and he drove all night. Took the man to Sacramento and left him at the hospital and then came back for me."

"Sheila, no wonder he looks so tired!"

"He's simply dead. But he'll get a good rest now. As for me," Sheila said proudly, "I've a reason."

She was lying on the bed, two pillows propping her beautiful head. Gwen, stretched the other way, with her head on another pillow at the foot, could face her with a suddenly enlightened look.

"What reason?" she demanded. And then, with an incredulous laugh, "Sheila Washburton! Oh no——!"

"I haven't even told Mother," said Sheila, laughing herself as Gwen got up and came to sink on her knees beside her, and put her arms about her, and kiss her. "Gwen, are you so glad?"

"Sheila! I can't believe it!"

"Link couldn't. He was as amazed—he was as *awed*," said Sheila, "as if such a thing never had been heard of before!"

"Well, I can't believe it!"

"It's true. Isn't it fun, Gwen?"

"Fun! Oh, darling, I'm so happy for you! Think of it, you with a little wriggly tadpole of your own! When?"

"May."

Gwen went slowly back to her place and lay staring at her sister, her eyes stars.

"Doesn't it seem a miracle?"

"Well, it does. And yet it's going on all the time, and to lots of women, poor things, the miracle is *not* to have it happen. I feel terribly happy about

it," confessed Sheila, "because it simply has knocked Link dizzy. He went around for days in a sort of dream, and when I'd look at him—much less speak to him!—he'd laugh."

"And do you feel all right?"

"Oh, perfectly. I've joined a bureau for better babies and I know just what to do," Sheila said. "It's all much easier than it used to be."

"You're happy, aren't you, darling?"

"Happy! Gwen, I tell you that marriage, when it's *right*, is just heaven. Someone beside you all the time, sympathetic and interested and—and funny, and solving all the problems, and never worrying about anything. It's wonderful."

Gwen, her heart soaring, meditated as to the wisdom of confiding to Sheila that her own affairs of the heart were moving along rather rapidly. But before she could decide, Sheila gave the conversation another turn.

"How do you like political work, Gwen?"

"Oh, I love it. I haven't had to go to Sacramento yet, and that's kind of disappointing, but they may send for me yet! I just stay here and handle propaganda in the office. It's fun, though, and election year will be fun, if our man gets in at the primaries. Mr Bellamy says that Linherr will only use this as a stepping-stone, that he's going to run for something big two years from now. But I enjoy it all, and I make speeches, and I'm good!"

"Of course you're good! It seems to me that's a thing you can do wonderfully, Gwen. And you get extra pay for it?"

"Oh yes, ten dollars a week, and I go to different places with Mr Linherr and Mr Bellamy. I've had a lot of fun! I wish it would last longer, but it may all stop at the primaries!"

"This Mr Bellamy, is he nice?"

Gwen's face sobered; she looked away for a moment, biting her lower lip.

"He's the—awfullest person I ever knew," she said presently, in a low voice.

"Making love to you?" Sheila asked shrewdly.

"Well, in a way. Sort of taking it for granted, really."

"Taking what for granted?"

"Well——" Gwen's face reddened. "Sort of acting as if I was as crazy about him as he is about me," she said, gulping. Her tone became apologetic. "This isn't old-maid talk, Sis," she said. "He brings me candy and things, and he talks—well, he's wild. He looks at me every second, and he'll say, 'Wonderful!' or 'My darling!' and he—he makes me go gooseflesh!"

"How old is he? What's he look like?"

"He's—oh, nearly forty, I guess; a widower. He has a little girl about ten. He's sort of dark; black-haired, and a little gray, and nice-looking. You'd like him. Only I don't want him to like me!"

"Has he asked you to marry him, Gwen?"

"Oh no! He wouldn't. He'd take all that for granted. He adores me, and he doesn't care if I don't adore him. And I haven't done *anything*, Sheila," Gwen protested. "I've never flirted with him or brought him home here or given him the slightest encouragement! He seemed so much older to me that I never thought of it. And I just *dread* the scenes he makes, and his telephoning to ask if he can come down!"

"He's in Sacramento? But when the election's over, Gwen, I don't suppose he'll bother you much longer."

"But that's almost a year! He'll have me crazy before that! And the worst of it is, Sis," Gwen said distressedly, "that he's so jealous he makes me perfectly wretched. He just doesn't want anyone else to *speak* to me! He glares at people when I talk to them. 'You were smiling at those bores as if you didn't utterly despise them,' he'll say to me. And he has no right," Gwen ended resentfully. "He has no right to be jealous of me! But you see, Sheila," she went on, "when we're campaigning, going around to these little towns to talk at club dinners and things, he often takes me. At first I thought it was lots of fun. But I can tell you that before the third time I'd had enough of it! He just—takes possession of you. He watches every word I say, and then instead of answering he'll just say, 'Adorable!' to himself. And he writes me—well, I couldn't dare show you the letters. I'd be ashamed."

"Does he say—he doesn't say anything about wanting to marry you, Gwen?"

"Oh, doesn't he! That's what he takes for granted! He was married before, and his wife died. I'll tell you who she was: she was the Greens' cousin. One of those redheaded girls at Falls Hill."

“Well, of course,” said Sheila. “I knew I knew the name! But they lived in Oakland.”

“He’s lived everywhere, apparently. But he’s smart, Sheila. He’s a terrific worker, and I know Linherr thinks he owes about half his chances to Van.”

“Vandyke Bellamy, that’s the name. I remember now. She was killed in an accident.”

“About three years ago. There’s a little girl, June, about ten, I think. She lives with old Mrs Green at Falls Hill.”

“But he really does want to marry you?”

“Oh yes. Goodness, if only he didn’t!”

“And you don’t like him at all, Gwen?”

“Well, I’d like him well enough if he didn’t take this—this proprietary attitude about me. He asks me what I was doing last week end, and if I went out with anyone, and it—really it sort of frightens me, Sheila. Last time I went to San Francisco——”

“Ah,” said Sheila, “now we are getting somewhere. Tell me about that. It seems to me that whenever Mother writes to me, you’re up in San Francisco with the Latimers. What is all this?”

“Mother probably gets a good chance to write letters when I’m not here,” Gwen said, flushing, but pleased. “I told you about Dick Latimer who was so cracked about you,” she went on. “Well, it seems it wasn’t you. I hope that doesn’t break your heart!”

“I can bear it, inasmuch as I’d hardly know him if I met him,” smiled Sheila. “Heavens, how long ago the days in the library seem!” she added. “Once a baby is coming you seem—you seem shut away in a sort of new world of your own. All love and protection and safety. I can’t believe I’m the same woman!”

“Dick lives with his mother in a dreary little apartment right near the hospital,” Gwen said. “She’s got a job in the hospital, and she gets rent from the place they have over near River Lane. But of course Dick hasn’t anything, and books cost a fortune, and he’s got years of intern work to do.”

“But you do really like each other, Gwen?” Sheila asked surprisedly.

“Well—I’m beginning to, horribly. I have better times with him than I’ve ever had with any other man,” Gwen confessed, thinking it out as she spoke,

and looking away. “We’re companionable. I admire him tremendously. He’s like a rock, or an oak, or anything else people ever say when they mean strong. He plans ahead, and he has the character to stick to what he plans, and when he talks you realize that he’s going to be a big man—at least, that’s the way it seems to me!” she broke off, laughing, a little embarrassed.

“Darling, you’re head over heels,” Sheila said, laughing, too. “But wouldn’t you have to wait a long time, Gwen?” she added more seriously.

“No, not necessarily. I could get a job near the hospital. Lots of ’em marry while they’re interns,” Gwen answered. “But it hasn’t come to that yet!” she went on. “It’s just that we like each other, awfully, and write to each other every few days, and like to be together! And that’s what makes the attentions of this other—this other idiot so maddening! He’ll say, ‘You know that you’re going to marry me, Gwen, don’t you?’ And the other day he showed me a little revolver and said, ‘You know what I’m going to do with that if you play fast and loose with me, don’t you?’ ”

“Good heavens!” said Sheila, really disturbed and raising herself on one elbow.

“Well, he never *would*!” Gwen assured her.

“He might shoot you, a man like that!”

“Me? No fear! No, it was suicide he was talking about. Sheila, do you really believe,” Gwen asked curiously, “do you really believe that a man could come into an office and just see a woman, and decide all of a sudden that he wanted to marry her, and just go on from bad to worse until he was perfectly insane about the whole thing?”

“Well, evidently this one did,” Sheila said, smiling but still anxious.

“If he’d ever even kissed me!” the younger sister continued. “But he never has. We’ve driven around the country, most of the time with a pair of good old committee men or women with us, and we’ve had a few dinners in little country restaurants. The Paris Grill it usually is, and the only thing you can eat is ham and eggs. You couldn’t call that a background for romance, exactly. But the way Van talks you’d think I’d been leading him on! Or if not that, at least he talks as if the whole thing was settled and just waiting for the date.”

“Has he money, Gwen?”

“He talks as if he had. I imagine he’s a sort of free-lancer, now in funds and now out. He’s smart.”

"I'd certainly give him a wide berth until this cools off," observed Sheila.

"Goodness knows I'm trying to! But about once a week he shows up and goes in for a little political talk with Mr Keane and then comes out and asks me to lunch. Last—last Tuesday it was, he came in, and when I said that I was just going to rush across the street to the Saddle Rock for an oyster stew, he said that it wouldn't take any longer to go in the car to the hotel and have a steak, and I got back to the office at quarter past three! I thought Madge would bite my head off."

"Another time don't go at all, Gwen. He's really dangerous."

"I know he is! At least he is to my peace of mind. But you see, the worst of it is, he's quite chummy with Mr Keane, and Mr Keane gives advice and money for this primaries business, and Van is always coming in for a talk or a conference. I can't snub him."

"You could tell him you're interested in Doctor Latimer."

"Aha, no such luck! I've told him a thousand times that there's someone else, but he just smiles. He says women love to pique men by talking of other admirers. It doesn't worry him a bit!"

"It might worry him if you actually married your doctor."

"Yes, but I can't do that until I'm asked! I—I know it's Dick for me, Sheila, forever and forever, but meanwhile Van—you don't know how forceful Van can be!"

Sheila lay thinking, her forehead wrinkled.

"Gwen, here's a suggestion: Why not look around in the city and see if you can get a job there? Mr Keane would give you a letter. Your friend the doctor might help, or his mother. Then you'd be away from this pest, and you and your M.D. could plan with both your salaries to count on."

"Mother'd have ten catfits."

"No, she wouldn't. Not if you gave her a hint."

"But—well, I could have that plan in mind, Sheila," Gwen said hesitantly; "but things between us are just at the—the shaky stage, now, and I wouldn't want Dick to think I was moving in on him."

"You don't have to worry, he sounds to me mad about you! Oh, but speaking of lawyers, Gwen," Sheila broke off to say suddenly. "Link is corresponding with a man who is near the Johnson-Polk Mills."

“The Johnson-Polk Mills? Where are they?”

“That’s the firm that wanted to buy the Wallbestos patent.”

“Oh yes, yes! Oh, is he? Goody!” said Gwen. “A little extra money now would probably straighten out a good many things.”

“Sheila,” said her mother, entering the room suddenly and unannounced, “should you have taken that long drive, over snowy roads, in your condition?”

Sheila laughed, catching at her mother’s hand as Mrs Washburton seated herself on the edge of the bed.

“Who told you, Mother?”

“You did, my dear, the moment my eyes lighted on you. I just said to your father: ‘I believe that poor child’s in for it!’ ”

The younger wife’s eyes danced as they met Gwen’s.

“What’s this ‘poor child’ stuff?”

“Well, it does seem *soon*,” Mrs Washburton said firmly. “I did hope you’d have a little more free time.”

“Mother, what a way to take the news of your grandchild!” Gwen reproached her. “Here Sheila and I are all dewy-eyed and rapt and talking of mysterious little ships and what not, and you act as if something awful had happened.”

“I do not,” protested her mother. “I’m delighted. It’s what I expected, and I’d have been very much surprised if Sheila and Link *hadn’t* had children! If she’ll just be sensible now and take care of herself.”

“Oh, what materialists you are, in your generation!” Gwen lamented. “No illusions, no dreams, no poetry! A precious little soul is about to be entrusted to Sheila’s young hands, a new life is to dawn in this bleak old world——”

“Nonsense,” said her mother. “A baby’s a baby. It’ll be a great care and a great responsibility for two or three years, and then I suppose just as it gets to be less trouble there’ll be another. I hoped that Sheila’d travel—Link go on some case to Washington maybe—I’ve never seen Washington myself ——”

“Mother, you’re priceless!” Sheila told her, laughing. “But at that,” she added consolingly, “babies have been known to go to Washington.”

“Exposing a delicate child to a four-day train trip!” Mrs Washburton said severely. “No, now, you girls needn’t laugh as if I was half idiotic!” she added, as Gwen rolled over and smothered disrespectful gasps in the comforter.

“Mother, if you insist we’ll regard you as completely idiotic, you may depend upon it, darling,” she said. “Does anyone realize that even on Thanksgiving Eve we have to eat?” Gwen added, getting to her feet and shaking her hair into its usual shape. “What are we having, Mother? Beans and what? I know there are beans because I intended them for lunch and they didn’t get done. Oh, isn’t it fun to have Sheila home again!”

“I started French toast,” Mrs Washburton said, as both girls took possession of the bench at the dressing table at once in a familiar old fashion. “I remember Link liked it so much last spring when he and Sheila were engaged. The batter’s all made, and the beans are done, and I didn’t know whether there was enough of the lamb stew, or whether you wanted to do something with eggs.”

“There’ll be plenty, what with one thing and another,” Gwen announced confidently; “anyone who feels hungry can look at the pies and the turk. I put about two loaves of bread into him this afternoon. Chestnuts and bread and pineapple and I don’t know what all!”

“Pineapple!” echoed Sheila, revolving on the bench to face her sister.

“She got that out of a magazine,” Fanny Washburton said simply.

“It might be good.”

“Good! It’s perfectly delicious. It makes it taste so light. One cup of chopped pineapple to three of crumbs, and the rest just as usual. Oh, and chopped preserved ginger!”

“Chopped preserved ginger, too,” Mrs Washburton said patiently to her older daughter.

“Mother read in the paper that a man died eating it!” said Gwen.

“I did not. What he died eating was something his wife had put calomel into. She thought it was baking powder.”

Sheila laughed delightedly as they all went downstairs together.

“I love this crazy family!” she said.

“I think people are crazy not to go to the movies if they have the money!” Kip said unexpectedly, and they all laughed again.

CHAPTER XI

AFTER supper there was a fire in the sitting room and they all sat there in the old way. Peter's new girl, Jane Willis, was a clerk in the telegraph office and would not be free until ten, so he and his mother took on Gwen and Link for a rubber or two of bridge, and Sheila played cribbage with her father. Gwen's eyes constantly strayed to her sister. Sheila was more beautiful than ever, she thought, and the prospect of Sheila's new dignity and new joy filled her own heart with content. There was no one in the world quite as wonderful as Sheila!

She had been asked to have Thanksgiving dinner with the Latimers, and had in turn asked Dick if he could drive his mother to Kenthill tomorrow and have their turkey feast with the Washburtons. But neither plan had been practical, and Gwen had to console herself that Dick was coming over on Sunday if he possibly could get away. Sheila and Link would be gone then, everyone relaxed and weary after the holiday excitement, but she and Dick would take a walk in the fresh winter cold, and afterward have an especially good supper. Stuffed potatoes and sausage perhaps, and a chocolate soufflé. Gwen could get the meal partly ready before he arrived, and then dazzle him with an effect of quiet speed. What would it be like to be a doctor's wife in some faraway city? her thoughts wandered on. What would it be like to have the responsibility for this man, his meals and his clothes, his comfort, his honor, his children, someday? Her heart danced.

"We went down two, not doubled and not vul," said Link, briskly scoring. "It was worth it. Your deal, Gwen."

Gwen came out of her dream. The plain old walls of home were still about her, the shabby bookcases, the curtains that needed washing. Life was still in its old safe groove, but life had a way of changing, of leaving the old ways behind it. Sheila had been here playing cribbage with Dad only two short years ago, without ever having heard the name of James Gunther Baker. And now she was all wife, sitting there with her wedding taffeta and her loose Chinese jacket partly concealing the fact that by another Thanksgiving there would be a baby in the Washburton house for the first time since Peter had been the baby.

"Stop mooning, Gwen, and concentrate," suggested Link. "You had a good raise there."

“Oh heavens, I’m sorry, Link. I was meditating upon the mutability of life. What’d you bid?”

“Keep it up, Sis,” said Peter. “It gives us the only chance we’re likely to get.”

“I guess I haven’t lived right,” Fanny Washburton said, putting down her hand. “Nothing but two jacks, partner.”

“They’re more than enough!” Peter said enthusiastically. “We can’t go down more than six.”

“And two for his nibs,” Sheila said, over the cribbage board. “Why don’t you go somewhere and take two or three lessons, Dad? It’s a game you’d love if you once mastered it.”

Home, Gwen thought, and it was safe and dear, and Dick somehow fitted into it. Dick was home. Why let a silly outside thing like the unwelcome attentions of Vandyke Bellamy worry one? He might rave, and threaten a pistol, but he wouldn’t do anything; a man of forty, with a daughter ten years old! This was Thanksgiving time, and she had plenty for which to be thankful.

She had to report at the office as usual on Friday and Saturday, and early on Sunday Sheila and Link went away. But there were evening hours full of the old harmony and intimacy, and before she left Sheila exacted a promise that everyone would come up to the mine for as long a Christmas holiday as every member of the group could separately manage to secure.

“There’s a little empty house right near us,” said Sheila, “partly furnished, like all the company houses, and when you come we’re going to put towels and soap in and use it for a guest house. We can keep Gwen with us, or we could keep Peter and Kip, and put Gwen and Mother and Dad in the other house. I can manage all the meals; it’ll be one long picnic, and it’ll be such fun!”

“We take all the presents up!” Gwen began to plan enthusiastically. “Oh, and there’ll be snow, won’t there, Sheila?”

“We’ve had snow already.”

“We’ll see,” said her mother. “I don’t want to miss the Woman’s Auxiliary Tree nor the Orphanage Tree, and I s’pose they’ll want me to do something about the Christmas program at the club. Then we’re having the Sunday-school children——”

“Don’t pay any attention to her,” Gwen broke in, one arm about her mother. “We’ll all be there, and we’ll have snowball fights and go on a picnic and have the most glorious time we’ve ever had anywhere! It’s only a few weeks, so don’t put on this parting act, Mother. Sheila isn’t leaving for Thibet.”

“I really wish I could once say something and not have some child of mine——” Fanny Washburton was beginning patiently, when Link called from the car, and Sheila with last kisses and a half-laughing, half-rueful, “Oh, I’m homesicker now than I was on my wedding day!” ran to take her place by his side on the front seat.

When they were gone a strange silence and apathy seemed to fall on the house and its occupants. Peter, wrapped in his dressing gown, decided to return to the bed from which he had been summoned to say good-by to the guests. Gwen’s father and mother settled beside the sitting-room stove with the papers. Kip disappeared over the backyard fence, and Gwen repaired to the kitchen to help Tryrena with clearance of the breakfast disorder and get things in line for the two-o’clock dinner. Dick would be here for that; she wouldn’t go for the long walk that was needed to clear her rather heavy head until Dick came.

He loved to take the car out of town and up to the edge of the woods, and then walk on and up past vineyards and orchards and through belts of pine and juniper; the hills falling away in wooden canyons and mountain meadows and every turn of the deserted old roads showing a new aspect of the valleys and towns below. He told Gwen that he always came back feeling younger and freshened and readier for work.

“You feeling younger!” she scoffed at him cheerfully. “Why, you’re absolutely the most vigorous person I ever knew!”

“Well, anyway, this makes me over!”

But she knew it was not all the fresh, cool country air and the bland winter skies and the damp, rich forest odors that were like perfume; there was an exhilaration for them both in just being together, in the companionable silence in which they panted upward, side by side, in the laughter with which they reached the high ridges.

Today the ground was spongy from the recent rains, and the sky a somber gray. They climbed the old Summit Road, abandoned now for a newer, wider, more modern highway, but still used occasionally by trappers

and by the few lone woodsmen whose cabins were dotted here and there in the mountains.

"Gwen, wouldn't you like to have a little cabin up here someday? One room and a fireplace, and a grill outside. Lord, you could have fun up here!"

"I believe——" She was drawing her breath in agonizing gasps, leaning for support against the shaft of a tall, tufted pine. "I believe you'd like a little cabin everywhere we've ever been, Dick! You want one on the shore and you wanted one on Telegraph Hill in San Francisco. How many little one-room cabins are you planning to have?"

"Well, wherever we've been I'd like one."

"Like the crosses of the *chère reine*."

"Yep. Does that spur look terribly high to you?"

"Oh heavens, no! Let's go right at it, and be ravenous for supper."

They were off again, following roads that were hardly discernible now, scrambling higher and higher, growing red-cheeked and hot and breathless, but at last achieving the summit, and standing under the slanted high pine that stood there like a beacon and could be seen from all the valley. The deep-matted pine needles and brush under their feet were soaking from melted snows. There was no place to sit down, and besides that, the afternoon light was waning rapidly toward a November night. Gwen caught at his hand.

"Come on, Dick! It's going to be dark in no time. It'll take us forty minutes to get down, and we've got baths and everything to get in before supper. You're staying to supper?"

They were half sliding, half running down the steep trail, impelled to wild laughter by the speed and excitement of it.

"Yes, but I have to go right afterward!"

"Oh, dear! Jane's coming over, and of course Pete'll be there and we could play games!"

"I'm sorry. But you know it takes me just about three hours to get to the city, and I've got to be up at five."

"I know. Now I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll get home—say at quarter to five. Don't forget we've got to take off our shoes on the porch! You go right up to Peter's room and get into your own clothes, and have a shower if there's any hot water. I'm sure there is. And I'll go into the kitchen and see

how things are going there. I think it's baked sweets tonight, with Dad's usual array of sardines and crackers and so on. He loves indigestible suppers! But anyway, I'll rush up and change, and then we'll have supper, and you'll be off by seven. That'll get you home by ten. Will that be soon enough?"

They had reached the level valley now, and were making good time between the bare orchards whose upturned clods still shone from wet plowing, and the little shabby houses that straggled outside of the town, and that seemed to have drawn into themselves for the winter. A cold sunset shone in yellow and steel against the west; the light hung so low that the pumpkins threw little shadows on the stained frostbitten leaves of the shriveled vines.

"Isn't it all Thanksgivingy?" Gwen demanded, keeping gallant step with him, although the muscles of her legs were so tired now that they trembled.

"Gwen," he said suddenly, when they were in sight of home, "I've got a chance to go to Edinburgh. That's what I've been trying to tell you all day. I've been offered a three-year fellowship in the finest medical atmosphere in the world. I've been talking it over with Mother. I've got to take it. You know what it means. You know what it means!"

Gwen glanced at him once and met his miserable look. She felt herself swallow with a dry throat. Her heart turned to lead.

There were pickets missing from what had once been an elegant fence of deep-scalloped white poles. There were brown streaks on the house where Mother had fastened hollyhocks with strips of glove. The hollyhocks were gone, and Tryrena's chickens had long ago devoured the sunflower seeds. But there were a few pale cosmos blossoms left, floating like stars against the dusk, and there were chrysanthemums, with white and bronze blossoms bound together with strings in muddy bunches. On the uneven bricks of the path frost would delicately form itself tonight, and Gwen's rubbers would crush it when she and Dad came down to the gate tomorrow.

"What do you think?" Dick asked.

"They don't pay much?" she asked, forcing herself to speak.

"Nothing, practically. The letter didn't say, but one of the fellers told me sixty pounds a year."

"Three hundred dollars." Her mind, accustomed to calculations in terms of domestic expense, worked it out reluctantly. That would barely cover rent. And while an American woman might be reasonably sure of finding a

job in Rochester or Baltimore or San Francisco, the situation might be entirely different in Scotland. People had different ideas in Scotland; standards of living were different. Yes, she knew what this news meant.

"What—what does your mother think, Dick?"

"She thinks—well, she knows what it would be worth to me. If I have three years of work with Doctor Muir, there isn't a hospital or a clinic in the world that can't use me. I'd be—I'd be an authority on my own subject before I was thirty-two."

"How'd he happen to offer it, Dick?"

"I wrote a little article, and the *Lancet* used it, and he saw it and wrote me a long letter. I'd taken it for granted that certain spine shocks usually work one way. He thought I was middle-aged, evidently, because he said that if my family was of an age to leave and it would interest 'Mrs Latimer,' he would be very glad to have me come over and work with him for a few months. Well, that was weeks ago, and I just answered that I was only finishing my first-year internship in June, and that there wasn't a prayer of my getting to Scotland, because I had no means whatever, and must take whatever offered here. And his answer came yesterday. He offers me the Muir Fellowship."

Gwen spoke steadily:

"You ought to go."

"I'd have to borrow money for the trip. But not much," the man said, delaying her for a moment on the porch before they entered the warm, lighted house. "I'd go tourist all the way, and live in the hospital when I got there."

"You'd love it," she said, an ache as old as womanhood itself in her voice.

"Well, Lord——" he said simply, in a tone of acknowledgement. "It boosts me right over the bad time," he said; "it gives me three years of security. It means——"

CHAPTER XII

THERE was an interruption. The porch door opened, close beside them, the light rushed out.

"Gwen," her mother said, in an elegant tone that covered deeps of embittered significance, "Mr Bellamy is here, dear. He's been here quite a little while, darling, waiting for you! Dad's asked him for supper," she added in a savage whisper.

"Oh, how nice!" Gwen said, with a face of despair. "I'll just say hello and then run upstairs. I won't be a minute. Open some of the peaches," she added under her breath.

"Don't be long!" her mother said cheerfully. "Nothing done about supper!" she murmured darkly. "Except I started the potatoes."

"I'll be out and help in two minutes!" Gwen murmured, taking off mud-clotted shoes in the doorway. Dick caught at her arm.

"Think it over, will you, Gwen? I'll not write him until we talk about it."

"Well, Mr Bellamy!" Gwen said, going into the parlor with her shoes in her left hand. "Excuse the stocking feet, but we were mud in to the bone. May I present Doctor Latimer, also in his stocking feet? Rush upstairs, Dick, and change. Mr Bellamy," she went on with a nervous laugh, "I understand that my father has asked you to stay for the sort of American Sunday supper that puts the uninitiated into the emergency ward? Remember that anything you eat may be used against you! I'm all mud. Will you excuse me for about ten seconds while I leap into dry things? What are you doing, Dad—teaching him dominoes? No cheating. Don't you want lights in here?"

The visitor was a well-groomed man of forty, with black hair touched becomingly on the temples with silver, and a clipped black mustache. He wore glasses over keen gray eyes; his skin, naturally sallow, was healthily browned, and he was dressed in browns that matched his color. A suit of mixed browns, a brown tie, brown shoes, and a brown line on the handkerchief that was folded in his breast pocket all helped the impression he made of correctness and wide-awakeness. He was not tall, but he held himself erect, and displayed, by a tremendous eagerness of manner and emphasis in speech, the overflowing vitality that possessed him.

“Am I really talking to you again, and not imagining it?” he said in the hall. “Won’t you let me take those shoes—you must—really, I can’t let you! You are more beautiful than ever,” he added in a low tone.

“Don’t touch them!” Gwen said. “It’s an awful pair of Pete’s that Doctor Latimer was wearing, and these of mine don’t matter. I may never clean them; I may throw them away.”

“You are the most wonderful person alive,” the man said, as Gwen and the four dirty shoes disappeared in the direction of the kitchen. She had flushed and laughed at his words, but she was not happy.

“Mother, why did he have to come today of all days, and what possessed Dad to ask him to stay?” she whispered, when she was safely out of his hearing.

“Well, he’s come all the way from Sacramento, Gwen, and I don’t see that your father could do much else!”

“He didn’t come all the way from Sacramento to see *me*!”

“Well, he had lunch with the Spencers and talked over some business with the Judge, I believe, but he seemed real anxious to see you, and the smell of baking sweet potatoes began to go through the whole house, and Kip came in simply one mess of mud and asked if he could get some peanut butter for supper, and it was just too pointed!”

“I wish he’d chosen some other day!” Gwen felt dazed and shaken. She had to be alone to think, and now the most distracting of interruptions had arrived!

Scotland! It seemed as far away as the poles. She could cope with conditions anywhere else; but with no money, in a Scottish winter——? It suggested nothing but stony little streets, fish-stands at bleak windy corners, dark rooms in which poverty held sway. There might indeed be plenty and prosperity in Edinburgh, but it would not be for her.

Half thinking these things, and half concerned to see that the sweet potatoes were properly baking, and that there were eggs to scramble with some of Mother’s tomato preserve, and, under all her thoughts, irritated to realize that this last hour with Dick must be shared with the unwelcome Van, Gwen somehow did manage to flash upstairs and get herself into a comfortable old blue gown and a pair of worn slippers, and was back in time to set the table.

“Come out here into the dining room while I’m busy here, Mr Bellamy,” she said. There was nothing else to do; her mother had disappeared, and the men were not yet downstairs. “We’re very informal here on Sunday nights,” Gwen went on, hospitably busy. She was conscious that she was tired out, indeed trembling with fatigue. But somehow she’d get through this——

He came willingly, seating himself in her grandfather’s dilapidated old leather chair, watching her appreciatively.

“What a darling you are!” he said. “I’ve been thinking of you every minute of the time. I’ve been wanting to talk to you. How long are all these dreadful people going to be around? No, now,” he added quickly, putting up a hand to stop her comments, and laughing, “I know they’re all very lovely, because they belong to you, but of course I’m hungry for just a few minutes alone with you! Is that so surprising?”

“What’s surprising is,” Gwen said, determinedly unsentimental, “that this is turning into a real supper. My sister brought down some apple fruitcake that some old woman up there in the mountains——”

“Don’t talk about food; talk about yourself. You’re adorable!” the man said under his breath from time to time as she went to and fro, making the table attractive, returning flushed from the kitchen. “Where do you sit?”

“I’ll not tell you! You’ll sit next to my mother, of course, as guest of honor. I’ll have you know that we know how to do things correctly, if we are only mountaineers.”

“Don’t be unkind to me,” he said.

“By putting you next to my mother?—Here’s Mother now. Everything’s ready except that the eggs——” She disappeared kitchen ward, returned with a large smoking platter. The three men and Kip were in the room now, and Mrs Washburton was already seated at the table. Pete’s latest attachment, a tall eyeglassed girl who worked in the telegraph office and treated him with an easy indifference Gwen thought simply amazing, had arrived. Jane was homely, with all the confident mannerisms of a beauty. And the strange thing was that men seemed to take her at her own valuation.

Immediately they were all eating and talking. Van Bellamy, seeing himself temporarily separated from his adored one, devoted himself to Gwen’s mother, with such success that presently Peter and Jane were also listening to him in fascinated attention. Dick, on the other hand, was tired and worried. Van’s attitude toward Gwen was too openly expressed to be ignored. If Gwen spoke, Van listened with a very exaggeration of pleasure

and admiration. “She’s marvelous!” he would say under his breath, when Gwen finished speaking. All the older man’s conversation was directed, whether he actually used her name or not, toward Gwen. He watched her with sparkling, appreciative eyes. His personality easily dominated the supper table. He was a brilliant talker, and with this new audience he had no trouble in making an impression.

At quarter to eight Gwen walked with Dick to the car. He was still silent and troubled, his opening remark being a somewhat discouraged statement that he might just as well go to Scotland, as far as he could see.

“Why do you say that, Dick?” she asked, in quick hurt.

“Well, because—because—— Oh, damn it!” Dick muttered, interrupting the unfinished sentence, unable to find words. “You never told me he was crazy about you!” he said restlessly.

“I didn’t think it mattered,” Gwen answered serenely. “I assure you it’s quite a new experience to me to have two men worrying over me,” she added. Dick laughed wretchedly.

“I don’t know what to do about this Muir thing!” he said.

“Dick, can it wait?”

“Oh, sure it can wait. That is, he said he knew I would want to talk this over with my mother, and think it over, and he would not expect my decision before Christmas.”

“Well, then. I’m coming to town next Saturday. You think about it and I will. And we’ll talk about it then.”

“I don’t know that I can get Sunday, now that Tobin’s laid up.”

“That won’t matter. I’ll come over and we’ll have lunch in the cafeteria. Ah, Dick, stop glowering about Van! I’m just one of his clerks.”

“I suppose he’d take you in a box, if you went with him,” Dick said.

“Who’d take me in a *what*?”

“I was thinking of the opera, Saturday night. Our seats are up in the balcony.”

“As if that mattered! It’s my first grand opera.”

“Lord!” Dick said, under his breath, seated at the wheel of the car now, with Gwen’s face close to his own.

“Lord what?” Gwen asked teasingly, yet with understanding and sympathy in her voice, too.

“Oh, nothing!” he said. “Except that I always thought money didn’t count!”

“It doesn’t.” She was distressed to have him merely shrug at this and say only, “Well, good-by, see you Saturday!” as he drove away. It was too bad to have him so depressed, so bitter. She knew that it was the sparkling Vandyke Bellamy who had produced this mood in him, and it was with no especially cordial feeling toward her other guest that she went slowly back into the house.

Van was at the old piano playing various rambling familiar bits of music. Gwen’s father had disappeared. Her mother was in the dining room, piling plates, urging Kip on to do his homework. Gwen went out and worked for a little while, returned to the sitting room and leaned her elbows on the piano, her chin in her cupped hands.

The man was playing softly, rambling through a dozen familiar lovely airs; sometimes he looked down at the keys for a moment as he fitted one intricate bit of melody to another; sometimes he looked dreamily, abstractedly into Gwen’s eyes and smiled. Moments went by, and she began to feel the spell of the hour: A quiet Sunday-evening hour in the old parlor with only a lamp lighted here and there to shine on the books and chairs and the faded rug, and the enchanted music of Chopin and Schumann pouring softly from under the clever, accomplished fingers on the keyboard.

“I didn’t know that you could play,” she said in a silence when for a moment he stopped.

“You don’t——” Without moving his eyes from hers he played a soft little flight of chords. “You don’t really know anything about me, do you?”

“Not much,” Gwen conceded, with an apologetic little laugh.

“That’s funny, isn’t it?” He seemed to be asking the question of his own thoughts. “When I think of nothing but you,” he finished simply.

Smiling, she listened to some little familiar melody as it poured from the keys, presently asking:

“Seriously, do you talk this way to many women?”

His look flashed to hers, returned to the piano.

“Not to any,” he answered quietly, after a moment. Then, carelessly: “Who is our young friend, the doctor?”

“Dick? He’s an intern at the City and County.”

“Graduate?”

“Oh yes. They kept him on, which was quite a compliment.”

“Not much pay, though.”

“No. But great experience. And now he’s had—he was just telling me he’s had an invitation to go to a famous Edinburgh hospital. They’ve offered him a fellowship.”

“Bravo!” the man said softly, fingering chords, his eyes on her face.

“Three years, with the great spine man, Muir. He’s all upset about it.”

“Upset, naturally,” he agreed with a nod. “Has he private means?”

“Oh no. His mother works in the hospital, in the linen room. She has a house here that she rents, but they’re—they’ve—no, he has nothing except what he earns,” Gwen said, somewhat confusedly.

“That’s the history of the biggest men, after all.”

“That’s what I tell him,” Gwen said, grateful for sympathy.

“But it’s a long road,” Bellamy went on. “It’s not an engagement between you?” he added quietly.

The very naturalness of the question made her heart beat fast. Gwen in return answered as naturally as she could.

“Oh no!”

“Then I ask you first,” Van said steadily.

Her throat thickened and her color rushed up. She could not speak.

“I ask you to marry me first,” the man went on. His fine hands did not stop their delicate fingering of the keys, and the soft chords of music went on. “You needn’t answer me now. The only life I can think of is with you as my wife. I know what you’re thinking now. You’re thinking that you are resigned to years of waiting, waiting for a start somewhere as the wife of a doctor beginning at the beginning—without means, without a practice——”

Gwen was shaken, frightened a little, yet somehow deliciously thrilled, too. Under every other emotion she was conscious of enjoyment of this hour in the dimly lighted parlor with the fire glowing lower and lower in the old

“airtight” stove, and the music flowing softly on and on and the ardent face and strangely haunting voice of this man so near.

“With a reputation,” she put in, as he paused.

“Oh yes, with a reputation,” he conceded. “And after a while, when he’s fifty, and you’re past forty, the consolation of knowing that you have made him a success. But somehow I see a different life for you——

“I see you,” he went on as Gwen did not speak, “taking your place in the world as the very remarkable woman you are. I would want you to know London, to know New York, and to find yourself. Find out what you’re capable of, and how much you have to give! Good heavens, how much you have to give! What is it? Poetry, fiction, lectures, essays—my dear child, how should I know? I don’t know. I just know that it’s there—the immortal fire. Something I felt the first instant I met you. Something that came out to me, making me know——”

He interrupted himself. His fingers began very softly the first movement of the “Moonlight.”

“Making me know that it wasn’t just youth—just sunrise—that makes you what you are,” he said. “But lightning. A woman who is going to strike through this world, sooner or later, like a lightning flash.”

“But why not as the wife of a doctor, Van?”

A pause.

“I am completely unable—unable to say anything when you call me by my name, Gwen.”

“To help a man, to be his inspiration and companion and helper, is a pretty big job.” Gwen felt that she was playing a frightening, a fascinating, part in an emotional play. But the man was not play-acting.

“But not *your* life,” he said, with a delicate stress on the pronoun.

“Certainly my life! My home, my husband, my children.”

Bellamy did not answer. He continued to watch her thoughtfully for a moment, then he asked suddenly:

“Will you go with me to the opera Saturday night? I have to be in the city.”

“Funny,” Gwen said youthfully. “I’ve never been asked to the opera at all before! Now two men ask me for the same night.”

“Ah? You’re going with your doctor?”

“If he can get off.”

“I’m too late, then. Gwen, you know you aren’t going to marry him,” Van said, fingering the flowing music very softly. She tried to laugh a natural, surprised, half-affronted laugh.

“Why not?”

“Because—I think—you’re going to marry me, dear.”

“No, I’m not, Van,” she said quickly and honestly.

“Because you think you love him.”

“That might be the reason.”

Van slowly shook the silver-touched, dark smoothness of his head. He was half smiling. Gwen felt a sudden unreasoning terror of him; it was as if he possessed a force stronger than anything she could bring to master it, stronger than anything she could even analyze.

“You’ll marry me, Gwen,” he said.

“I’m sorry.” But it didn’t sound like her voice, and she felt herself trembling. She went away from the piano, and in a moment he followed her and almost immediately said that he must go.

When he was gone Gwen put out lights, straightened chairs, Went into the dining room to clear away all signs of Kip’s usual Sunday-night struggle with Monday’s homework. The table cover was dragged askew; there were clods of mud on the rumpled rug, pencil shavings on the floor. On the table, among discarded exercise papers, were apple cores, walnut shells, a drained milky glass.

Gwen worked absently, stopping often to stare vaguely into space. The trembling stopped; the house was darkened and very still. But the fear she could not define or conquer continued cold and deep in her heart.

CHAPTER XIII

LONG before the appointed Saturday came, Gwen had told practically everyone in Kenthill that she was to go to the opera, and the local paper had taken due note of the fact.

"Miss Gwendolyn Washburton," said the "Madame la Bavarde" column of the *Post-Star*, "will leave for San Francisco on Saturday afternoon, to attend the opening of the opera season as the guest of Mrs Timothy Latimer, once a well-known resident of Kenthill, and her son, Dr Richard Latimer, who is now on the staff of the City and County Hospital."

Put in this fashion, it looked rather well, and Gwen packed her best clothes, her cold creams and brushes and slippers and evening stockings in a high state of elated expectation. After all, Dick had the tickets; he had shown them to her. After all, nothing could keep her from going to the opera now!

It was a little daunting to find San Francisco looking dark and wintry under a light rain, and to reach the Latimer flat before either of the legitimate occupants did. Gwen knew the family secrets now. She could put her hand up to the doorway lintel in perfect expectation of finding the key; she knew where to grope for the switch that lighted the little sitting room which opened directly upon the public hall. She knew where she would sleep, too; the couch was made up and the table set for three. She was expected; this was the right night; she would be welcome. But just the same it was not exactly heartening.

Mrs Latimer's shallow bedroom closet was not crowded. There was plenty of room for Gwen's coat, her evening dress, her best evening wrap. She hung them up carefully, went into the tiny kitchen to see if there was any obvious thing to be done toward dinner getting and, not finding any, returned to the living room. It was ten minutes after five o'clock. The evening paper, tightly twisted and curved, was at the door, and Gwen brought it in and sat reading it. She read about the opera, *Lohengrin*, and of the women of fashion who had taken boxes for the season, and of the dinner parties that would precede the opera, and gradually she began to feel excited again, her face flushed and her hands cold.

After a while, reflecting that Dick would of course want to dress and shave, and the bathroom would be in demand, she went in to brush and cream, scrubbing her hands, dampening her black hair to curve it into its most becoming waves, putting on the topaz earrings and the little chain of topazes and pearls. Then she belted her kimono trimly about her. She would not put on her dress until later.

The effect of all this, as seen in the somewhat discouraging mirror in Mrs Latimer's room, was so good that Gwen felt much encouraged. Of course she would not look like these girls whose names were listed in the paper, and the seats Dick had gotten were probably very poor ones in the topmost gallery, but she did look her best, and that thought, added to the singing delights of the phrase "Me, Gwen, actually at grand opera!" was enough.

She had just finished when Mrs Latimer came in, and Gwen dutifully helped her with her bundles. Liver and bacon and rolls and a can of hominy and three jelly doughnuts, large and spongy and plentifully sugared, were rapidly prepared for dinner. Gwen set the table, and they talked of Dick as they worked. The girl could not hear enough of him.

"It seems a shame that you aren't going to the opera, too, Mrs Latimer. I know Dick would have——"

"Oh, my dear, I get all the music I want on the radio!" Dick's mother said. "It'd simply finish me to think that I had to get into my good clothes when I'm as tired as I am tonight. Besides, I'm on duty tonight. We always have to have one woman on the linen room at night in case of emergency. So I'm going back right after supper."

"I saw Dick's evening things hanging up in the bathroom."

"Yes, I had 'em pressed for him! I gave those to Dick on his eighteenth birthday, and he's worn 'em to fraternity dinners and things like that ever since. He's hard on his clothes, too; always was. When he wasn't more than four he had to have shoes about every ten weeks, and that went right on until he was buying his own shoes."

"Has he made up his mind about Edinburgh?"

"Why, I don't know as there's anything to decide. He's not apt to get a chance like that again. Some of the boys met me in the hall the other day, and you'd think it was the moon they were offering Dick. If he's going to specialize on spines, and I s'pose he is, this is just the one thing he'll have to have."

Gwen felt a little chill. Dick had not told his mother anything of his agonies at parting with his girl. Perhaps men did not feel them as girls did.

"When would he go?"

"He ought to go right away. The letter said the sooner the better."

Gwen poured hot water into the teapot to warm it. She had forgotten about the opera. She crouched at the oven door to watch the toast, suddenly subdued, thinking that three years was a long time. And she couldn't go! She couldn't go!

The door slammed and Dick came in, tired and chilled, in his rumpled hospital white. A stethoscope was in his pocket; he smelled of iodoform and carbolic. He kissed his mother, put his dark head down for a moment on the slight little woman's shoulder.

"God, I am tired!" he muttered, and looking up, smiled at Gwen. "I'm sorry," he said immediately, "I can't take you tonight. Isn't it hell? Filmore wants me, and I've got to stay. I tried to get Mitchell to take it; he can't, and we're shorthanded anyway."

Gwen felt her pulses stop. No opera! She couldn't for a moment face the bitter blow of it, although she did her best, and managed a strained smile and a husky, "Oh, that's all right!"

"No, it's rotten!" Dick said wearily, at the table now, waiting for his dinner. "Coffee ready, Mom? I think I'll have mine now. It's rotten," he repeated briefly, "but there's no help for it. I'll put you on the car that goes within a block of the door. Damn, what luck!"

"Oh, I'll not go, Dick!"

He was evidently too tired and too despondent to argue. His shadowed eyes met hers. Gwen looked at him for a moment and then said gently:

"I'll go, of course, if you'd like me to. And tomorrow I'll tell you all about it."

She was rewarded by his grateful look.

"I wish you would," he said. "As far as I'm concerned, I don't mind missing the music. I don't know anything about Wagner. But I hoped that we'd have some fun."

"I believe it's very heavy and slow and nothing ever happens," Gwen said cheerfully. "Have you ever heard this opera, Mrs Latimer?"

“Good gracious, no!” Dick’s mother said in hasty disclaimer. “I went to *The Chocolate Soldier* once with Dick’s father, and it was real good. But that’s the only time I ever went, and I don’t believe that was grand opera.”

“I’ll get a great thrill out of it whatever it is,” Gwen said, determining not to be disappointed. “What will I do with the extra ticket, Dick?”

“Give it to some kid who’s standing around.”

“I’ll give it to some old woman,” Gwen decided. “Or I could go to the box office and get my money back for it, couldn’t I?”

“Lord, I’d like to be going,” Dick said, eyes on her glowing face. “I hate to have you go alone!”

When they had finished dinner she disappeared into the bedroom, returning in a few minutes dressed in white, with silver sequins flashing at her belt and outlining the square-cut throat of her gown. Over her arm she carried a veteran evening wrap of blue brocade and white fur, and in her hand were new gloves.

“Well, if you don’t look pretty!” Dick’s mother exclaimed involuntarily.

“You’re beautiful,” Dick said as they walked to the streetcar. “I never saw you look this way!”

The compliment, rare from him, gave her confidence, and she was pleasantly conscious that the other persons in the car knew at once that the young lady was opera-bound. Gwen loved riding along in the bright lights, looking out from the windows at the streets that were teeming with late shoppers on Saturday night, and trying to get her bearings and estimate just how much time she would have to wait before the curtain rose.

The short two blocks she had to walk to the civic auditorium were a part of the general charm of the evening, for the sidewalks were filled with men in evening dress and bareheaded women beautifully gowned, in elaborate wraps, hurrying along toward the great lighted doorways. Cars were pouring along the street, taxis honking, and when she finally reached the wide, shallow steps she found awnings out and a staff of police watching the ingoing throngs. There was a great foyer milling with laughing and murmuring folk; Gwen watched for a moment, looking about for someone to whom to give her extra ticket, and found herself facing Van Bellamy. His face was radiant.

“Here you are! And how wonderful you look. My darling,” he said, adding the last two words under his breath. “Tell me, where are your seats?”

“I’m alone,” she said, conscious of his devouring happy gaze as she hurriedly explained the situation.

“Latimer couldn’t come!” His face looked as if he could not believe it.

“It’s a long story. An accident, and emergency work. No. He had to be there.”

“And you’re—you’re—— But then—my dear, my dear, I can’t believe this at all!” he said, stammering. “Let me see them.”

He took her tickets, looked at them, glanced about.

“Wait here just a minute. It’s early,” he said. He was gone, and Gwen, glad to have met a friend among all these strangers, and well amused by what was going on about her, watched him only long enough to see him draw aside a man who was at the ticket gate and engage him in earnest conversation. They both looked at the tickets and then went away together, and she waited. It would have been much more fun to be with Dick, of course. But Van was much better than nobody, and he had made quite an impression on her in his evening attire, erect and well groomed, the overtones of gray on his sleekly brushed hair, the carnation at his buttonhole, the accustomed easy manner in which he carried gloves, overcoat, opera hat all making him a figure of real distinction even in this distinguished company. And what was even more valuable here, he was evidently entirely at home.

A bell trilled and the groups began to move toward the different stairways and doors; Gwen was just beginning to entertain a faint misgiving, when Van reappeared, looking pleased, and gripped her firmly under the elbow.

“Come with me,” he said, steering her through the crowd. Gwen allowed herself to be guided, hardly believing her senses when she realized that they were not mounting stairs, that they were going through an archway and up a short flight of steps to a sort of low balcony roped off into open boxes. “These are the general director’s seats, and it seems they weren’t wanted tonight,” Van said.

There were a man and woman in a comfortable space that had seats for eight. They sat unobtrusively in the background. Van put Gwen in a front chair and sat immediately behind her, leaving two front seats vacant. But nobody came to fill them, and the lights fanned down, and a hush came over the house, and a hush like terror over Gwen’s spirit.

The violins, which had been softly whining, were still; there was the crisp tap-tap of the conductor's baton, and the enchantment began.

In the wide semicircle of packed seats these were at the extreme left, and so nearest the stage. She could look down on the heads of the players in the orchestra. She saw the curtain tremble, saw it gather into thick folds and rise upon a scene of splendor. Consciousness of her own being was swept away from her; she knew no longer where she was nor who was her companion. Great spaces seemed to be opening all about her, and through these spaces echoed and re-echoed the most magical music known to man. And as the chords were woven and interwoven and the themes were braided into a stronger and stronger strand, and Elsa, standing alone and unbefriended, began her appeal, Gwen's cheeks were wet, and she leaned forward, her lips parted, her breath coming swift and shallow, her hands knotted together until if she could have felt anything it would have been pain.

When the act ended she was exhausted. Her hands were wet and cold; she unashamedly dried her eyes and blew her nose. When Van turned toward her, she answered him with only a whispered monosyllable.

"We'll stay here," he said, "we don't have to walk around." And he began to talk of the operas: *The Ring* and its story, and of *Tristan and Isolde*. Gwen's cheeks dried and her heart stopped its hammer beat, but she was still shaken, and grateful to him for his easy talk. And she was impressed, too, by his knowledge of German opera; he had heard it in Europe, he told her.

"How did you happen to be in Europe?"

"My mother was a Frenchwoman, you know. She and my father were divorced when I was about eight, and I was with her for years. We lived in Paris; she took me to Germany once or twice. She was cracked about music."

"Are these seats terribly expensive?"

"Not to me," he said with a laugh. "I gave old McMasters your tickets—he said he could have sold five hundred more tonight!—and he gave me a card and told me to try the box office and, if it had nothing, to come back and he'd see what he could do."

"Imagine, in the director's seats!"

"And your first opera, is it?"

"Oh yes. And imagine beginning with *Lohengrin*! It ought to be done by easy stages."

She liked Van tonight. He was gentle and friendly, rather than too devoted, and everything he had to say of the opera, and of the great world to which the opera belonged—the world of singers and capital cities and diamonds and furs—was wonderful to her. She was still listening to him in absorbed attention when the lights went down again, and when he reached in the darkness for her hand she did not withdraw it, but sat with her shoulder almost touching his shoulder just behind her, and their fingers locked.

In the next entr'acte they walked about on stone floors that were crisped by hundreds of slippered feet, and Gwen, still dazed and almost speechless, laughed to see in the bar mirror how pale she was, and had a lemonade to quench her burning throat. She was transported to a mood and a region entirely unfamiliar; she had lost all her bearings; there was no world but the world of music and the miracle of the violins.

When it was all over they came out into the cool winter night that sparkled afresh after a sudden light rain, and Gwen said that if Van would only show her where the right car was she would be eternally grateful, because she was so turned around——

"I'm taking you home," he said with quiet authority. "You don't want a sandwich somewhere?"

"Oh no, Van, no! Thank you, but I'm all—all wrung out; I'm dying, I think. I couldn't bear it—lights and people. To hear it, to have heard it just beginning, you know, being hinted—the 'Wedding March,' I mean—to realize that——" She was standing still, under the awning, unconscious of time and place, her eyes stars. "To realize, Van, that one day it wasn't in the world, and the next day—simply, it *was*!" she said, breathless. The man laughed in pleasure at her excitement.

"That was a great performance," he said. "They were all in great form."

"Oh, a taxi?" Gwen said. She settled back in it contentedly. "This completes things, Van," she added. "This makes the whole evening simply perfection!"

"And shall you tell Dick you met me?"

Her eyes glinted as she turned them toward him in the dark.

"Oh, why not? Oh, I see," Gwen said, slowly. "Oh yes, I'll tell him, because I simply must," she decided, laughing; "I can't go in and pretend that I'm not—devastated, and I'll be sure to mention the box sooner or later. Everyone isn't as jealous as you are, Van!"

He had her hand again, tight in his own.

"I love you so much," he said. "You wonderful, wonderful woman. As long as I live I shall never forget leaning over your shoulder tonight, with your hair against my cheek, Gwen."

She made no answer. It was too bad, she thought, that he should feel so. Within her being there was no response, no sudden uplift of fear and joy, such as Dick's gruffest word had power to arouse in her. With Van she felt only immense embarrassment and reluctance and sympathy for his feeling. As soon as she and Dick had settled their plans he would know of it, she thought uncomfortably, and then he would find some other woman. Meanwhile—if only he wouldn't grow affectionate——

When they reached her corner she said something shyly about not being able to ask him to come up. Oh no, he said quickly, he wouldn't, in any case. Would Dick be there?

"Probably not. He sleeps at the hospital, you know, but on Sunday mornings he comes home and has breakfast with his mother, if he can."

"And when do I see you again, darling?"

"Soon." This was awkward, getting away. They were on the sidewalk when he put his arms about her and kissed her good night. Gwen said nothing more as she escaped into the odorous darkness of the apartment-house stairs. But when she had entered the Latimer living room she went to the window and looked down into the dark street with a sure presentiment of seeing him there. The taxi had gone away, but Van was standing in the shadow of the neighboring grocery window, looking up. He could not see her; she had been wary enough hardly to stir the curtain. Gwen turned away silently and went in to the narrow bedroom, where Dick's mother was already sleeping the sleep of the exhausted.

CHAPTER XIV

When Dick came in to breakfast the next morning, he found Gwen in her kimono again, eager to tell him of the opera. She had decided, not without some thought, that the simple truth would be her wisest course, but she saw his face darken as the recital went on, and altered it judiciously. Men were all as jealous as children, and jealousy was so tiresome!

"Changed the seats, did he?"

"Well, yes. He knew a man at the door; he said he was in a case once that this man brought about election returns or something. So he took your seats and sold them, and Van got others."

"Downstairs?"

"Oh yes. And Dick, it was wonderful! I never dreamed . . ." She was off with a good start upon the musical element of the evening now, but when he spoke it was still of Van.

"How'd he happen to be there?"

"He loves music. He plays the piano marvelously, you know."

They idled at the table; more coffee, more toast, more marmalade. Fog pressed softly at the kitchen window; the streets were quiet in the early morning. Now and then church bells rang. Gwen asked Dick if he had had a hard night.

"No, it was darned interesting!" He told them about it. Afterward Gwen helped in the kitchen, got herself completely dressed, came out to the little living room to find Dick deep in the morning papers.

"Now what?" she asked. "Must you go to the hospital this morning?"

"You haven't got a date?" he asked. For a moment Gwen was bewildered, then she laughed, suddenly understanding his mood.

"I've been *wondering* what was the matter with you! No, I haven't got a date. What shall we do?"

"It's kind of rotten weather," he said. "Cold."

"Let's walk, then. Where could we go and make a fire and cook hamburgers?"

She saw his face brighten, almost in spite of himself.

"Where could we get hamburgers?"

"They're right in the house here. Your mother got them for our lunch."

"Oh? Oh, let's see," Dick murmured, warming, letting the newspaper drop to the floor beside his chair. "I know what we could do—if I can get Ollie Briggs on the telephone——" he said. "Wait a minute!"

Ollie Briggs and his wife, it appeared, were going down to spend Sunday at Halfmoon Bay, fishing with friends. Ollie had offered Dick the trip down in the Briggses' car, but was not sure they could include Dick and Miss Washburton in the fishing trip. However, there were beautiful beaches all about Princeton; there were cliffs and rocks and pines, and just behind them were woods and hills. Dick, suddenly all enthusiasm, telephoned Ollie, who was on duty, most fortunately, until nine, and who promised to stop for Dick and Gwen if they could be ready in fifteen minutes.

Gwen flew for the hamburgers about which this whole plan had been so felicitously arranged, added a saucepan and some rolls, pepper, salt, matches, coffee and coffeepot. The kitchen was suddenly alive.

"I'm borrowing a dish towel, too, Mrs Latimer!"

"Borrow anything you want to."

"You wouldn't go with us, Mom?" Dick said.

"I would not. Mrs Lacey's going to bring her grandchildren over, and we're going out to the Park. I'm too old to eat half sand for my lunch and break my back sitting on the ground."

They laughed joyously as they raced through preparations, and were down on the foggy sidewalk in good time, Dick's disreputable little black suitcase doing good service, Gwen bundled into his oldest coat. He himself did not need a coat, but she might feel the winter air.

Dr Briggs, with a doe-eyed young wife, presently drove up. Gwen and Dick got into the back seat; in laughter and high spirits the party started on its way. They drove west and then south, south along the dramatically beautiful line of the coast, shown now between rifts of lifting fog, with the sunshine striking through in long timid lances, and the fresh smell of the ocean and the cliff grasses rising like incense about them. Gwen's heart sang with the singing sea; every wave, as it rolled in and poised itself in an emerald curve for a moment and broke in a creamy smother of foam,

seemed to be bringing to her heart some message of youth and happiness and the morning hour.

The Briggses left them at a long wide arc of sand, and Gwen and Dick tramped along it contentedly, looking for a place where they might hope to be alone, later on, when the Sunday picnickers arrived. They presently found a cranny in a cliff, with a strip of washed beach set between encroaching rocks, and here they settled themselves, half a mile away from the big beach, shut into a sun-flooded little ingle in the shore.

Gwen busied herself in housewifely fashion with luncheon preparations, steadying her coffeepot on a rock, opening packages from the delicacy shop, scraping sand smooth to hold the cups.

"But we forgot spoons, Dick!"

"We can use my knife."

"We can use little sticks."

"Gwen," the man said when they had occupied another hour with scrambling about on the rocks, investigating the life of the pools, watching the solemn tides brim slowly in and rush out with the long level drag unchanged through all the ages, "doesn't your mother mind our having days alone this way?"

"No," Gwen answered sedately. "She knows we like each other, of course, and that we have a good deal to talk over. It's time to light that fire, Dick," she added, in a matter-of-fact tone. "Mother's very practical," finished Gwen. "She knows we're—serious."

Kneeling on one knee, he slowly shook out the lighted match before it had touched the fire. She saw the look in his face change, his eyes soften. He got to his feet, and they stood facing each other with the ballooning fog and the curving sea gulls and the great ocean for a background to their two young figures.

"Do you mean what you said, Gwen?" Dick asked, his big hands on her shoulders. She locked her hands about his neck, trying to laugh.

"Do—do you want me to?"

"Do I want you to!"

"You never said so." The wind was blowing her dark curls, her slender young body straight into his arms; their cheeks were together.

“Because I—because I——Oh, my God!” Dick whispered. And for a moment the whole world, to Gwen, was only a man’s kiss. When she emerged breathless from his embrace, and could hold him at arm’s length, she was laughing triumphantly.

“You knew it all the time, since that first Sunday!” she reproached him. “The Sunday we went to the Arcades!”

“Know it? I never dared dream it! I didn’t—— But, Gwen,” he interrupted himself, his mood chilled, “I can’t go to Scotland now!”

“Ah yes, you can. That’s just it. You must. All the more.”

“But we can’t wait four years! We can’t wait one.”

“We’ll have to, Dick.”

“I can’t. I won’t. I’ll get a job running an elevator.” She was tight in his arms again, her hair tumbled, her breath stopped.

“It won’t be four years, Dick. We’ll find a way before that. It may not be two! And what’s two years? Nothing! I’ll come over to the bonny banks,” Gwen said, laughing, “and greet ye wi’ a skir’rl o’ the pipes. I’ll aye find ye a wee hoosie——”

“Gwen, you’re so wonderful, you’re so wonderful!” he was saying, laughing shakily, breathing like a man who has been running. “Sit down here, let’s talk! We’re engaged, do you get that? We’re engaged! My God, and only yesterday I was worrying because I couldn’t get you better seats for the opera, and take you in a taxi. Engaged, hey? What do you know about that!”

“It’s a mere detail,” she said, “but you haven’t said yet that you love me. I brought this subject up, remember.”

“Oh, Lord, do I love you! Wait until we’ve been married twenty years and I’ll tell you I love you!”

“You never would have asked me, I suppose?”

“I didn’t dare! I’ve been going around for weeks—months—wondering how I could. I couldn’t even give you the right kind of an engagement ring. I can’t now. But by George——”

“Dick, darling, don’t worry about a ring. Worry about having enough warm clothes for Scotland. Worry about getting there. Will it cost you a lot?”

“No, they send me fifty pounds. I can do it swell on that. I’ll go tourist, or third, I don’t care! Gwen, I don’t care about anything now, so long as you’ll wait for me. And you’ll be proud of me, you’ll see! Lord, won’t I work! And I’ll save, too. I’ll save——”

“I’m proud of you now. Why, Dick,” Gwen said, “when I saw how miserable you’ve been making yourself, and how worried you were about the whole thing, I just had to tell you that I’m as much married to you now as I will be three years from now. Poor or rich, successful or failure, you’re just my fate. I’ll cook for you in two little rooms in the Mission, or I’ll be the wife of the great spine specialist, I don’t care! We could always afford to do this, you know. Find a beach somewhere, and cook our lunch.”

“I adore you!” Dick said in a low tone. Another voice had said that in her hearing, and not so long before, but it had not reached her as this voice did. No other woman in the world had ever heard Dick Latimer say that. The phrase was new to him; he said it awkwardly. But every fiber of her being responded to it. Seated with her back braced against the smooth shoulder of a rock, Gwen put out her hand, and he flung himself down beside her and caught the hand to his lips. “My God, I adore you!” he said again, under his breath. “To wait for you for years, Gwen. It seems more than I can do! I want you so, my beautiful wife!”

“It won’t be so long. We’ll both be so busy. And before you know it, it’ll be ‘next year,’ and then ‘this year,’ and then I’ll be getting my clothes together!”

“I know. I know. I’ve not got much to offer you even with this Edinburgh thing, Gwen, but without it I’d have nothing. I’ve got to take it.”

“And this isn’t like a ‘crush,’ Dick, just another ‘case.’ With us it’s marriage—it’s a life job. We’re going to have a little apartment somewhere, and maybe a first baby, and you’re coming home tired, and we’re going to discuss money and plans. And then it’ll be easier, and we’ll move to bigger quarters——”

“It’ll be heaven!” he said gruffly, as she paused, in a voice almost ashamed of its own emotion.

“Those three years will be nothing. We’ll still be young. The glory—the glory, Dick,” Gwen said, “is that we’ve found each other. In spite of my being buried in Kenthill, and you being a slave to those clinics, we’ve actually found each other.”

“To the end of my life you’ll be the only woman for me, Gwen.”

“And to the end of my life I’ll love you. I know it,” Gwen said, “the way you know things. It’s my destiny. I’m going to be Mrs Latimer to the end of the chapter!”

“Mrs Latimer, *God*!” he said under his breath.

“Are you happy, Dick?”

“I’m so happy I’m goofy. I don’t know what I’m doing! I think I’ve been eating hashish or something! Gwen,” he returned the question bluntly, laughing nervously, his dark face close to her own, “are you happy?”

“Utterly, gloriously, completely happy. I’ve found what I wanted. A man who’s too good for me, too smart, going to be too great! A man whose socks I want to darn and whose house I want to run——”

His mouth against hers stopped her.

“Dick,” she said after a moment, shaking herself free and getting to her feet, “you scare me! Happiness like this is enough to scare anyone. Let’s have lunch. Are you hungry?”

“I suppose I oughtn’t to be. People in love are supposed to toy with food, aren’t they? I’m starving!”

“I could eat a dead horse,” Gwen said simply. They began, with many interruptions, to get the meal cooked and ready. The frying pan came forth; butter sizzled black under the red cakes of meat; the scent of coffee rose into the warm air.

“Was anyone else in the world as happy as this, ever?”

“Dick, I don’t think so. I didn’t know it could be like this.”

“The most wonderful girl God ever made,” Dick said, and there was a little silence.

“A new world,” the girl said after a while, as they ate their luncheon.

“A new world,” Dick echoed soberly. “And only yesterday,” he added, “I was wondering if you were going to marry that—that sap!”

“Van? Oh, Dick, no! He’s—he must be nearly forty, to begin with.”

“What happened to his first wife?”

“She died in an auto crash. The car rolled on her and she was burned to death. Horrible! She was a Kenthill girl, you know. Polly used to know her very well. He has a little girl who lives with her mother now. No, he’s really

nice," Gwen said judicially, on a great bite of hamburger and toasted bun, "but I wouldn't marry him. Not ever."

"He's in love with *you*, though."

"It sort of surprises me," Gwen said ingenuously. "I don't know how he got that way. He's so *violent* about it. Well," she presently added, opening a box of cocoanut cookies with an experienced thumb, "when he knows we're engaged that'll end *that*."

"Engaged, ha!" Dick exulted, sprawled in the bland winter sunshine with his dark head resting on the surface of a rock and his hat over his eyes.

"Cooky, Dick?"

"Sure. We'll always remember this Sunday, won't we, Gwen?"

"Remember it! It starts our new life, Dick. It's the beginning of all our planning, our moving from this house to that house, our worries together and our fun together. It's so strange," Gwen mused, nibbling on a cooky, looking at it, and nibbling again, "it's so strange to think that from now on it's you and me. 'Doctor and Mrs Latimer,' 'The Latimers,' 'The Latimer children.' Funny how one day a thing isn't in existence, and the next it's part of the plan."

"Gwen, if it didn't have to be so long before we begin!"

"Oh well," she said reasonably, "I don't think that matters so much as having it *right*. It's easy enough to wait for things that are going to be perfect when they come."

He had rolled on his side and was looking at her. Now he stretched out his hand, and Gwen put her own hand into it.

"You're so—so darned wonderful, Gwen, that you make me ashamed," he said. "We'll both be busy, you know, and I'll be learning—Lord, if there's anything that gets away from me in these three years I don't know what it'll be!"

"I don't think it'll be three years. I think I'll come to Edinburgh and we'll be married there in less than two."

"I'd bet on it," he said. He took a paper and pen from his pocket, and they entered upon definite calculations. Rent, so much. Food, certainly not more than so much. Clothes—but they were both sure that they would not need clothes. Clothes lasted a long time. And for a while they were alone in a little heaven of their own.

At three o'clock they walked to the bus, sandy, blinking, weary, but there was no fatigue in their bright eyes as they talked all the long way into town, and Gwen, with Dick's arm for the first time tight about her, felt as if she could never be tired or discouraged or doubtful again. There was a deep restfulness in the security of loving and being loved; she could not drink deep enough of it.

CHAPTER XV

THREE weeks later, with his little wistful mother beside her, she saw him off on the train from Oakland for his great adventure. It was three o'clock in a bleak January afternoon; the city looked cold and dirty, and whitecaps followed the ferryboat across the bay. Dick was wearing his old overcoat, his old hat, but there were plenty of new socks, a present from his mother in his bulging old suitcase, and the gloves he wore had been Gwen's parting present made that day.

He kissed both women soberly when they were with him in the tourist car, clung tightly for a moment to Gwen.

"Write me, won't you?"

"I've written you already, darling. There'll be a letter there."

"You're a lucky boy to get a girl like Gwen, Dick," the mother said, grateful for the devotion that had outreached even her own.

"I love you," Dick said in a whisper. For a minute Gwen was afraid that she was going to cry; her face twitched, and a horrible, bitter dryness caught at her throat.

"This'll be funny someday," she said a little unsteadily. Then she and Dick's mother had to leave the train, and they stood on the platform looking up at Dick's window until it pulled away into the east that was already darkening into shadows and night.

Gwen had come to town on this occasion with the family car. It was parked on the Embarcadero in San Francisco. The two women went back to it together, and Gwen drove her future mother-in-law to the big hospital that seemed deserted and unimportant and changed now with Dick's figure, in rumpled starched white, gone from it.

"He's like his father," Mrs Latimer said, "he'll never look at another woman."

Gwen gulped.

"I hope he won't!" she said thickly.

Driving the hundred miles home alone in the early winter dusk, she encouraged herself with bracing thoughts, sometimes speaking them aloud.

“Three years. Thirty-six months. It comes out—let’s see, it comes out something round a thousand days. About eleven hundred days. What’s that? Nothing! I’m going to be so improved when Dick Latimer sees me again that his head’ll spin. I’m going to brush my hair one hundred times every morning and every night. That’ll take some of the bushiness off. I’m going to study the radio for educational programs and read history. I’ll begin on English for six months, and then—Portuguese, for Rio. And I’ll know something about Brazilian history. Everyone ought to. I’ll give up candy; it only makes my face feel hot. Candy and pastry. That’ll make me sort of mysterious and interesting. I wonder if I ought to study something about Rio? I know what I’ll do! I’ll study up on every one of those places Dick wanted to live in, Gloucester and Rio and Shanghai—what were they, anyway? I’ll think them all up, and then if we go there I’ll be all ready!”

The miles rolled by, and presently the days began to slip by, too, and she had her first note from Dick at Omaha, and another from Chicago. Then came a real letter, written on the boat, where his third-cabin quarters were very comfortable, he reported, and where every detail fascinated him. He had made a friend of the ship’s doctor, and this doctor, it appeared, had a brother doctor in the very hospital to which Dick was going, so everything had started auspiciously, and he was in good spirits.

Gwen on her part devoted herself to a conscientious improvement of her character and habits. The heroic regime she instituted of cold baths, long walks, refusal of sweets, casual introduction of history facts and sedulous study of Portuguese did not long escape the eyes of the family, but Gwen persisted despite their teasing, and wrote long exhilarated accounts of her doings to Dick.

“I’ve taken off eleven pounds to date,” she wrote him in one of her letters the following spring, “and yesterday I had the exquisite delight of hearing Mr Keane tell me I ought to put on some weight. But it isn’t all dieting, nor sitting up into the wee sma’ hours to write to you. Sheila’s here, and day before yesterday, at exactly six o’clock in the morning, my adored niece Fanny Washburton Baker (delicious name!) joined the party. Sheila, more beautiful and lovely and generally incomparable, came down ten days ago with Link; he went back but she stayed on, and night before last she got Mother and Dad up at about eleven and they went to the hospital, and I dressed and walked there about two hours later, and we others stayed downstairs, and Sheila put up a good fight, and was going strong when I peeked in at her at four, when Link arrived. He’d driven all the way at top

speed and was filthy and scared and tired and hungry and everything, so I took him out to an all-night coffee stand near the hospital and we had coffee and said that we weren't in the least anxious, everything was going so well, and then tried to walk away without paying, to the waiter's fury, and automatically got into the car and drove home, where nothing was going on and we hadn't intended to go at all.

"So we went back to the hospital and waited, and at six down came the nurse looking like the Angel Gabriel, with Fanny roaring with rage in a blanket. And if Mother didn't see Sheila within ten minutes! And Sheila said, 'Am I smart? Is she cute?' As for Link, she was so well they let him come and go as he liked.

"We're all insufferably puffed up about this little dark-haired woman. She's really—— But you should hear my father! He tells men downtown how Fanny made a face when they changed her bottle formula, as if the child had opened her mouth and recited the Ten Commandments!" . . .

"There's more good news, too," she said in another letter. "It seems Link is done at the mine, he won his case and he's not going back. He did such a wonderful job that he had to make a speech about it in Sacramento, and last week he repeated it in San Francisco, and now—*now*—but this is a secret, Marshall Hunter, who is chairman for his party in the state, wants Link to let him put up his name for the congressional nomination in his district and run at the primaries. Excitement? I ask you! It's lucky for me now that Van Bellamy broke with Linherr even if I did lose my extra salary, for I couldn't be working against Sheila's husband. Anyway they say Linherr hasn't a chance against Miller.

"Sheila and I have been to two meetings, and I want to tell you that politics are to me as the air I breathe. I love them! To have someone get up and say nice things about Link, and then to have Link talk, and be so simple and modest and clear, telling what ought to be done, and how it hasn't been done, and to have applause and maybe a big collection, with everyone writing pledges or digging down into pockets for money—I tell you it is thrilling! They say the other men—four of them!—won't have a prayer, so it's only the other party candidate that he'll have to fight, and that'll be the incumbent, old Miller, or Linherr. Link's been after Miller for years, and says he won't have a leg to stand on after the exposures of what's been going on. But it's going to be hot fighting, and it simply amazes me how quietly Link takes it, and what arguments he has all ready for them if he's heckled.

"You asked me about Van Bellamy. Well, I haven't seen him since early February, because after the scrap with Linherr he went to Hartford on a case, and then to Washington. They say he'll come back to help the party, which means he'll go over to Miller, which seems awful, but if he does he won't ask me to be his secretary and expect me to oppose my sister's husband! Yes, he's written me once or twice, and is as crazy as ever, evidently, but the campaign won't be here, it'll be in Sacramento, so I'll not have to see him.

"That reminds me," her letter rambled on, "of my pleasure and pride that you want to announce our engagement right away. I always imagined that it would be the other way, and I be the tearful betrayed girl whimpering for fair play. To have you afraid that you haven't got me tight and close and forever is diverting and unexpected. Mother doesn't want it announced until the date can be set, Dick; she says it's unlucky. But it has been steadily oozing out in the circle of my intimate friends, which is large, and nobody'll faint with utter amazement when at last we do tell everyone. And that reminds me that I'd like to hear more about Jessy McDevitt. I know these landlady's daughters! She may be thirty-four and have a face like a windblown waffle iron—I believe that was your pretty figure of speech!—but I don't trust a landlady's daughter. You are only human, and a little more cream in your cockaleekie or haggis or cairngorms, or whatever else you eat, might prove too strong a temptation to you!"

In August she wrote him exultantly: "Too much good news for one letter! Link won at the primaries hands down, which means that Sheila practically is a congressman's lady; Miller beat Linherr, and Link ought to get a landslide over Miller! Fanny is simply ravishing, and of all absurdities there is really a chance that I'll get not a few hundreds but possibly even a few thousands from my ridiculous uncle's patent. It seems that they've been actually using it at this big factory at the Johnson-Polk Mills, and unless they can produce evidence that they did actually buy it and pay for it, we actually—you'll gather that all this is 'actually' happening!—we'll have a claim that may go back years, and may amount to *money*. So then farewell to the mortgage, and a silver bowl for Fanny, and I'm off third cabin or eighth cabin to meet ye by the bonny, bonny banks themselves! Oh, Dick, is it because it's summer, and peaches and figs are in, and bathing suits all over the side porch, and I'm engaged to you, or is it really a pretty good sort of old world?" . . .

"Only nine hundred and seventy-five . . ." "Only nine hundred and sixteen . . ." "Only eight hundred and eighty-six of our eleven hundred days left!" her letters exulted. And in September she wrote: "Dearest Dick, don't

count on it. But there really seems to be a chance that the Johnson-Polk Mills people will offer—will have to offer—a really enormous sum for the rights of Uncle Elmer's asbestos thing. Link's corresponding with a lawyer there—Dick, it might be ten thousand dollars! Mortgage paid, a good sum left for Mom and Dad, and you and me on our way! Try not to think about it."

But she could not follow her own advice. She thought about it continually. Ten thousand dollars was not a great sum, as the world counted money. Men paid half that for a new car without thinking too much about it. And this ten thousand would mean her very life!

It would mean that glorious hour in the bank when the mortgage was taken out and read and destroyed. It would mean an argument: "I say I want to leave you and Dad four thousand, Mom, just in case of emergency!" it would mean a happy trip to San Francisco, to dazzle Dick's quiet mother with the news. It would mean shopping, perhaps with Sheila. "Ah, Gwen, get the velvet, dear. You can wear a black velvet to any sort of party!" and "I'll get my coat in Scotland. Scotch worsted. And I must get a present for Dick. But *what*?"

Then the tickets. "Only those who never have traveled can fully appreciate what tickets mean," Gwen mused. Section Seven, lower. And Cabin Two Twenty-six, Deck D. She went into the travel agency's office, dared to look at the deck design of a great liner, spread in a honeycomb of tiny apartments under a slab of glass. The rooms stamped in blue were second class; they looked entrancing! With the bath so near, and the little stairways so convenient, and the dining room quite as nice as the larger one downstairs. "Exactly the same food, madam; you'll find it a marvelous table!" said interested Mr Jones.

January, with their three years cut down to one, would be the month of her departure, if all went well, for almost every mail brought fresh news of Gwen's legacy. Link was talking now of a compromise based upon the profit that the Wallbestos patent had meant to the Johnson-Polk Mills all these years. It hadn't been so valuable a discovery as they had thought, but still it had been used, and there was no record whatsoever that Mr Sandy Johnson, the founder and proprietor of the mills, now some years dead, had ever followed up his offer to the late Mr Elmer Wall with any definite understanding with the party of the second part. Mr Johnson's son-in-law, Mr Chilion McTague, was anxious to take the matter up at once with the board of directors, and was confident that a settlement entirely satisfactory to Mr Wall's heirs could be reached.

“Fortune favors the brave, Dick,” Gwen wrote him in October. “Keep an eye out for a suitable apartment, furnished of course, for we don’t want to have to burden ourselves with a lot of belongings. Find something if you can like all the stories: a bedroom, a dressing room—does one hope for a bath?—a sitting room in which my doctor can have a green lamp and a coke fire. I insist on a fireplace with rods in it for my tea kettle. We’ll have tea and scones every day. What are scones? On your holidays we’ll go fish in burns and on wet nights we’ll read him. I’ll wear my new tweed coat the day we go to sail on the Tweed. Everything to match! I insist on a landlady who will call me ‘Mem.’ Oh, Dick, Dick, to walk the streets of Edinburgh with you, my darling! To bring home a little occasional prawn or a seedcake for supper! To know that all the time those wonderful square hands of yours are getting cleverer and cleverer, and readier to lessen all the pains of all the backbones of all the world!”

“I think I’m going away after Christmas, Madge,” said Gwen to her companion in the office.

“Where?” said Madge, delighted in advance at anything that sounded like news on a dull rainy day.

“Scotland. To marry Doctor Latimer.”

“I knew you were, but not so soon,” Madge said. “Won’t you hate it?”

“Hate it?”

“It sounds to me like a lot of gloomy old castles. However, it won’t be forever, will it? You’ll come back to California. Everyone does.”

Gwen laughed with sheer delight.

“It sounds to me like heaven,” she said. “My brother-in-law, Link Baker, you know, has been following up this patent thing of poor old Uncle Elmer’s. And it seems I have a sort of claim. Link says they’re inclined to be very generous about it, they don’t want a lawsuit and neither do I. But it comes to real money. And money is just what Dick and I haven’t got most of. We counted on three years, and it’ll be just about one!”

“What’ll I do without you?” Madge wondered ruefully. “Well, anyway, our dear friend Van will stop telephoning,” she consoled herself. “He got back when? Anyway, he’s been calling all today and yesterday.”

“Idiot! Wasting money telephoning here from Sacramento!”

“I’d be scared to have that man in love with me,” Madge said.

“Why scared?”

“He’s so wild. Telephoning, and special-delivery letters, and messages—there’s a note for you here.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Don’t you ever read ’em?” Madge demanded with an admiring chuckle.

“They all say the same thing,” Gwen said. She tossed the letter aside. “It may mean he’s in town,” she added, after a minute, “and I may have to dodge him.”

Madge began to type briskly; Gwen opened the note.

She read it, and felt her throat muscles stiffen and her mouth fill with salt water. After a moment she read it again.

“My own beautiful darling,” Van had written. “I find myself in town, will be here until the six-o’clock tonight—and must see you. Miller’s outfit sent me here and I need your help. We’ve got to stop Baker. J. G. Baker, who’s running against Miller, and I’ve got an idea I can stop him—through his wife. Is he anything to your sister’s husband, Link Baker? Do you know him? We haven’t much time now and we’ve got to work fast. I’ll be waiting for you downstairs at five. All my heart, my dearest.”

“Wake up,” Madge said, “Bellamy’s telephoning again!”

Gwen reached for her own receiver: spoke to the operator outside.

“Put that call on here, May,” she said.

CHAPTER XVI

MADGE was studying her curiously.

"I thought you didn't like him?" she exclaimed.

"Mr Bellamy? Well, I—no, I don't," Gwen said. She tore his note into a thousand tiny scraps; kept tearing them smaller and smaller.

"Then what'd you make a date with him for?" Madge demanded.

"Well, I—I—he keeps at it so—and I thought I'd——" Gwen began. "There's no use putting him off," she said weakly.

"Gwen Washburton, in love with one man, you're not going to fool around with another!"

"No, I'm not fooling around with him. I'm . . . Oh, my God, could he know about Sheila, could he know about Sheila!" Gwen thought. "I'm going to tell him I'm engaged," she said aloud.

"Well, you don't have to take him home to dinner with you to tell him that!"

"No, but I—I don't know that he'll come home with me to dinner. . . . He wants to 'stop Baker,' " Gwen's thoughts milled about in a frenzy of terror. "He can't! The election's Tuesday and this is Friday! How could he ——"

"Gwen, you're scared of him. I think you're an awful fool!" Madge said.

"No, but when people persist this way! And after all, we were working together—until he went East."

"When'd he get back? Seems to me this has all started up in an awful hurry."

"He got back Wednesday. I know, because his mother-in-law,—you know, his wife's mother—telephoned me and said she and the little girl were going to Sacramento to meet him. He must have wired her and asked her to let me know."

"His wife's dead, you told me that."

"Oh, years ago."

“You didn’t go to Sacramento to meet him, did you?”

“Of course I didn’t. I see myself! I thought he was going to be away all winter. Now he’s back, and the Miller outfit have apparently gotten him in for the finish of the campaign.”

“That doesn’t make sense. He was working against Miller, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, but he quarreled with Linherr. And it’s the party now. He’s for Miller now.”

“How d’you know?”

“He said so, in that note.”

“Well, he certainly doesn’t think you’re going to get into it against your own brother-in-law?”

“I don’t suppose so.” Gwen spoke vaguely, her eyes absent.

“Come back to earth, Gwen. Why don’t you tell him he hasn’t a prayer against Link? It’s true. That Miller crowd is all washed up. And tell him you’re engaged and that I’m an emergency ward case over his telephoning. Link’s talking here tomorrow, isn’t he? Tell him to go to one of those meetings. That’d fix him.”

“Yes, Link’s in Oakland tonight, and here tomorrow——” Gwen was deep in thought. Link. She’d have to see him. No, she couldn’t. Sheila—Sheila—but she couldn’t tell Sheila——

“Sheila with him?” Madge was asking.

“These last days, yes.” Gwen’s voice sounded strange to her; like the voice of another woman.

“He’s got a cinch,” Madge opined. “He doesn’t have to worry!”

“I don’t see how Miller can stop him.” Gwen spoke slowly, frowning a little. “Electioneering is horrible!” she added, in sudden weariness. “I hate it!”

“I’ve always hated it. I told you so long ago,” Madge answered in satisfaction.

It was deadly quiet in the office on this cold dark afternoon; there was nothing to do. But young Art Keane liked to come in at about five o’clock, flushed from a late luncheon and stimulating talk with his friends, and dictate unnecessary letters. The girls were supposed to wait for him.

“I hope Art is having a nice lunch,” Madge said on a yawn. “Well, anyway, the rain is washing our windows for us!”

“Why don’t you go home, Madge? It’s almost five.”

“Oh, I might as well stay. You go.”

“I’m meeting Mr Bellamy downstairs about quarter past.”

“More fool you! What do you do it for?”

“Oh, well——” Gwen was so frightened that she had to swallow with a dry throat. “I might as well,” she said lamely.

“I think I’ll go. My mother’s reading a paper to the prison-reform women tonight,” Madge said, doubling over to pull on her rubbers. “My father and I’ll have scrambled eggs and go to a flicker. I’ll bet they have better meals in the prison than we do since Ma got started reforming everyone! Thanks, Gwen, I’ll do as much for you someday!”

She closed the door. After that it was quiet in the office. Gwen sat without moving in the dimly lighted, dingy place, staring at the wall.

It was half an hour later that she went down to find Van waiting in the lower hallway. The iron stairways smelled drearily of the wet day; the floors were tracked from muddy shoes.

“Van,” she said unsmilingly. She raised heavy eyes to his; put out her hand.

He looked ill, haggard and tired, but he was dressed with his usual care, his gloves, his rain-spattered gray hat and gray raincoat correct in every detail.

“My dear, I’ve been home since Wednesday—this is Friday. I’ve been telephoning——” he began, in a faint dry voice. “You didn’t answer—there wasn’t a note——”

“Van, you’re not well!” the girl said, forgetting her own fear and distress at the sight of his.

“I’m well now, I’m seeing you. More beautiful—more wonderful than ever!” he said hoarsely, gripping her arm, guiding her toward the street. “Where can we go? I must talk to you!”

Faint rain struck at them through the darkness that was spiked with street lights here and there.

“We can’t go home,” Gwen frowned, her tone lifeless, dull. “We can go to the Lotus Bowl, right round the corner here. You’re catching a train?”

“No. Yes, of course I am! Gwen, it’s all right now. To see you and hear you! That’s all I need. Don’t ever be unkind to me again, will you? You didn’t write—all these months——”

“Please——” she entreated him in an undertone. They were in the deserted little tearoom now; a stout girl, coming toward them from the room behind the shop, snapped up an occasional table light as she came.

“Hello, Gwen, awful weather!” she said.

“Hello, Beet. Mr Bellamy—you know Mr Bellamy, Miss Wilcox? Mr Bellamy has to catch a train, Beatrice, and we want some tea.”

“You want orange pekoe,” Beatrice surmised.

“Anything! And toast? Anything.”

“Will she ever get away?” Van muttered. “You wouldn’t come and meet me!” he said immediately.

“I couldn’t.”

“I’d been counting on it, all the way across the continent. No message, no letter! I’ve tried to forget you, God knows I’ve tried! I even tried to kill myself, Gwen. I meant to! But I didn’t have the courage——”

“All that’s nonsense, Van,” she said wearily, as he paused. “I’m not going to talk about it. You know that I’m engaged to Doctor Latimer. I’m going to Scotland this year——”

“You are not!” he said hoarsely. “I’ll not let you!”

Gwen said nothing. She narrowed her eyes and looked away into space. The mere mention of Dick’s name had made her want him with a longing that was like pain. Edinburgh, and Dick, and the snug little shabby apartment with the coal fire and the outdated bathroom, the hissing tea kettle and the toasted oaten loaf——!

“Van,” she said, forcing the words, terrified at their import as she spoke them, “what do you mean about Link Baker?”

He brought his attention to the changed subject reluctantly, scowling, indifferent.

“All I meant about him was that he might be something to the Baker that’s running against Miller,” he said. “I came down to see Keane about

him, but he's not here."

"What could you possibly have against Baker?"

"Nothing against him. But I think I can persuade his wife to get him to drop out."

Dusk in the tearoom, broken by the little pink table lamps here and there. Rain tickling against the dark street windows. Odors of toast and hot butter and tea.

"Drop out? Now?" she managed to say. "With the election next Tuesday?"

"He's got a good offer from a San Francisco firm. He should worry! He could say his wife didn't like Washington—couldn't live in Washington."

"And you'd help put Miller in? The man you were fighting at the primaries?"

"It's the party," he said. "I'd have preferred Linherr. Linherr didn't get it. But I'm still for the party."

"You know the kind of crook Miller is!"

"Miller's not necessarily a crook. Politics are a pretty dirty business, Gwen. Miller's done some scaly things, but he's a decent enough fellow in lots of ways. This man Baker has got the election in his pocket, they tell me, and they called me in—this was yesterday. Well, it so happens that I've got something on Baker's wife. It may be no use. Or it may be that she'll get her husband to reconsider his candidacy. It's a chance. I don't know him, I don't know anything about him. But I know that a Kenthill man, Lamont, rented a little apartment in Sacramento about eight years ago, and that she was his girl. My mother owned the apartment; he left a few books there when he gave it up, and this note was in one of the books. I returned the books and I kept the note. Now from something else they told me I think the girl who wrote it married Baker."

"It was signed?" Gwen's voice was a shadow; her lips were white.

"Nope, but it was on Library paper—she worked in the Library."

"Who told you this!" The words were like so many explosives.

"Nobody. That is, nobody knows about the note. But while they were talking I suddenly put the whole thing together. I knew your sister had married a Lincoln Baker; I thought she might know something about it.

Don’t look that way, Gwen,” Van broke off to say. “This is politics. I only got into this yesterday, it’s just a matter of business to me.”

Gwen was staring at him, her face colorless.

“You knew James Gunther Baker’s wife is my sister Sheila?” the girl whispered at length. She saw from the amazed horror in his eyes that he had not known. And for a long time they sat looking at each other without speaking.

CHAPTER XVII

AFTER a while Van said, stammering:

"Of course I didn't know that. There are so many Bakers. You—you've always called him 'Link.' "

"Because Sheila told him the first time she met him that he looked like Lincoln. He's really James Gunther Baker."

Another silence. Then Gwen said in a whisper:

"They want to keep Link out, do they?"

"They say they have to."

"And they would do that to do it?"

"They would do anything to do it."

"They've thought, I suppose, about proving a—a filthy lie like that?"

"Is it a lie?"

"Of course it's a lie!" The ghost that had haunted her for months, a short year and a half ago, was risen again. Her thoughts were saying: "Sheila, Sheila, Sheila!" in the familiar, heartsick old way. Her world rocked. Sheila, and little Fanny, and Link—all of them, their security, their happiness, crashing to earth——!

"If it is a lie," Van said, watching her narrowly, his nostrils whitened, "then they can go no further with it, naturally!"

"Link would smash your face in, or anyone's face in, who only suggested it!"

"He would ask her first to deny it, I suppose?"

Gwen narrowed her eyes, looked into space.

"Blackmail," she said in a whisper.

"Not blackmail at all. Nobody knows anything of this but me. We were having a general talk, yesterday, and one of the fellows said that Baker had married a stunning Kenthill girl who had worked in the Sacramento Library. So I went out to my mother's property later on and asked a few questions,

nobody remembered much, everyone remembered something. Later, when I was back with the boys again, I said that possibly I could persuade Mr Baker to accept an offer from a San Francisco firm of lawyers, as more—more profitable in the long run. I didn't say why. I knew that the average man wouldn't allow any—any investigation that might involve his wife in this sort of thing."

"My God!" Gwen said under her breath. Her thoughts raced about; trapped. She had sometimes imagined frightening complications in connection with the revelation Sheila had made to her at the time of Sheila's marriage; she could never have dreamed anything like this! This was no figment of her brain; she was awake, here in the tearoom, and this man was tearing to pieces the whole fabric of her life. "You would take it to Link and threaten him with exposure?" she said, with a dry mouth.

"Not threaten. He knows—Baker's a politician, and he knows exactly how much money his opponents have put into this campaign, what the election is worth to them. They've had it all their own way while Miller's been in. They're not gentlemen, Gwen; they're not going to balance delicate values in this thing. Anything that will stop Baker means hundreds of thousands to them."

"But to you——" she said, swallowing, her hands cold. "You. You're different! You wouldn't—you *couldn't* do a thing like that!"

"I meant to see his wife. If she chose to tell him that would be her affair."

"Sheila."

"I didn't know it was your sister!"

"No; but now you do know! Now—surely now—you'll do this for me, Van? You'll deny that evidence? It may not be of any value at all. It may be that it wouldn't *be* evidence!"

"It's the letter of a woman desperately, passionately in love. A woman who says: 'I never lived until I belonged to you! It means I'm yours. It means that without robbing anyone we've given each other the last proof of love and faith.' "

Gwen had shut her eyes as, remembering them one by one, he slowly said the words.

"It isn't signed?"

"It's signed just with an 'S' drawn in a heart."

“That isn’t proof!” But even as she spoke she knew that it would be proof. Sheila’s handwriting, the unmistakable sharp letters! Sheila not being able to deny it.

“An election is an important thing to these fellows, Gwen. Their whole future depends upon who goes to Washington.”

“They are a crowd of crooks, Van.”

“No; not crooks. Manipulators.”

“Link despises them. He’s shown them up. He’s honestly beaten them. Van, you wouldn’t let them win, after all? You wouldn’t hurt him so horribly, and ruin her life! Van,” Gwen asked, leaning forward so that the candle lighted blue lights in her eyes and touched her dark hair with an aureole, “you could stop this right here if you wanted to, couldn’t you? Think—*think* what it means to us all—to me!”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’m confused. Gwen, if I had had any idea ____”

“No one else knows of it?”

“Not that I know of—no. It was years ago. It’s only by the merest chance that I happened to know it. It might have been destroyed a thousand times. My mother’s dead; I don’t know who else would remember!”

“So you could stop it?” she pursued eagerly.

“Yes, I could stop it, Gwen.”

“Ah, Van, you will, then? For me. You’ve always said that you cared for me, that my happiness was important to you. Will you give me that note, and go back and tell Miller’s crowd that you were mistaken—that you haven’t any pressure to put on Link, or that it wasn’t the right pressure?”

He looked at her for a long minute of silence.

“I throw my clients down,” he observed, dryly.

“This once!”

“You say they aren’t square-shooters, Gwen. This would be a pretty low trick on them.”

“Not to blackmail a woman who never did anything against you, or hurt anyone else in her whole life?”

“She did hurt someone, of course. He was married.”

Gwen was silent for a moment.

“She was twenty,” she said then, in a troubled voice.

“I know. Good God!” Van said, impatient and ashamed, “do you think I like the whole thing? If I do this for you, go back to them and tell them I can’t do anything about it, will you marry me?” he asked flatly.

The girl’s eyes dilated; she stared at him in astonishment that was almost amusement.

“I’m engaged. I’ve promised to marry Dick Latimer. How could I possibly—— No, I couldn’t do that.”

“Not for your sister?”

Gwen could hardly find her voice; her mouth was dry. She was in deadly earnest now.

“Well—you couldn’t—nobody could ask that,” she stammered. “I—I —— No girl could marry one man, loving another!”

“I’d make you the happiest woman in the world.”

“No, you mustn’t talk like that. You mustn’t think like that. That’s—out. That would only mean misery to us both. It wouldn’t work. You know it wouldn’t work!” she said quickly.

“It’s a chance to save your sister. Marry me, Gwen, immediately, now, and we can forget the whole thing. Baker will be elected—he can’t lose, as things are now. Your sister will be safe. The note will be burned and no one will ever know anything of this.”

“If you knew it, someone else may! It—it brings it all back. She was so young; younger than I am now! She did love him, and we—we don’t know anything more than that. It was a crush—a girl’s crush on her office boss ——”

Her voice faltered; she stopped speaking. It did not matter, after all, that the world would never know of Sheila’s long-ago affair. What did matter was that Link would turn to her and ask her if the story were true. Gwen knew Sheila. She would make no attempt at denial. And something fine and secure and proud would die out of her soul that day. It was as Sheila herself had said on the morning of her wedding day: to some women that episode would be unimportant. But she was one of the finer ones, upon whose lives it must leave an eternal scar.

“Remember that, Gwen,” Van was saying eagerly, as a lawyer sums up a case, “I stand ready to destroy that note, to be as loyal to your sister as you can possibly be, from the moment you promise to marry me. When you’re thinking about it, think of that. The whole thing can be wiped out—forgotten—if you’ll make that decision. You see, I can’t live without you,” he said, leaning toward her, his eyes burning. “I know what I can do for you. I know that I can make you the happiest woman in the world! You’re half engaged to Dick Latimer. He’s a fine boy, but how soon do you think he’ll be able to support a wife? Not for years. Not for at least five years. You’re mine.

“I didn’t know until now,” he went on in a quieter tone, “that I had this—this argument to offer you. Gwen, I’m on fire—I’m on *fire* with hope that you’ll do this for your sister and her husband and the baby and us all! It means happiness for everyone—my darling, it means happiness for you, too. Can’t you see that?”

Gwen spoke slowly, absently, as if she had hardly heard him:

“I’m thinking what I must do. Sheila gets home late tonight; I’ll not talk to her tonight. But tomorrow—tomorrow’s Saturday, and I’ll be home all day because Mr Keane and Art are going after ducks. I’ll talk to Sheila tomorrow—she’ll know what to do. And then I’ll—I’ll write you. If your political feeling is all on that side, and you have this chance to put Link out of the running, perhaps it isn’t fair to ask you to be generous to her, not to do the thing that would wreck her life. I don’t know! But for the last time, Van, I ask you to do that.”

“And I ask you to marry me. My life is over if you say no. I’ve been close to ending it all, Gwen. I’ve got you under my skin, in my blood, I think of you night and day. If I’m to have mercy on you, why can’t you have mercy on me! I beg you. I put my whole life’s security and happiness into your hands.”

“I put mine into yours!” she countered passionately. “How can a woman who loves one man marry another? How can I write Dick—— But no, it’s not possible!”

Van was on his feet.

“I have to go to my train,” he said. “Shall I get a taxi and send you home? I think the rain has held up for a minute.”

“No, no. It’s only a few blocks!”

“I’m coming down again on Sunday, Gwen. Shall I see you?”

"I'll be at home."

"And you'll decide by then?"

"There's nothing to decide, Van. I'll have to tell her, and see what she will do. She'll go straight to Link, and he'll—I suppose he'll withdraw. My God!" Gwen said, under her breath. "And of course, after this," she said nervously, when they were on the sidewalk, "we needn't ever see each other again, you and I. I liked you—I thought you were—— But it doesn't matter now."

"All's fair in love and war," the man reminded her. "This is both. If you'll be kind to me, I'll make you forget this. I'll blot it out with a thousand kindnesses to you; yes, and to everyone you love, too! Years from now you'll say to me: 'You did it only because you loved me so deeply.' "

Gwen turned from him and walked away past the lighted shop windows and across the wet streets, and said no word of good-by. She went home in a dazed dream of pain and fear, and throughout the evening of familiar kitchen activities had to rouse herself to answer her father, to realize what he was saying and what she was doing.

Fanny had her bottle, stared at her aunt and at the nursery lights with round eyes that were just like Link's. Honest eyes, even in a baby of a few months. Poor Link, he would be generous about the thunderbolt so close to him, be kind about it, tell Sheila that he would be just as happy in the San Francisco law-office job, remind her that she would be nearer her mother and sister. The Miller crowd triumphant; they and their corruption swept into office and power. Four days left before election; no time now to put up another candidate.

For however easily she might once have dismissed what Sheila had done as nobody's business but Sheila's and not within Link's rights of either inquiry or pronouncement, Gwen knew the matter was no longer a personal thing, to either herself or Sheila. She could visualize the devastating headlines, the newspaper references to that "love nest" of nearly nine years ago. It never would come to that, of course, Link couldn't let it, but they had it in their power to threaten that, and Sheila was therefore condemned to see all his political hopes blasted, and blasted by the train to which her hand had set the match.

Gwen did not sleep that night. She heard Sheila and Link creep in at about one o'clock; heard Sheila tiptoe to her mother's room for the baby, heard her crooning low voice as she settled Fanny afresh in the crib. There

were exchanged chuckles between the young parents, a low murmur of contented voices; then the bar of light that had lain across the pear-tree leaves vanished and the whole house was still. But there was no sleep for Gwen.

The next morning Sheila came down to breakfast as fresh as a rose. Late hours and long trips did not tire her, stimulated as she was by the most potent of vintages: a share in the pre-election excitements of the candidate who is sure of success. Sheila had drunk deep of enthusiastic meetings, of the honest admiration as well as the flattery of Link's supporters; with gardenias pinned to her shoulder she had been hurried through cheering crowds to her place beside Link on platforms; had sat proudly listening to him as he made dinner speeches; had known herself in all the various bureaus and headquarters outside of which the great "Baker for Congress" banners blew so gaily, an admired and watched and even envied figure.

She and he had lunched hastily in big hotels, had been met by delegations, had been drawn into a very delight of intimacy in this new intimacy of interest between them; she had glowed with his glory, and he had wanted her near him in everything.

"Link's forty fathoms deep asleep," said Sheila this morning, "and I think I'll let him sleep. We have to be in Sacramento for lunch tomorrow and two meetings, one in the afternoon and one in the evening, but we won't start until about ten. You and Peter are going!"

"Ten!" Gwen's thoughts ran. "If I go I'll miss Van again. Unless," she went on wretchedly, "he sees the posters of Link's meeting and decides to stay and see me there. . . . I'm asked?" she added aloud. "I wasn't sure."

"Gwen, you've *got* to go! You'll be back for the office Monday even if we decide to stay overnight, because we'll come back early Monday anyway," Sheila was saying. "I want you to hear Link when he gets started. He's simply magnificent. In San José the other day it was a debate, and it seemed to me that the Miller man simply made every point that could be made—I was sick over it. And then Link got up, and so quietly, almost as if he was amused, he broke it all down, point after point, with everyone interrupting him to applaud, and one crazy man yelling that he was bought and paid for and being put out, and more applause than ever—it was simply thrilling! You *can* go tomorrow, can't you?"

"Sure," Gwen said, swallowing. . . . "I can wire Van," she thought. She dreaded seeing him; she dared not evade him.

“You look tired, darling. You weren’t working last night? Was my baby bad?”

“Fanny’s always an angel. No, I didn’t sleep awfully well,” Gwen admitted, tears suddenly in her eyes. She looked down to hide them, took a sip of hot coffee. “It was so stuffy, and I had a blue letter from Dick,” she complained. “How do you really think it’s going?” she asked, changing the subject deliberately.

“Well, of course we see only the one side,” Sheila said, eager to talk campaign, and observing nothing amiss. “But I honestly do think that Link’s as safe as a church. And as he was saying—something like Gwen’s Dick in Edinburgh—it gives a man real prestige to have been sent to Washington.”

“Don’t you fool yourself; they’re grooming him for governor,” Peter observed, dribbling syrup artistically upon a plate of hot cakes.

“Mother, come in and sit down,” said Gwen. “Nobody wants any more!”

“I’ve just got batter for about three more,” Mrs Washburton said, looking in through a blue haze of frying from the kitchen.

“I’ll eat ’em, Aunt Fanny,” said Kip.

“Kip darling,” Sheila said, looking through the voluminous papers for political reports, “you’ll burst with a rumbling detonation.”

Gwen could not eat. But her white night had developed several new thoughts and hopes in the situation. She had hoped that perhaps—perhaps there was just a possibility that Sheila had long ago told Link that years earlier she and Anthony Lamont had loved each other, had had a few mad, blind weeks of happiness, had very soon come to their senses and put it all from them as a childish dream—a childish weakness and mistake. That wouldn’t save Link’s political career, but it might save Sheila’s pride at least. But full answer to this question and full destruction of this hope came when she found herself in idle conversation with Link and Sheila later in the day.

“This is a great wife of mine,” Link said, studying the picture Sheila made as she sat in afternoon sunshine under the dooryard oaks, with Fanny scrambling on a spread rug at her feet. “Is she lending me a hand in this campaign! I’ll say she is! Everywhere we go it’s the ‘lovely Mrs Baker,’ and ‘the candidate’s beautiful wife,’ and flowers for Sheila, and her picture in the papers! Listen, wife, were you always like this? Was she a particularly nice little girl, Mrs Washburton?”

“Sheila was always an angel,” her mother said with conviction. “I’ll never forget her one day when she was about twelve years old. She had on a white dotted swiss——”

“I’m enjoying this conversation and I perfectly remember the white swiss,” said Sheila.

“Well, you were always a good-looking child, Sheila, but that day—it was a hot day, and a Sunday, and we had a lot of the folks here, Betsy and Polly and Nelson and I don’t know how many uncles and aunts—and you were standing against that wall where the La Neige rose—that great big heavy white rose, Link—was blooming, and I declare I thought someone ought to paint you, with your hair shining in the sun. And I don’t know that you’ve ever done anything from that day to this that wasn’t as right as it could be!”

“I’ve never done anything right!” Sheila said, laughing and stooping to steer the rolling Fanny back onto the rug.

“She’s never done a thing in her life that wasn’t entirely worthy of that little girl among white roses,” Link said. “Sheila, what was the lowest thing you ever did in your life?”

“Listen, this has got to stop somewhere!” Sheila protested, still laughing. Gwen glanced at her, against her desperate determination not to glance at her. Sheila was amused, a little embarrassed, not in the least self-conscious or alarmed. This was just Link, talking in his extravagant adoring way, and Mother going on as she always had about her eldest! Sheila’s beautiful face was flushed with pleasure as she lifted the baby to her cheek; Gwen saw with stupefaction that there was no back-turning thought there to disturb her complete joy in living, and living as Link’s wife and Fanny’s mother. “What did I do?” she asked. “Well, I left an open window with the rain coming right in on Fanny when she wasn’t a month old, didn’t I, Fanny?”

“You’ve always been the finest woman God ever made,” Link said quietly. “Will I be proud of you if we go to Washington!”

“Link,” Gwen presently said, “what happens if a candidate, at the very last minute, withdraws?”

“Withdraws why?”

“Oh well, for any good reason. There must be reasons.”

“He could die,” Link conceded speculatively.

“He needn’t necessarily die. Suppose—suppose his mother was in China, and cabled for him, and he had to start right off?”

“In that case—in case of accident, he might have to leave, I suppose that may have happened. But that wouldn’t mean that he had to retire from office. He’d let the election take its course, and just skip the last meetings and the last speeches. He’d do anything else first, though!”

“Would it be considered such a serious thing, Link?”

“You bet your life it’d be serious. Elections cost an awful lot of money, these days,” Link said, with his attractive, homely face very thoughtful. “It would be a pretty low trick to let things run along until close up to election and then drop out. That would let the party down in a way that would hurt it for a long time. You see, it wouldn’t be merely a man declining to run. It’d mean that the whole campaign was thrown away; the effort they might have concentrated on another man would be wasted. As a matter of fact men have died right after taking office, and their successors haven’t adhered to their policies. But I don’t know,” Link mused aloud, “that I ever heard of a candidate resigning within a week of election.”

“Well, anyway, you won’t!” Sheila said joyfully.

“No, I won’t. I couldn’t even if the house burned up this afternoon, Sheila, with you and the baby in it.”

“Don’t *say* such things!” Mrs Washburton exclaimed.

“We’ll be careful,” Sheila promised.

“It’s bad enough,” her mother added, “to have Gwen talking of going to Scotland and you to Washington!”

“I’ll be left, Mater,” said Peter, “and maybe then somebody’ll bring me my breakfast out under the trees at eleven o’clock.”

This was in pointed reference to Sheila’s delight in spoiling her husband in this particular, and they all laughed.

“I was dead on my feet, I don’t know how I got through that Richmond speech,” Link said. “How Sheila keeps up is a mystery to me!”

“It stimulates me,” Sheila said. “Besides, you make the speeches and you do the driving, I don’t do anything but love it! Politics is my field. Politics *are* my field. Which is it, Link?”

“Either way, I should think. Lord,” Link said in a lazy voice, “this is pleasant!”

“Perfect,” Sheila said, and for a while they were all silent, in the still clear peace of the autumn afternoon, with the air thin and sweet and scented with grapes and prunes and the tar-weed fires from the railway crossing where they were clearing the meadows. Chickens were picking over a heap of cut sunflower stalks; the sky was high and pale. From surrounding backyards came sounds of Saturday activities; children shouted and kitchen doors banged, but here under the trees there was lazy peace and silence.

“You mean you couldn’t resign because you’ve done so much about the Miller muckraking, Link?” Gwen presently asked.

“Well, I’m identified with it; I started it, in a way. At least they asked me to see what was going on, and the deeper I went into it the more I uncovered. Just before Sheila and I were married I had the honor to have a gun fired at me,” Link said.

“It’ll probably be a machine gun after Tuesday,” Peter suggested. Gwen lost track of the desultory half-serious talk; she was watching Sheila. Sheila so beautiful in her faded cotton frock, and her hair tumbled up carelessly, and her eyes glowing with joy in her man and her child.

It was a gala time for the Washburton family. Gwen was probably going to make some money from her patent rights. Peter was definitely engaged to his plain nice Jane Willis. Dick Latimer was anxious to marry into the clan, and Sheila was home with a darling baby. Sheila’s husband, finally, appeared to be on the point of shedding glory upon everyone concerned. The Indian-summer weather was perfection; everyone was well.

“I declare I don’t know when I’ve seen your father in such spirits!” Mrs Washburton said.

CHAPTER XVIII

For all that long, happy Saturday Gwen saw the familiar scene as through a glass darkly. Everything was distorted; the more serenely beautiful the outward view, the more dreadful her knowledge of the cankerworm that was gnawing at the heart of it all. The autumn shadows that lay so graciously under the bared pear tree, the slant of westering sun, red and without warmth, that struck through the kitchen windows, the voices that called through the bare old rooms and the feet that went up and down the stairs all had a quality today of unreality and horror. She could not bear them.

Sheila went off with Link for a round of speeches: at a woman's-club meeting, for a three-o'clock radio engagement, for a final round-up dinner of the party's chiefs. Gwen heard her laughter ringing through the house before she went; heard her calling.

"Link, should I take my heavy coat? We'll not be very late!"

She came downstairs, looking lovely in an old brown velvet dress she had had before her marriage; her head bare, the lovely tawny hair brushed up into rings and waves.

"Gwen, you are such a darling to run that baby for me! I couldn't have any of this fun if you didn't do it."

"But Sheila, she's no trouble!"

"Oh, look here! I've had her days on end up at the mine, and I know exactly how little trouble a baby six months old is!"

"Well, anyway, Tryrena and Aunt Sis and Mother simply fight for her," Gwen said, at random, her heart beating fast. Should she—no, she couldn't tell Sheila! "Last night if Dad didn't come parading downstairs with her at about six——" she went on, hardly knowing what she said. "I'd sponged her off and given her her bottle and settled her down, but he said his granddaughter looked lonely to him, and she wasn't to be cut away from all human contacts! Of course she was in ecstasies, looking around and being perfectly angelic. . . . Oh, my God, if it was only really like this!" Gwen thought.

"But I do appreciate it!" Sheila kissed her sister, and for a second Gwen forgot the nightmare, and everything was as it should be, in one country-

town home out of millions of such homes, with an autumn day closing in cool and early, and the house scented with the smell of soup simmering and gingerbread baking for dinner.

Gwen went upstairs when Sheila had gone and took a look at the baby sound asleep, went on into her own room and began to put away the wash laid out on the bed. When the family was small Tryrena, with stalwart help from Mrs Washburton, did most of the washing, but with this big houseful everything was sent out except the baby's personal wear which her mother conscientiously hung in long white lines in the back yard every morning.

Shirts and socks for Peter.—The socks ought really to be looked over.—Towels. Napkins. Gwen went up and down stairs, glad to have something dull and distasteful to do.

"Gwen," her mother hissed from her doorway, "did Tryrena start the soup?"

"You can smell it all over the place, Mother."

Oh, if only this peaceful household were what it seemed! If only the worst annoyance of the afternoon were the odor of boiling turnips and onions! Oh, to feel safe and sure of anything again! Gwen sat by the sitting-room stove in the late afternoon, with little Fanny in her lap, and tried to think it all out.

Suppose she just put Van off until after election? No, she couldn't do that. He was much too smart; he'd see through that. It wouldn't be honest, anyway. Suppose she told Link? Was he strong enough, did he love Sheila enough to hide from her the fact that he knew—but what earthly good would that do? Link's knowing wouldn't alter the plans of the Miller forces.

Detestable, despicable, for a man to hold a threat like this over a woman! How much love and trust could she conceivably give Van if she married him under such circumstances! She had begged him to be merciful, and he had refused. Was any wife likely to forget that?

Well, and he had begged her to marry him, and she had refused, too. But that was different. What he proposed to do was cruel and low. She had merely been begging for her sister's happiness and honor. Gwen began to tremble again as she thought of the balance in which that happiness and honor were held now. They would stop Link by any means that came into their power, and Van Bellamy held those means in the palm of his hand. And he was unbalanced, nervous, passionate, the kind of man who could make

with a woman, even if he loved her, the bargain he had tried to make with Gwen last night.

That she was building this castle of fear largely in her own imagination; that she had never known of an instance in which the girlhood mistakes of a candidate's wife had been used as a weapon by the opposed party, did not occur to her. She only felt confusedly that Sheila's honor, Link's career, their married happiness were menaced, just how and to what degree she could not guess. But that was enough to fill her heart with apprehension and her mind with desperate courage.

Dark came and suppertime and Fanny was put to bed, and presently little Fanny's parents, flushed and jaded and triumphant after new successes, came home, and there was cribbage again in the parlor, and a crazy game of bridge, and still Gwen was no nearer to a solution to her problem.

But after wakeful hours, when she lay watching the autumn moonlight move in squares and angles across her bedroom floor, quite suddenly and simply she knew what she must do, and after that she slept.

Next morning, in Sunday quiet she and Peter started for Sacramento with Sheila and Link, an expedition that promised excitement all the way along. They were to lunch at a men's club, go on to two afternoon meetings, have rooms in the luxurious hotel on the park for rest and supper, and then attend the big mass meeting, when Link was to make his real speech. The day was soft and foggy, perfect for driving, and her companions were in such spirits that Gwen felt her own horror of oppression all the more. She would have been the gayest of them all if this Sunday might only have been what it seemed, she thought. She wondered already, with the dull amaze of the burdened in spirit, what it felt like to be happy and free from fear.

When after the afternoon round they reached the hotel, the experience had none of the delight that it might have had for her under other circumstances. They were given a beautiful suite of large rooms where various enthusiastic men were already gathered awaiting them; reporters were there, photographers, politicians. The governor came in, and Sheila and Gwen leaned out of the window to see the crowd in the street that was waiting on the mere chance of sharing the thrills of the occasion, and seeing "the candidate."

Presently, without announcement, Van Bellamy was one of the group. He knew some of the men; Gwen saw that there was no particular enthusiasm evinced at the sight of this representative of the enemy camp, and felt a chill in her soul. But Van was magnetic; he carried his own welcome. Just a few

casual words and a joke were enough to lessen the tension of the situation, and he lost no time in explaining that he was not after secrets; he wanted to speak to Mrs Baker's sister.

"You're going to have a tremendous crowd tonight, Mr Baker. The hall opens at half past seven and they're lining up already. Looks like a big night!" he said, cordially. Immediately he drew Gwen aside.

"It's after six now. Will you come to dinner with me?"

"I think Sheila and I are going to have tea upstairs. She's tired."

"It'd only be downstairs. I have to see you."

"You got my telegram saying we'd be here?"

"Yes, and thank you."

"If you'll wait," Gwen said after a moment, "I'll be down. I'll freshen up a little—there's no one in my room—we've got about six rooms here. Peter's going off with Link and a lot of men. Sheila and I begged off."

"I'll wait for you at the entrance to the dining room." Van went away, and Gwen went in to explain to Sheila.

"I'm going downstairs to have some supper with Mr Bellamy. Want me to order for you first?"

"Oh, Gwen, why? You don't like him, and he belongs to that Miller crowd that's saying such awful things about Link."

"Well, I think I ought to. He wants me to."

"Has he got some hold over you?" Sheila asked, really disturbed. "I don't see why you don't tell him you're engaged to someone else, and not interested."

"Well, I may. Tonight." Gwen brushed her hair and powdered her face. She thought of rouge; she was very pale. But Sheila, who had a delicate natural color, never used it, and Gwen had not often felt the need of it before.

"I look horrible," she apologized, meeting Van a few minutes later. "But I'm tired. I've not been sleeping very well—something new for me! And of course we've had a terrific day."

Van led her to a sheltered corner of the dining room; already a great many diners were busy with their meal; the town was full tonight for the mass meeting. From Davis and Marysville and Wheatland and Woodland

farmers and their wives had come down to taste the excitement of the city on the last day before election week.

Of all this Gwen was conscious with the bitter taste of despair blotting and changing it. It should all have been such fun! It was so frightening instead. She and Van had hardly seated themselves when her mind was carried to her own special affairs, and she became aware only of him: his voice, his eyes, his vibrant and dominating personality.

"You've thought this over, Gwen, and talked it over with your sister. What does she say?"

"No." Gwen paused, spoke slowly with an effort. "I didn't speak to Sheila about it. I couldn't."

"You didn't?"

"No. This is—my affair. She couldn't do anything. I can. And you can. You—*could*. I know—I've been thinking all day that you will."

"I've been hoping all day, Gwen. Hardly daring to hope——"

Her heavy eyes were raised to his.

"Suppose," she began, still speaking with the same difficulty and slowness, "suppose I said to you that I would marry you. What happiness could possibly come of that? If I didn't want to. If I loved another man—as I do. If I despised you."

"You wouldn't despise me. You'd find your real happiness in marrying me. You couldn't stay mad at me, Gwen."

"Mad!" She echoed the childish word with a despairing half-laugh.

"Marriage is different from what you think it is, Gwen," the man urged eagerly. "After a few months the real values begin to show themselves. You'd be secure. You'd have a position, an income. Marrying poverty, in a strange place, isn't what it sounds like! You've got to come down to common sense, sooner or later. You've got to see the realities. And then it may be too late to change a romantic dream for a solid, comfortable——"

"Don't talk like that!" she interrupted him in a sharp whisper.

"But look about you," he pursued, undiscouraged. "Look at the girls you know who have married poor men. See what they've let themselves in for. Small rooms and crying babies and smoky stoves and all the rest of it! How long does romance live under all that? Ah, they may go on loving each other," he interrupted himself quickly, as Gwen raised her head as if she

might speak; “they may have settled down into humdrum affection and companionship and all that. I’m not denying it! But think what they have to go through first! There isn’t much beauty left. It’s kitchen aprons and plumbers’ bills and children down all winter long with flu, and in ten years—in ten years,” Van repeated, “the woman looks at her husband and wonders, ‘Why did I do it?’ ”

“I don’t think that’s the question,” Gwen said coldly and wearily; “the question concerns—my sister. I can’t—I can’t let you do anything that will wreck her life. I can’t understand—I can’t *understand* your being willing to do it, or to consider it! It’s not—it’s not right that one human being should have such power over another. And you’re mistaken if you think I could ever forget or forgive it!”

“If you married me you would.”

“You don’t believe that yourself!”

“I do. Marriage is real, Gwen, and sensible people have to accept it as it is, make the best of it. They don’t go back to old grudges. They go ahead. And you’d go ahead to new happiness. You’d realize in a few months that all this we’re discussing now is moonshine, that the reality is you and me, and what we mean to each other.”

“Sheila’s whole life and Link’s aren’t moonshine. I wish I had the courage to call your bluff,” Gwen said. “You wouldn’t blackmail her. Why, the whole world despises blackmailers! You couldn’t ever hold up your head in the presence of decent people again. You’d never dare do it.”

“I’m not ruining her life, nor proposing to,” Van answered. “A man doesn’t have to be sent to Congress to live a successful life! Baker has a dozen chances for fame and fortune if he drops out now. They don’t call it blackmail in politics, Gwen. Why, there was an election some years ago in which one party promised not to stress the fact that a candidate had run off with his friend’s wife, if the other party kept still on the subject of their man’s illegitimacy. What do you call that? Well, they didn’t call it blackmail, they called it politics.

“I could go to your sister now,” he went on, as Gwen remained silent, staring fixedly at him, “and persuade her to get her husband to withdraw. It wouldn’t mean poverty for him, or anything for her except an attack of nerves. She could say it was not wanting to leave her mother, wanting to be in San Francisco. And then I could go to that room I’ve just left—they’re staging a Miller procession tonight, and they’re going to go past the hall

with a lot of ballyhoo while Baker's speaking. I could go back to that room, where those fellows have been smoking cigars all day, racking their brains to get something to stop this Baker landslide, and say to them, 'Gentlemen, just a word. I have every reason to believe that James G. Baker will withdraw his candidacy before this time tomorrow.'

"You don't know what that would mean to me. They've thrown me a lot of business, they're throwing me business all the time. I'd get so much that in a few years I wouldn't need them, I'd have built up all I wanted. I'd be the biggest political power in this state. After all, Gwen, there *was* an affair and there was a love nest; there's no getting away from that!"

"Hush!" she said. And then, after a pause: "What I've been thinking all day, what I've come down to say to you, is that I have to accept your terms whatever they are. I've no choice. If it wasn't my sister, it would be her baby, and if it wasn't for either of them it would be for Link, what he stands for, what he's done already."

There was a silence. Gwen did not look up. In the pause the headwaiter approached to ask anxiously if the chicken was satisfactory.

"You mean," Van asked in a whisper, after a long time, "that you will marry me?"

"I will do my very best, Van."

"You give me your word?"

"Oh yes. It's hard for me to think how I will do it, or if I can do it," Gwen said simply; "but if I can I will."

"You will marry me, Gwen?"

"If you want me to. But I want that letter and *every bit of evidence* you've got that incriminates my sister!" Gwen added the last phrase almost savagely.

"You make me the happiest man in the world, my darling," Van said; "don't look so sober about it! I'll make you happy, Gwen. In a few years, dearest, on our fourth or fifth anniversary, you'll laugh at all this. 'What was the fuss about?' you'll ask me. It won't seem at all the same. You're promising me, aren't you?" he broke off to ask anxiously. "You're solemnly promising me, Gwen?"

"I do solemnly promise. Yes."

"You won't change?"

“No. If I say I will, I will.” She was speaking lifelessly, looking away with a little frown as she spoke, as if her head ached.

“I know it. And it will be the object of my life to see that you are never sorry, Gwen!”

“There’s one thing,” she said, laying her unresponsive hand in the hand he stretched eagerly across the table. “There isn’t any other evidence, anything else like this note anywhere, is there?”

“I swear it.”

“This is all you know of?” she said, speaking always in a slow, thick voice, and frowning slightly, as if throat and head hurt her. “Nobody else knows anything?”

“Nobody. And you and I’ll be married next Wednesday, the day after election, Gwen. Promise!”

Her honest blue eyes, heavy with fatigue and despair, were raised to his.

“I promise,” she said, very low.

Instantly he took from his pocketbook a folded slip of paper. Gwen felt a sensation of weakness and sickness as she opened it and smoothed it on the table. Sheila’s handwriting, no mistake. For a moment she could not read it. The price of her life. The price of her happiness. The end to that dream of the Edinburgh rooms, the coke fire, the toasting muffins, and Dick putting the kettle on the hob. The end of love. Her youth, her young body, her dark hair and warm young arms all to be given to this other man. Gwen’s soul seemed to have escaped from the warm dining room, to be beating about, desperate and alone, in the darkness and the rain.

CHAPTER XIX

"READ it," Van said quietly. "I want you to know what it says."

"I'd rather not read it." Gwen's hand still rested on the letter. . . . "This must be a terrible dream," she thought. "I'm not here in this dining room on this horrible wet afternoon, promising to marry Van Bellamy! I'm asleep upstairs in my room——"

"Read it, and then you can destroy it," Van was saying. "And it will be as if it had never been! Turn it over and notice that it's on Public Library paper, Gwen."

"I see it is. You say, Van," Gwen recapitulated it, in a slow, puzzled fashion, "that your mother owned this apartment house, and that after Tony Lamont gave up his apartment, eight years ago, you found this letter in a book and kept it, and that only yesterday someone said something that made you think it might be Link's wife?"

"Baker's wife," he corrected, checking her story with nods as she went along.

"But you didn't know Baker's wife was Sheila."

"No; not until just now. I've been away since March."

"And only yesterday you put it all together? Is that really what happened, Van?"

"My dearest, truly, truly. My darling, you can wipe the whole thing out if you will. Don't look so distressed! Would I ask you to marry me, Gwen, if I didn't know I could make you happy?"

She looked at him steadily, her eyes ringed with shadow.

"Read that note," he said again.

Gwen looked down at it, her spirit sick within her. There was no mistaking Sheila's handwriting in the few lines that crossed the sheet of Library paper.

"Tony, it's tomorrow, and I'm not sorry," Sheila had written. "I never lived until I belonged to you! It means I'm yours. It means that without robbing anyone we've given each other the last proof of love and faith.

Whatever the law says, we belong to each other now in a far higher sense than was ever theirs to lessen or increase. Does that mean that I've gone a little crazy, Tony? Well, here I am putting myself way down in the corner for punishment, as ever and forever and all ways and always your S."

Gwen could not see the lines; she took in the meaning with blurred eyes and a fast-beating heart. Then she tore the fine paper to shreds, pushed them down into her plate, saw their lines run and blot. The letter was dead forever, but its significance was cut into her heart as acid cuts into a flawless sheet of pure metal, never to be erased.

"Gone!" she said, clearing her throat to pronounce the word, facing him with colorless cheeks and lips.

"You are a heroic woman, Gwen," he said. "You are mine now, and you are never going to be sorry."

She took her glass and poured water upon the torn papers in her plate, drove them to and fro with her fork until they were a gray pulp.

"You'll marry me, when?" the man asked. "Tomorrow?"

"Any time. After election. We'll—— There'll be too much going on at home before that. They'd—— I couldn't fool them."

"Wednesday, then. The sooner the better. You'll write your doctor friend in Scotland?"

"Yes, I'll write him. Not Wednesday, that's too soon! We can be married a week from Wednesday, maybe."

"You'll not fail me, Gwen?"

"Oh no. I'll keep my word. I feel so tired and so confused now that I hardly know what's going on," Gwen added, unwelcome tears suddenly biting at her eyelids and thickening her throat, "but I do hear my own voice saying this, Van, and I can keep my word. Anyone can do that. I don't know what I'll write Dick."

Saying his name brought him suddenly to her thoughts, and with that thought came again the dream of the little Edinburgh flat, the coke fire, the crumpets and periwinkles that a young doctor and his wife were going to share with their tea, the staring baby who would one day watch them and think them the most wonderful persons in all his little world.

A faintness of spirit like physical weakness came over her, and she rose unsteadily to her feet.

“I think I’ll go upstairs to Sheila. We’re staying here tonight, but we’re going back to Kenthill early in the morning, we start at six. So I won’t see you again. Next Sunday—I don’t know what we’re doing—but I’ll write. . . . No more long letters to Scotland,” she thought. “Just one note more, and a short one! Ah, Dick, my darling, my darling——!”

Van went with her to the elevator.

“Good night, my lovely wife!” he said. “In a few days I won’t have to say good night.”

She looked at him, pathetically quiet, receptive.

“I’ve always thought,” she said hesitantly, “that any woman could make a success of any marriage if she was determined to. But I don’t know. If things go wrong——”

“Things won’t go wrong!”

It was all like a dream. It was like a dream to go upstairs and find Sheila deep asleep with a smile like that of a sleeping child on her face, to think the fearful thoughts that Gwen was thinking and to know that Sheila right here on the adjoining bed had no faintest conception of them. Sheila would go on to Washington with Link, and everyone there would admire the beautiful Mrs Baker. And in a few months little dark-headed Fanny would have a fair-haired little brother with his mother’s wonderful eyes, and life would be like a never-ending story of friendships and delights. Link would never fail her; even now there was a steadiness, a simple gentleness and strength about him that would go into the years; husband, father, householder, public servant, Link would be equal to the claim of all his responsibilities. And Sheila, beside him, would lend them grace and sweetness.

Gwen felt dazed and tired. If her thoughts slipped away for a few seconds, it was only to return with a fresh sense of shock and incredulity. She couldn’t have promised to marry Van Bellamy! It couldn’t have been true that only an hour ago she had held in her hand the fatal note; that note whose existence had haunted her, had filled her soul with fear, since Friday night. It was destroyed now, forever, and everything she had hoped and planned in the months since Dick had gone away had been consumed with it. No tweed coat now to keep her snug and warm through the long storms of a Scotch winter! No little snuggery with a fire and a studying doctor! It was as if a part of her living heart had been cut away.

The next day, in the office, she found a letter from Dick. He had had her joyous confident letter; he could not believe that things might really be

coming their way, he wrote.

"Gwen, I've not let myself think how much I want you! Do you know what I do now? I go down to the railway station where your train will come in from London and walk about it and imagine that the time has come.

"I've looked at apartments," the letter went on. "One is quite nice, two pounds a week, and coal found. Not so bad? It's only two rooms, but we could use the attic, she says. The other is simply a pip, four rooms, one enormous, and looking out on such a nice street, and only one flight up, but she wants three pounds ten. However, I think I can get her to come down, for she's never rented before and hasn't a very firm idea about it. I liked her because she kept showing me things 'my wife' would like. Gwen, was anyone ever married before, feeling this way? It seems to me the old world would have split open with excitement if this is the usual thing. I look at the married doctors, men my age, at the hospital, and just wonder and wonder. You've made life a thing to wonder about."

She sat for a long time looking into space, the letter in her hands. After a while she began to answer; tore the pages up. She began again; again it would not do. After a while she wrote five lines, signed them "Gwen," and sent them off. She was conscious of wishing that he had them already; that they need not be so long upon their way.

After the election, Sheila and Link went away to Pebble Beach for a ten days' rest. They took the baby with them, with Tryrena's sister as nurse: Gwen was to go down and join them for a long week end. But she wired them on Friday that she could not make it, and when Sheila came back her first puzzled question was about Gwen. Why hadn't she come the first week end and why hadn't she come the second? Pebble Beach had been divinely beautiful, Fanny simply a little angel, and they had wanted Gwen to make it complete!

These queries were poured out in the first moments of reunion, but Sheila had hardly resigned Fanny to her mother's arms or loosened her coat before she perceived from her mother's manner and from the expression of the home group that something was wrong.

"What is it?" she demanded, looking in bewilderment from mother to father, from Pete to Aunt Sis. "How's Gwen?"

"She's out, she was here a few minutes ago," Mrs Washburton said. "She had to go downtown."

“Home at three o’clock in the afternoon? She’s sick!” Sheila exclaimed anxiously.

“No.” Mrs Washburton had obviously been crying. Now her eyes watered again. “Come sit down, Sheila, you must be dead. I never raced around the country this way before my children were born! No, she’s left the office,” she said. “She only told Dad and me at breakfast this morning. She’s going to be married to Mr Bellamy this afternoon.”

“She—*what*!” Sheila exclaimed in a sharp whisper. She was seated now by the sitting-room stove; Link had taken her hat and coat and flung them on the old square piano; Mrs Washburton, seated opposite, had little Fanny in her arms. Sheila’s eyes never left her mother’s.

“What about Dick Latimer?” Link asked in his kindly understanding voice, ending a long moment of dead silence.

“She’s written him that it’s all off,” Peter offered.

“I don’t know what’s got into her; it doesn’t seem like Gwen,” the elder Peter said. Sheila seemed incapable of speech.

“It was at breakfast,” Mrs Washburton added, “that she said very quietly to Dad and me that Mr Bellamy was in town and that she wanted to be married in the house at five o’clock and they would go afterward to Sacramento. He was here Sunday and the Sunday before, and Dad said once or twice that he didn’t like it much—a man that age paying attentions to our Gwen! But we never dreamed——! Seems she didn’t notify the office that she was leaving until last night. She’s had little Jo Hilton in there sort of getting used to things in case she was married in January, and she just turned everything over to Jo and said good-by to everyone without a word of warning. Mr Bellamy was here last night; he had dinner with us, and afterward he and Gwen went for a walk, and I suppose they arranged all the details then. Anyway, Doctor Stockbridge is coming here any time now, and I’ve telephoned a few of the family—I can’t get Henry or Polly, and the Pattersons don’t answer. It’s all so different from your lovely little wedding, dear——”

“But I don’t understand!” Sheila said in the first pause. Her eyes went in bewilderment from her brother’s face to her father’s. “It doesn’t seem like Gwen! She can’t—— Link, she oughtn’t to marry Van Bellamy!” she protested passionately.

“No, I don’t think she should,” Link agreed slowly. “He’s—oh, he’s all right, I suppose,” he conceded, “but he works for that gang of crooks, and

he's been mixed up in some pretty queer cases!"

"But Link, what can we *do*?" Gwen's mother demanded despairingly.

"Here's what she said at breakfast," Peter contributed. "She said that she'd made up her mind, and that if there was going to be any fuss she'd be married in Sacramento. But she said of course she'd like to be married at home, with Mother and Dad and you and all of us there. She said they had first decided to get married and tell us afterward, but that she thought this was the better way if we wouldn't rag her and try to talk her out of it."

"But—but she *couldn't*!" Sheila protested. "How does she seem? She can't love him! She told me herself how he bothered her. He's spoiled and he's selfish and he's jealous; she said so herself!"

"She's free, white, and twenty-one," Link reminded them soberly.

"She's been looking something awful," Peter said. "For about a week—well, I've never seen Gwen look the way she does! She cries all night, I guess, and then she plasters white powder all over her face to hide it, and it's the darnedest-looking thing you ever saw! This morning she was sick—she looked sick, anyway, and she said she hadn't slept well. When she told us she was going to be married we were all stunned, and it was Tryrena who spoke up and said, 'Well, I hope you-all's going to be the happiest woman in the world, you sure did get a handsome-looking man,' and Gwen burst out crying and jumped up and kissed Tryrena, and then of course we all said something—we said whatever we could——"

"Mother, how much money have we, all of us? How much money have you, Link?" Sheila suddenly demanded. "Let's send her off—let's ship her off to Scotland—now—tonight!"

"Darling, you can't do that," Link remonstrated; "you mustn't let yourself get so excited."

"It's the worst thing in the world for you," her mother added.

"There's no use arguing with Gwen," Peter said; "she's made up her mind. I don't know why she's doing it, and I'll be darned if I think *she* does, but you can't change her now!"

"He's bullied her into it," Sheila said, very white.

"Here they are!" Peter warned her. Immediately afterward Gwen, followed by Van, came in.

Gwen wore a blue suit that Sheila had not seen before and a blue hat that curved about her face like an old-fashioned poke bonnet. Both were infinitely becoming to the dark bang that almost touched her blue eyes and to the lines of her face, which Sheila thought looked thinner than she ever had seen it before. The eyes were set in rings of pallor now, and Gwen looked and seemed ill, but she was quite composed and welcomed her sister with a laugh that somehow managed to imitate its old ring of joy.

"Sheila! I thought we'd be back before you got here! And my darling, darling Fanny." Gwen went on her knees before the child, who gave a crow of delight at seeing her. "My sweetheart, you are more beautiful than ever!" her aunt said, a little unsteadily.

Van had meanwhile greeted the group easily without embarrassment, and now he said, "Speaking of beauty, it seems to me I am getting a very beautiful wife! They've told you our plans?"

"Sheila, do you like it?" Gwen said, standing to display her new clothes. "I got it in Sacramento; Mother and I went up on the train last Saturday, and Van drove us back after dinner. You didn't know then that it was a wedding dress, did you, Mother? Fanny, my heart, do you know that you are going to be at a wedding? Dad, I think that's Doctor Stockbridge who's just driving up; will you let him in? And someone tell Tryrena; I couldn't be married without Tryrena! Who else is coming, Mother? I'm going to dash upstairs to straighten my bonnet and shawl, and I'll be right down."

"I said 'four,' Gwen," her mother said patiently. "It isn't but twenty of."

"That's all right, we can talk. No party, Sheila. Van wanted to send champagne, but I thought it was silly."

"You hate me for taking the last daughter—for taking your sister away," Van said, sitting down, "but my apology is that anyone who sees Gwen, who knows her, couldn't help it! In marriage it's 'May the best man win,' isn't it?"

"As the best man, I hope so," Peter said, and they all laughed nervously and without mirth.

"You're to be married one of these days yourself, Peter?" the new member of the family asked.

"Not until June. I have to have forty-five dollars first," Peter said lugubriously.

A few relatives, all in a state of decently concealed amazement, were now arriving. Tryrena came in to murmur that it seemed as if there ought to be coffee for them at least; there was all them drop cookies, too. Mrs Washburton said nervously that she might make coffee, and immediately after the ceremony send Kip for cream. But Tryrena's daughter was in the kitchen; she would go for cream.

"There won't be mo'n sixteen or seventeen," Tryrena said. "I'll lay out some cups on the dining-room table."

Gwen came downstairs, looking the better for a little beautifying, pinning a line of creamy gardenias to the shoulder of the blue suit.

"Married in blue, faithful and true," she said cheerfully, not looking at anyone. She greeted the clergyman, glancing aside at Fanny as if the baby were in some sort of trouble. "Fanny, you mustn't cry at my wedding," she admonished her, covering her own feeling by drawing attention to the baby, very busy with Fanny's socks.

"She wasn't crying!" Betsy said. "She the bestest baby ever was and booful too!"

"Where shall we stand?" Gwen was managing everything as she always had. It was an easier task than usual today, for the others were all somewhat bewildered and did what they were told without suggestion. Van looked radiant. He had taken off his tweed overcoat and laid aside his gloves and cap; he stood very straight beside her, but Gwen was still a half-head taller. Fire crackled in the little stove; a winter wind mouthed softly about the windows and whined high up in the chimney, and a chicken went through the side yard with a desolate "caw-caw-caw." Gwen made her responses audibly, in a clear steady voice; Van's joy broke through as he promised to love and cherish her for all the days of his life, and Sheila, watching him, felt her unreasoning hate and distrust of him a little weakened. He did love Gwen passionately; that was what had won her, of course. And he wasn't an idler or a gambler or a drinker.

It was just, Sheila had to admit to herself honestly, that he had a cocksure manner that was disagreeable, and that he was on the opposite side in politics to Link. Those were not grave objections, and if he was a good husband to Gwen, and if she was established in a prosperous home with nice children as the years went by, they would all come to understand today's inexplicable performance.

The newly wedded pair remained only a few minutes after the ceremony. They had a long drive on a cold afternoon before them; they were going to Sacramento that night. Gwen buttoned an old topcoat over her wedding dress, kissed everyone without a sign of breaking, and promised Sheila that she and Van would be in Washington sometime in the following summer, and they would have a heavenly visit together.

"Aunt Sis, remember the address on Maple Street! And Mother dearest, Pete's going to drive you and Dad up to see me—to see us—on the very first day you can come!"

No rice today, no joyous bridesmaids in a spring doorway, no waving of lilac plumes and scent of bridal wreath! There had been frost, and the yard looked shabby and cold-bitten; the willow's drooping fringes were yellowed and dry; the foliage on the chrysanthemum stalks was slimy and black. Gwen got into the car that was parked in the yard, leaned back of Van to wave another good-by.

Then she was gone and the Washburtons went back into the house that had echoed to her laughter and her flying feet for all her twenty-three years; to the dining room where she had set the table thousands of times; to the kitchen where her figure seemed still to be moving about, her hands busy with the coffeepot or herself crouched on the floor to watch toast.

Meanwhile, through the quiet winter afternoon, Van and Gwen drove into a changed life in a changed world.

"You had something to eat, dear?" Van said after a while.

"I had—yes; I had a cup of coffee."

"Tell me that you're one-tenth as happy as I am, Gwen."

She smiled, with a tired face and white lips.

"I hope we're going to be happy, Van. There's no reason why we shouldn't be. I know you—I know you won't—hurry me, if I seem—oh, unenthusiastic, puzzled," Gwen said, searching for words, using them carefully, her throat thick.

"And you've forgotten your young doctor in Edinburgh?"

"If I haven't," she said, with the shadow of a smile, "this would be a good time to begin."

“I’m jealous of every thought of yours,” the man confessed. “You’re mine now, forever and forever. It even disturbed me to have you ask your father and mother to come see us! I want every minute!”

“But Van, they’ll surely want to come and see us!” She was roused out of her weary calm by sheer surprise.

“Yes, but not that casual way. *When* we ask them, and for the *time* we ask them. We don’t want people running in and out, Gwen. My darling, is this a dream, or are we truly married, and am I taking you to our own little home? A late supper will be ready there, Gwen, and a fire, and when you’ve rested, and come out in your wrapper and slippers to join me for that little supper, then I’ll believe you’re mine. It isn’t a dream, dear, it’s real.”

Her eyes met his with their faithful, honest smile. She did not speak aloud. But deep in her spirit she said: “No. It isn’t a dream.”

CHAPTER XX

For some months after her marriage Gwen Bellamy lived and moved and had her being in a state of numbness and bewilderment. She went gallantly through the outward form of everything demanded of her; she stifled all inner emotions resolutely. And when realization began and her normal feelings dared to return, they were softened by time and by the hundred considerations that common sense and her young, untried philosophy afforded.

Sometimes in the early days she would walk the streets of Sacramento for hours, wondering who she was and why she was here, and what had become of Gwen Washburton. Thoughts of her family and of Dick Latimer had receded into that past she had determined to ignore and had succeeded surprisingly in banishing to a world of vague dreams and unreal memories. Constantly she reminded herself that there was no hardship in her life to be classed with those endured by millions of women all over the world; there was much to make it pleasant. Yet the numb sense of bewilderment persisted.

Van's devotion, his almost violent determination to make her happy, could not be without fruit. She did have hours of happiness; hours when her old spirit flashed up and she laughed and made him laugh in some fortunate moment. These intervals, however, came only on his own terms; when Van was not in a happy mood nothing could change him, and Gwen swiftly learned to recognize the signs of bad weather and to efface herself as much as possible while it lasted.

They made several short honeymoon trips: to Eureka, to Stockton, to Reno, and Gwen enjoyed the long rides through new country and the stays at strange hotels. Van liked comfort and always ordered the best of everything; sometimes he would keep her waiting, weary and dirty, in a hotel lobby for twenty minutes while he inspected two or three different types of accommodation. More than once he descended, with an apologetic proprietor in attendance, to say briefly that nothing in this place would do; they must try elsewhere. If Gwen protested amiably, "Ah, Van, we're so tired! This place seems very nice," she risked his furious displeasure and a sulphurous silence that might last several hours. So she schooled herself to silence, which was after all no such burden, and presently conceded that the

other rooms were much nicer and that they both would have been wretched in the first hotel.

It mystified her sometimes that a man so genuinely attached to his wife, so passionately eager to please her, to make her presents, could go into periods of cold anger so easily, but then a great many things mystified Gwen now, and she accepted occasional dark hours passively and made the most of the endurable and even enjoyable ones. They had many a cozy little meal together with their car parked outside of some wayside tavern or country-town hotel; they went to movies together; they commented on the odd persons they met as Van carried his cases to rural courtrooms; they had their jokes together.

"You've picked a man who likes his own way, my dear!" Van would say in satisfaction, when some plan of hers was lightly discarded and one of his own substituted. He was sometimes very good company when he was sure of her complete compliance with his arrangements and would entertain her, as they drove along through mountains and orchards and villages, with stories of interesting cases and notorious criminals.

Then there was always his music to act upon her more analytical moods. He loved music; he was an exceptional performer himself, and he would always give up any other amusement to take her to a concert or even to a lecture about music. A new world opened to Gwen when Van spent contented evening after evening playing dreamily through Wagner's operas or Chopin's études, and when she saw him at the piano, intent, absorbed, happy, she saw a Van who almost seemed a stranger to the one she knew in the hours of ordinary living.

But all this did not lessen her sense of not being herself, of having been transported to a life where everything was unfamiliar and unnatural. Between her and her husband there was no basic sympathy of natures; what developed between them of companionship and congeniality was deliberately contributed at Gwen's expense. She knew that he never suspected it, but she was conscious of it from the very first hour of her married life. He conceded nothing; he was unaware of any necessity to concede anything. It was Gwen who made herself like what he liked to eat at the hour he liked it, made herself cultivate the men he felt valuable to his business, resigned herself to giving up other friendships and contacts. If he burst into disappointed exclamations upon seeing how she was dressed for some outing, she changed her dress. If, just before they left the house for some anticipated expedition, he complained of illness, begged her to stay home and "spoil her old man" just for once, with a quiet evening of milk and

toast and music, Gwen agreed. There was no peace otherwise, and to go out with him when he was in a silent rage of resentment was an experience she learned not to repeat if it could be avoided.

His attitude toward new friends, and toward her family in particular, was perhaps the most amazing lesson she had to learn as a wife. Van's deepest-rooted characteristic was jealousy. It was not jealousy alone of her charm or a desire that it should not be exerted on other men; it went deeper, and touched every interest and every moment of her life.

When first she proposed that her mother and father come to Sacramento for a visit, his attitude was one of fear. How long would they want to stay? Just for lunch? Not by any possibility for dinner?

Just before they arrived upon the long-discussed Sunday he discovered that Peter was driving them, and exhausted Gwen with one of the most violent exhibitions of temper she had ever seen in him. Why in the name of God, he shouted, hadn't she told him her doubly-qualified brother was coming? She had kept it from him! He had always said that if he had a wife who deceived him he would leave her! But her sister hadn't thought much of keeping poor Link Baker in the dark; it was a family characteristic evidently! The Washburtons were the sort of slack, slovenly family who put truth aside with a lot of other things that did not matter!

Gwen was stunned, sickened by the outburst. It was just noon on Sunday; Van had seen the little Chinese houseboy setting the table for five and had come storming in to know who was expected. She sat at her dressing table, her silky black hair in a cloud about her face, and went slowly on with the motions of the brush. He did not mean this, of course; he would be all right in a moment.

"You may as well know right now," Van said, "that you can't sneak your family in on me whenever you take the notion! I'm not going to be here today. You can have your precious family all to yourself!"

Well, that crisis had passed, as she was to learn many other crises would pass. He had indeed disappeared with a vicious slamming of doors, and Gwen had prepared herself to face the family with a serene explanation of his absence. She had planned to say that Van was so sorry; he had simply been obliged to go to San Leandro——

But in fifteen minutes he had been back, sulkily apologetic, willing, as he had said, to meet her overtures of peace halfway. If she was sorry, then he

was sorry; they must not fight; they loved each other too much. And at the family party he had been his most charming self.

Gwen, still shaken with fear and shock, had taken a few minutes longer to collect herself, had been a little pale, a little strained in manner, as she had welcomed her mother and father and Peter. But very soon she had risen to the occasion, too; the luncheon had been a great success as to food, and her mother had been charmed with Gwen's little apartment, and had taken in all its details of completion to describe in a letter to Sheila. The icebox; the garbage can with an ingenious little lever to permit Gwen to open it with her foot; the telephone with its ear and mouthpiece on one stem; the bridge lamp that lighted the sitting room with so soft a glow.

"Well, Gwen, you just have everything!" her mother had declared.

"Haven't I? The furniture was Van's; it was in storage for years, but he had it all polished up. This is a chifforobe, Mother, isn't it convenient? Peter ought to have one. And look: shelves for storage. I tell Van a woman must have planned some of this!"

"You look so well, dear!" her mother had said.

"I'm spoiled. We have a room over the garage, you see, and we let this nice little Chinese college boy use it, and he comes in about four and simply does everything. And I have him all day Sunday. So all I get is breakfast and my own lunch. And then we're away a lot. Van has to be in little towns, and we drive there—look, Mother, bathroom all tiled; all you do is wipe it off with a damp rag, floor and walls and everything!"

Peter and Van, meanwhile, had become engrossed in a political discussion, and Gwen's father had been slowly sipping a long drink with great approval. Gwen had begun to feel some of the pride and excitement of first entertaining, and the rest of the day had gone delightfully. But it had been with a sense of relief, an almost guilty sense of relief, that Gwen had seen her family depart at four o'clock for the long drive home. No question had arisen as to some joyous impromptu arrangement by which Peter and Van should go off to some hotel tonight, and Mother share her room and Dad be made comfortable on the couch in the parlor and they all have scrambled eggs and crackers and jam for dinner and have a long evening together.

No, there would never be any such slipshod hospitality in the Bellamy house. She had known better than to suggest it. She had been only too thankful that everything had been so pleasant, and as she and Van had put

their house in order after the family party she had praised him, to his intense delight, for being "so nice to Peter, when you hadn't expected him."

"Well, I don't know why I raised such a row when I heard he was coming. I like your brother, and I know he likes me. But I hate to have things sprung on me."

"But that wasn't sprung on you, Van. From the beginning it was arranged that Peter should drive them up——"

"I know, I know. And it was all fine, and I was proud of you! But you see, Gwen, I'm so crazy about you that I'm jealous of everyone. I hate to see you kiss your father! My sister never kissed my father in her life." Van had caught her in his arms as she had passed him, the carpet sweeper in her hands, and had kissed her fiercely. "Damn it, I love you!" he had said.

This jealousy of his affected every detail of their united lives. When a neighbor called to leave with the bride a message of welcome and an offering of spiced currants, Gwen heard Van's annoyed inhospitable voice at the door.

"Mrs Bellamy is busy. What is the name? Trumbull? You know my wife? Oh, you *don't* know my wife? Thank you."

Then the door was firmly and audibly closed and Van came into the kitchen, where Gwen up to this moment had been contentedly enough busy with her own special type of pot roast, and thumped the harmless jar of fruit forcibly on the table.

"Damn such an interfering busybody!"

"Didn't you ask her in, Van?"

"Ask her in! Why the hell should I ask her in? Spectacled old idiot!"

"She's that nice old lady who lives next door, Van. She meant to be kind! I'm afraid you've hurt her feelings."

"I don't care whether I've hurt her feelings or not. Do you love me? That's the important question."

At Christmas time he firmly refused to go to Kenthill for the family celebration. Gwen, who had taken it for granted he would go, and who had written her mother to that effect, was rendered fortunately speechless with surprise at this decision, and so avoided a display of disappointment.

"No, my dear, I won't do it. All very nice for you with your family making a fuss about you. 'Darling Gwen' and 'Gwen, precious.' What do I

get out of it? Nothing. You write your mother I'm on a case."

Gwen, stunned, began to frame what sentences she might to break this blow to her mother, and later discovered, somewhat to her chagrin, that her family accepted her regrets with equanimity. Her mother wrote back that since Peter was going to be with his girl's family in Piedmont anyway, she and Dad and Kip would just go over to Cousin Harry's; it would save a lot of fuss and bother, and Tryrena could have the day off.

"I'm sending Sheila a box," wrote Mrs Washburton. "Do you want your things to go in it, or will you send something separate?"

And this aroused Gwen to the consideration of Christmas gifts and the pleasant reflection that she really had a little money to spend on them, and she immediately made a list. Van showed the greatest interest in this list, and in deciding what each and every member of the clan should receive; Gwen pleased him by asking many questions about his daughter's activities and tastes, and by taking special pains with little June's gift.

She had never seen her stepdaughter. June lived with her mother's mother in a town twenty miles from Kenthill; she had been ill with whooping cough at about the time of her father's second marriage, and the grandmother had written that it seemed unwise to send her to Kenthill under the circumstances. Gwen asked if it would be possible to have her for Christmas.

"She's having Christmas vacation, Van, and she'd probably love being here. We could give her a good time."

But Van said no. If New Year's Day was clear, he and Gwen could bundle up and drive to Falls Hill and see June. They could take her her present then.

"Oh no, Van, the day to get things is Christmas Day! That makes a tremendous difference to a child."

"Well——" He was amused at her earnestness; she was making a surprising fuss over Christmas! But as the holiday neared and Gwen insisted upon a turkey and everything that went with it, and as she brought home evergreen wreaths and toyon berries, he warmed to the spirit of the hour and asked an associate lawyer and his wife to come and share their Christmas dinner.

The day turned out to be far happier than Gwen had ever dreamed her first Christmas away from home might be. It was a clear, glorious day with the sun shining; the distant mountains were mantled in white. A singing day

of frost and echoes, Christmas horns and motor horns, church bells, joyous voices. Gwen had never been a churchwoman, but she and Van walked to early service; she discovering, as one more surprise in this nature so filled with surprises and contradictions, that he liked to go to church occasionally.

When they came home her Chinese assistant was there, and Gwen went at once into those kitchen activities that are a part of Christmas. She tied up her hair, got into comfortable oriental pajamas, and went about the familiar business of stuffing the turkey and setting the table with a practiced hand. The house was well equipped with silver and china; it had all belonged to her predecessor once, but Gwen did not let that thought trouble her as she made her table look its prettiest.

Meanwhile Van was at the piano, and the music of Wagner's operas, *Die Meistersinger* and *Tannhäuser*, was pouring through the house.

"Oh, play some Christmas music!" she called. His answer provided the only cloud on the day. He turned to her savagely and reminded her that she knew nothing of music, and asked her for God's sake not to yell at him when he was playing. But a moment later he was absorbed and happy again, and Gwen, after a second's check, and the bitter swallowing of a dry lump in her throat, reflected that he did not mean to be rude, and went on with her preparations unruffled. He had touched her with not one but a dozen thoughtful gifts that morning; not expensive gifts, but all things she needed or was delighted to have, and she let that fact comfort her for the moment's ugliness. Her delicious new stockings—not one, but a dozen pairs; her charming clips with the green brilliants; her darling topaz ring; her white sweater; her two new books; her writing paper with its handsome "G.W.B." wound into a clever monogram of his own designing; her handkerchiefs. And a new salt shaker brave in green and white dots, and a bathroom shelf covered with striped blue-and-white oilcloth, and a chocolate Santa Claus. All these acted as soothing little hands upon her disturbed spirit, and when her guests arrived it was a happy, eager hostess and a proud host who received them.

Mrs Peters was three years older than Gwen, but an even newer bride. She had been feeling homesick and strange for three weeks; her husband told them at once that she had cried with pleasure at being asked to a "real home" for Christmas dinner, and they both thanked Gwen and Van so profusely that they were able to estimate what the invitation had meant to the lonely young couple. And here, with these guests of his own selecting, Van showed neither stiffness nor jealousy, but carried the whole affair easily in his own inimitable way. It was at his suggestion that the Peterses

remained with them for an informal supper which they preceded with a long walk through the cool winter streets of the city and followed by a bridge game that was mostly laughter and apologies.

"The happiest Christmas of my whole life," Van said, when the guests had gone and he and Gwen were getting ready for bed. "It's been a happy day for you, too, hasn't it, darling? Our being together at church there, praying, and our presents, and giving that nice little couple such a wonderful time? You've loved it, haven't you?"

"I really and truly have."

"And you love me?" he said jealously, coming to her dressing table to sit on the bench beside her, and tightening his arm about her softness and sweetness and youth.

"What do you think?" It was her usual answer, although she had come, as was inevitable, to love him, or rather love certain moods and phases of the strange complexity that was his nature. When he was proud of her, she was proud; when he was, as tonight, completely content, she was content.

And more unexpectedly, she trusted him. Van's code was not the usual code that influenced a man to be unselfish, controlled, reasonable in his married life as husband and householder. His jealousy overbalanced every other characteristic he possessed. It threw everything else out of key. And his business experience had been with shrewd and crafty rather than simple and honorable men.

But according to his own irregular standards he maintained a strict rule. He would not owe money. Gwen's bills must be held within the generous limit he set and paid on the third day of every month to the last nickel. Van personally saw their tradespeople and explained that his wife would not write her checks until the third of every month, so that all bills would surely be in. The dazed grocer and butcher could hardly understand the real meaning of his message and remained, to Gwen's amusement, suspicious and unresponsive.

Van would defend a dishonest client or base his defense upon a purely technical legal flaw, but only because he considered these practices honest. And Gwen was confident that when he told her that there was no other evidence in the world, as far as he knew, against Sheila, and promised her, as he solemnly did, that under no circumstances would he ever reveal to another soul what he knew of Sheila, he would keep his word.

They drove down to see June on a cold still New Year's Day, and Gwen sat beside the bed of a delicate, shy, asthmatic child and put her hand over June's and smiled at her. Afterward they drove on to Kenthill and had dinner and spent the night with Gwen's people. The next day they returned to Sacramento, and then life began to go on evenly and quietly, and Gwen wondered sometimes if she were asleep or awake, or if she were like the little old woman of the nursery rhyme. "Lawk-a-mercy on me, this can't be I!" she wrote to Sheila.

The easiest way to keep Van happy was to have everything just as he liked it and to do everything he suggested. This was the simplest way, too. If her dinner was ready when he came home and he offered to take her downtown to dinner and a movie, she accepted his invitation enthusiastically. After all, it was pleasant to go downtown to dinner and a movie with one's husband. If, when she was ready to start out, he remarked that he had always disliked that dress, she asked him amiably enough what dress he would like her to wear. When he told her that he despised some new acquaintance and thought the man was having the impudence to begin to admire her, she said indifferently that then they would make no effort to see him again. It was comparatively simple to keep the home atmosphere serene by these means, and serenity was Gwen's object in life.

She wrote Sheila often, and often to her mother. She went to the Public Library for books, walked home in the crisp winter weather, responded joyfully when Van came home to say that they had to drive to Gerber or Mission San José.

In March Peter came to Sacramento for two days and stayed with them. Gwen was glad to see him go. Van had taken it into his head to resent the fact that Gwen loved her brother, and he made both Gwen and Peter uncomfortable for the last twenty-four hours of Peter's stay.

"Now what are you mad at me about?" he asked her when Peter was gone, with a little accent on the first word.

"Nothing," Gwen said, tearing off the couch sheets, folding the blankets to be packed until her spare bed should be needed again.

"Yes, you are. I'll be damned," said Van aggrievedly, "if I know why! I entertain your brother, I invited him to come to my club for a drink, I put myself out——"

He went on for a long while. After a while, goaded beyond bearing, she said darkly:

“I hope he’ll not come again.”

“Why not?” Van demanded, pouncing with satisfaction upon a reply at last.

“Because I’d rather not see him than have you act the way you acted at lunch.”

“How did I act at lunch?”

“Sulking. Going off and lying down.”

“Because I can’t stand the fuss you make about your people, my dear. It’s not becoming. You’re a married woman now, you are my wife, and it’s extremely trying to me at my own table to hear you talking of people I don’t know and places I haven’t been!”

Invariably, after hurting her, he talked himself into a state of feeling abused and indignant, and Gwen often had to make the first overtures of peace and apologize herself when she felt hotly that the apology should have come from him.

But he could not bear to have angry words or an even colder silence exist long between them, and would meet her approaches halfway, rejoicing in the restored harmony and showing more affection than ever. She had to reconcile herself to the fact that he would always be jealous, but apart from that she could manage the crises of their first year well enough. There were scenes, but she minimized her own part in them as much as she could, and Van apparently flourished on them. After a furious outbreak he would fling himself down on the couch and fall asleep instantly, and when he awakened he would retain no memory of the dispute.

He was jealous of telephone conversations if Gwen prolonged a talk with some woman friend for more than a minute or two. He was jealous of the letters she wrote and the books she read. He rejoiced audibly and frequently that they did not live near her people, that she had no old friends in Sacramento. He was continually torturing himself with misunderstandings, would look at her with a face of thunder as he said “Mitchell? I didn’t know you had a friend called Mitchell? What the hell was he doing here today?”

“He’s the grocery boy, Van. Eighteen, and all pimples and red hair.”

“Oh. Oh. I see. Go on, what were you saying? What were we talking about?” And Van would at once be especially gentle and interested for any

annoyance his surliness had caused her. But perhaps only a few minutes later he would be at it again.

"Shopping, were you? See anyone?"

"No."

"I thought you said someone told you about the fire downtown?"

"The girl at the notions counter."

"Oh yes, I see. Walk home?"

"All the way."

"Was Mrs Bates here when you got here?"

"No, just her message."

"She didn't come upstairs?"

"I didn't see her at all, Van. I just found her message under the door."

"Ah. Well, I wouldn't have minded if she had come upstairs, if she came in with you and sat down for a minute."

"She didn't, though. I didn't see her."

"Well, this chair was over by the window when I came in, and I imagined she might have——"

"No, she didn't." It was very hard to be patient. But for Gwen there was no alternative. Anything like opposition infuriated Van, and scenes and reconciliations and more scenes were too exhausting.

At Easter, June came to them for ten days. At first she was shy with Gwen, and almost equally silent and scared with her father. But they devoted themselves to amusing her and spoiling her, and long before her vacation was ended she had grown passionately attached to her stepmother.

Gwen took her shopping, and gave her twenty-five cents to spend in the five-and-ten-cent store. June lingered for almost an hour over the undertaking, reveling in every instant of it, consulting Gwen, carrying this selection or that back to its place to make room for another.

Gwen asked the Trumbull granddaughter to come upstairs for a party luncheon of meat cakes in buns and ice cream, and afterward took both small girls to the movies. She let June help her with her cooking and told her stories, and June wept when the time came to go.

Gwen liked June. The child was pretty in a delicate, gentle way, affectionate and dependent. They planned together for the summer vacation.

"We'll go swimming, June, and we'll have Alma come upstairs, and make candy——"

June glowed with ecstasy at these ideas, and begged her father to let her grandmother know at once that she was to come to Sacramento when school closed. But Van, to Gwen's surprise, was rather cool.

When June had gone, escorted by some neighbors who had to go back to Falls Hill, Gwen noticed that her husband was in a bad mood. He refused to answer her first concerned inquiries, and Gwen, tired and impatient on a hot April afternoon, thought that she would ignore him, let him sulk, go for a long walk alone. She was not well, and to have to indulge him in one of his scenes seemed at the moment too much to bear.

But to go away would be only to aggravate his mood; the tiresome explanations and apologies would only wait until she returned, and then be longer and more bitter. So she coaxed him for several minutes, and finally won from him a dignified:

"Well, I suppose it isn't very pleasant to have you setting my daughter against me. You two laughing at me secretly, planning everything with no reference whatsoever to me, making me feel in the way in my own house!"

"Van, what nonsense!"

"It's not nonsense at all!" he said, suddenly furious. "You thought it would be a swell joke on me to get June away from me! All right. All right. But it will be a hell of a long time before she comes here again! I don't care if she never comes!"

"Van, she's your child. Of *course* I wanted her to like me——"

A great deal of this, and more shouting, and then Gwen in tears, lying limp on the couch, and Van passionately repentant, cursing the Chinese boy for being so slow with Mrs Bellamy's iced tea, kneeling beside her to dry her eyes with his delicate, beautifully monogrammed handkerchief, begging her to forgive her stupid brute of a husband, because, after all, love for her had been at the bottom of all the trouble.

Afterward, in the slow dusk of the Sunday afternoon, he went to the piano, and for an hour or more Gwen lay passive, listening to the inspired music, wondering, wondering. She was the one woman in the world who could never be free of her husband; that had been nominated in the

unwritten bond that had first bound her to him. His possessive, his jealous love would never let her go; she could never ask him to let her go. In burying Sheila's secret she had made no terms; she had promised to be as good a wife to him as it lay in her power to be.

"I wonder if you'll be jealous of your son, Van?" she asked, when he came to sit beside her later that afternoon.

"I will be if you make a fool of yourself about him!" he conceded promptly. "If you want him in our room, if you won't leave him nights, and spoil our trips worrying about him, I certainly will make a scene."

"I hope he's a girl," she said. "You'd not think a girl worth worrying about."

"I shall be very much disappointed if he is," Van stated firmly.

"Van, you're so silly!" she said with a weak laugh.

"I'm not silly at all. I love my wife."

"I didn't count on feeling so—so worthless all the time," Gwen said, half to herself.

"I think that's entirely imagination, in women," Van said.

"Having a child is a natural thing. Not eating naturally upsets your stomach, and an upset stomach prevents your eating. It's a vicious circle. Now if you'd get dressed and come out with Green and me tonight, fill up on a good spaghetti dinner at Rasconi's, nourishing stuff like fish salad and potatoes——"

"Oh, please, Van! This weather——!"

"Well, I'll go clean up!" He was displeased, but not seriously.

He went upstairs, and she lay thinking of cool things; the river where the crowd used to go swimming; her bedroom at home, with the curtains blown in by the same mountain breeze that ruffled the pear-tree leaves; icy great peaches wet from the refrigerator——

Tears slipped from under her closed lids. She opened her eyes wide, swallowed, reached for a book.

CHAPTER XXI

"SHEILA dearest," wrote Gwen, "I wonder if I've mentioned physical discomfort and laziness and hatred of this damnable and eternal heat sufficiently in my late letters to make you suspect that in October I will present Mr B., as the Victorian ladies put it, with a pledge of my affections ____"

Her pen stopped. The day was very hot; her hand was slippery as she wrote. She must be careful not to say anything indiscreet to Sheila. Sheila hadn't been at all enthusiastic over Van as a brother-in-law, and Van always managed to see Sheila's answers to Gwen's letters, sooner or later. Sometimes he read them before Gwen did, if one arrived while she was still asleep in the morning, or happened to come his way before she saw it.

"Lovely letter from Sheila," he would say. "You were asleep and I wanted the news before I went to the office. Mind if I read it?"

"Not at all, Van." The slightest deviation from gracious agreement meant a scene, and what was the use of scenes?

Writing to Sheila was one of her luxuries, and now that she had plenty of money to spend on beautiful stationery, and plenty of spare time, she was often tempted to write as often as twice a week. But some undefined, vague sense of loyalty to Van prevented her. Sheila must not suspect that she was lonely, that she had hours upon empty hours to fill. So instead Gwen went alone to the movies, took what walks her sudden languor and the oppressive spring heat made possible, stopped at the Library for a talk with Polly, whom Van didn't like.

The Bakers had by this time happily established themselves in an apartment in Wardman Park in Washington. Sheila wrote detailed descriptions of it, and of their first social contacts in the enchanting capital. They had dined with a congressman and his wife at Chevy Chase; they had met Senator Milgrim and Chief Justice Martin; they were just back from the White House reception.

"Gwen, it seems too much happiness," Sheila's letters said. "It's so thrilling here, everyone so interesting and so fine, teas at the legations and embassies, and ourselves really in it, really belonging here! We both simply adore it, and Grace is the most wonderful cook of all time, and Millie

wonderful with my Fanny. Deep snow always thrills me too, going about to afternoon parties with Link over real white cottony snow, wearing my new furs, having everyone so nice to me! Do get Van to run for something and we'll do everything together!"

Gwen's face was sometimes sober and wistful as she read; she was not in the best of health and spirits these days. But she made her answers resolutely cheerful. In the letter telling of her own coming motherhood she congratulated Sheila upon the birth of a son.

"And tell your Peter that he will soon have a little western cousin," she wrote. "Oh, Sheila, if I could be with you these days! What fun to see your tiny new one, and remind my adored Fanny of her Aunt Gwen! And to hear her say 'Mommy' and 'Daddy' and 'd'ink'! Mine of course isn't due until late October, so he'll be very timid and polite with your bouncing middle-aged infants, but just the same his mother is all prepared to be simply ga-ga about him. My *own* baby—it sounds so strange! And yet I've always wanted him, and ought to take him in my stride as it were.

"I call him 'him' because Van of course wants a son. Having a darter, he naturally feels more interested in the opposite sex. And what an opposite sex it is, my darling sister!

"Mother of course will want me to come home for the baby, or she will want to come here. The doctor and Van and the nurse all say firmly that the sensible thing is for her to stay at home and not agitate herself and me at the finish. But it's all so far ahead that I'm not worrying. I'd love to be with Mother, of course, and I'd like to have her here. I have complete confidence in my doctor—they say he's fine and gives you lots of dope, but of course you do feel a little scared. But anything would be better than to have to keep the peace between Mother and Van while I was lying in a hospital bed." . . .

"Isn't it funny, Sheila," she wrote in another letter, "that for years and years I thought money trouble was not only the worst in the world but I thought the Washburtons were elected never to get away from it. And here you and I are talking about our cooks and our babies and what we hope to do in the summer as calm as you please! I keep very tight on my budget, but almost every night Van brings me home a present. Night before last it was six darling handkerchiefs with 'Honey' embroidered on them; he calls me that sometimes. And last night it was a glorious gallon can of olive oil, and of course you can go a long way on a gallon of olive oil. I never had one before. Peter came up for another night and Van was simply darling to him, so I have no trouble at all except this murderous hot weather that makes me

feel as limp as a rag. I lie on the couch and look at a roll of fluff under the piano, and care no more about it than if it was on Mars!"

Sheila, her own life one series of fresh joys and satisfactions, read between the lines of these letters and worried about them.

"Link, she's already regretting that she married that—that bully," said Sheila. "He wants a son, does he? And he and Mother don't keep the peace? And money trouble isn't the worst in the world; how does she know that? And 'what an opposite sex it is!' I tell you, Link, she's already regretting that she married Van. I know it! She was always in love with Dick Latimer. She was *dying* to go to Scotland and start out with him. And I'll never know why, and I'll never forgive her for throwing herself away on a man like Van! Mother hates him. She says he makes her feel uncomfortable. Now look at this, Link," Sheila went on, looking up from a second reading of the letter. " 'Van was simply darling to Peter!' What does that indicate? Why, that she was afraid he wouldn't be darling to Peter. And why *shouldn't* he be?"

"It was her own choice, Sheila," Link said. His own life was so brimming with content that it was hard for him to imagine any trouble at all in this miraculous relationship that brought a beautiful, loving woman into a man's life; presently added an exquisite baby son and daughter; gave him the right to answer "my wife" when his new friends and associates asked him who his companion was. Washington had been kind to the Bakers. Each day brought them fresh interests and fresh pleasures. Sheila and her babies had been moved in mid-July to a quiet beach cottage; Link came down when he could. No drop was lacking to the brimming cup of their felicity, unless it was in the sympathy and regret they felt when their thoughts went to hot Sacramento, and to Gwen heavy and dull with physical discomfort under the broiling western sun.

Those who could, fled from the town when the hot weather came, but Gwen stayed because her house was comparatively cool, and she felt too lazy to make the effort to go away. She and Van went to Tahoe for one week end, a week end of cool swimming and cool meals and general bliss for Gwen, but he was absorbed in an especially exacting case and liked to come home to a fresh, welcoming wife, a cool little supper of iced tea and boiled chicken, and perhaps a game of bridge with a couple of men friends.

Gwen learned to keep her meals simple; Van was not exacting. He would eat cold asparagus—cold artichokes—cold ham night after night, always praising her for her management and her salad dressing and her sweetness.

“This is what I like, just the two of us,” he would say afterward, his second glass of iced coffee set upon the piano, his hands moving on the keys. “We two here together. Nobody else! I’m jealous; I admit it. But I happen to be unfortunate enough to be in love with my wife.”

Evenings were not so bad. There was a cool movie house not far away, and sometimes they strolled there for the late show; sometimes they took the car and drove about for an hour or two, trying to find a breeze. But the long burning days were hard for Gwen.

She was not sleeping very well, and was usually awake when the hot dawn broke at half past four. Light glared into the room and flickered on every polished surface; Van might awaken too, with a great yawn, but he always went instantly to sleep again. Gwen would quietly go out to the living room, which faced north, and lie down on the couch. But the day’s heat was filtering in everywhere now; window shades moved restlessly; smells from the street, from the kitchen next door reached her one by one. Rinsed milk bottles on rinsed wood, gas. The Pattons’ coffee started up promptly at half past six. A boy on skates regularly clashed by, delivering papers. Gwen would hear the milkman clattering up the stairs, hear the clink of bottles. At seven she got up herself and brushed her hair and freshened her face. Van was a coffee fiend, but for months she could not touch it or bear the smell of it without nausea.

He went away before nine, and the slow hours began to creep by, with the simmering heat from outside assaulting every window and the sounds of the town’s morning life seeming to have their own quality of hotness. If Gwen lay down, a dripping perspiration broke gently over her; even a bath left her warmer and stickier than she had been when she started it. Mirrors showed her a swarthy dark face beaded with water, and hair plastered to her forehead. Her pen slipped in her wet hand; powder turned itself to dough on her face.

“Oh, if it only wasn’t so hot!” she sighed, dragging herself about. Her schoolboy cook came in shortly after three, but there was always much to be done before that; beds and breakfast dishes, dusting and ordering, calls to the telephone, calls to the door.

To go out into the hot light of the streets took courage, but she made herself walk a little every day, to the Library or to a movie. She had a few friends now, but they were not close enough to be visited informally for hours at a time. And visiting involved effort, anyway. With her books, she would go back to the house that always seemed comparatively cool when

she reached it, and spend the late-afternoon hours in a loose, thin silk Chinese coat, drowsing on her bed.

July seemed endless. August came in on a blast of heat that called forth comment from state papers far and wide. Gwen longed for her mother, longed with a physical ache for Sheila, for a few hours of the old laughing freedom, for the days when she had walked downtown in Kenthill feeling that there were wings on her feet, with the sweet cool fogs of midsummer drifting in and out among the trees, shutting away the sun.

She was ill, and the doctor told her that she must make no effort. Gwen laughed ruefully as she answered that she had not been making much, and obediently lay still for five days. Sometimes she cried, she hardly knew why, but there was never any trace of tears when Van came home. He would be jealous even of her tears, and she could give him no reason for them that would reassure him.

She went slowly into the kitchen and put away groceries and asked Mitchell please to get that watermelon into the icebox for her. She looked at the walls of her bedroom—oatmeal color, with the little etchings nicely placed. She looked at her mother's photograph on the bureau, and Sheila's on the desk, and her own on Van's chifforobe. The two silver candlesticks were empty; pink candles doubled over in this weather. On her dressing table there were a shaded pink light and two silver trays and a crystal powder bowl. Also the Chinese enamel box Polly had given her for a wedding present. Also the Italian cutwork doily someone else had given her.

"Whew! It's hot," she said aloud every little while. The days blended into each other; their only break was Sunday, when she and Van always tried to plan something cool. But he was working on a case for a San Francisco firm now—a case important to him because he suspected that they were going to ask him to come in with them as a partner someday, and often he worked all day Sunday at the office or in the law library.

When the case was finished they hoped to get away for a fortnight to Huntington Lake, in the cool high Sierras, but on the burning August Tuesday when at last he sent the results of his research to San Francisco Van came home early with news for Gwen.

"I'm off for the Lone Star Mine tonight, my dear. They want me there. It's your patent again. I'm flying at six."

"Van, you'll spend more than we get, telephoning them and going to them!"

"Well, let's hope not. Anyway, I've just wired Moore I'll go on tonight. I'm catching the Overland. I'll be back as soon as I can."

She helped him pack, wishing that she might go, too. The trip would be hot, but anything was better than just lying down under this furnace breath. Van ate a hurried sandwich from a tray; was gone. She was alone.

It was almost the first time Gwen had been alone since her marriage. The house, the world, her soul were filled with peace. She need not change her loose thin wrapper for supper; she need not even get up for supper. She could dine right here, without leaving the couch. Sliced tomatoes and lettuce; no, she had made a vegetable aspic this morning; she would have that.

"I wish," she thought half aloud, "I could see Mother while Van's gone." She had not seen her mother for weeks. In June she and Van had gone down on business; they had stayed at her mother's home only a few hours, had driven home in the starry hot night. It had been an unsatisfactory visit, and Van had raged for the first hour of the drive home because she had made so much of her family and been so "rude" to him.

"Van, I was not rude to you," she had protested hotly.

"Your trouble is that you don't know what's rude and what isn't," Van had answered. And to this there had seemed to be no reply.

The episode had left a sore spot in Gwen's heart, and she had been trying to plan another occasion, one that must prove happier. Now it seemed to have arrived.

Van was to be gone for at least ten days. Her mother—her home—were only seventy miles away. On the following morning, in the blazing heat of eleven o'clock, Gwen started for Kenthill, her packed bag beside her, her heart singing.

Oh, this was independence, this was fun! To be driving along so comfortably, knowing that nobody would worry about her, that nobody would care what she did, and returning continually to the almost unendurably exciting thought that within a few hours she would actually be at home, was rapture! Gwen did not hurry; noon found her still with twenty miles to go. But it did not matter; she had not wired her mother; this was to be a surprise visit. She stopped for luncheon at a "New York Grill," wondering if all New York grills were full of the smell of frying potatoes, with slow flies walking on sleazy white tablecloths, and not finding her choice of chicken Spanish particularly successful.

It was very hot when she came out of the restaurant; the little village street lay bare to the blazing sun. Gwen got into her car, feeling a little sick and headachy, and wishing she were at home. She drove on and on, watching the signboards; the miles dwindled to seventeen—to ten—to four ——

Then at last the first heavenly breath of mountain air, and then she was at the end of Central Avenue, and had passed the gas works and the park, and was beginning to exclaim aloud at the familiar sights of the town streets.

By the time she got home Gwen was almost exhausted with joy and fatigue and expectation; it was a shock to discover that the house was empty except for Tryrena. Her father was downtown, her mother at the club; goodness knew where Kip was, for Tryrena didn't.

But that was just as well. Attended by the sympathetic colored maid, who followed her into the bathroom and personally assisted with Gwen's bath in her anxiety to help, and to miss no second of gossip, Gwen got herself into an old cotton frock that had been still hanging in her closet, and, cooled and refreshed and blissful, went down to the big chair in the side yard to glory in the sweetness and shadows of the August afternoon and wait for the family.

CHAPTER XXII

It was all heavenly beyond her wildest hopes. Her mother's joy at finding her, her father's broad smile and the noisier welcomes of Peter and Kip began a time of sheer delight. To have her old place at the table, to sleep in her old room, with the familiar books and curtains and pear-tree shadow seeming to shut her in to the old safety and peace, was heaven. Gwen could not revel in it enough; she cross-examined them for all the news of Peter's girl, of Sheila, of little Fanny and the new baby boy.

"You've grown up, Gwen," Peter said, when he took her to a church bazaar downtown on the third night. She had protested that she did not want him to escort her anywhere under the circumstances. She loved him for saying that just as long as she'd stick around he'd take her everywhere, in the old way.

So they went down to the crowded hall, and met Peter's girl with her brother, and loitered along among the booths and stalls, exclaiming over the embroidered smocks and frosted cupcakes, and finally listened to a program that might have seemed feeble from a theatrical standpoint but that enthralled an audience that knew every individual performer intimately. Gwen met old friends and was delighted to answer their questions so honestly and yet with so much dignity. Yes, she lived in Sacramento, but her husband had had a very fine offer from a San Francisco firm and they might move there in a few months. No, she wasn't doing her own work, Mrs Porter; she had a very nice Chinese boy. Why, she'd come down to visit Mother because Van had been suddenly called away on a case.

Gwen, feeling very matronly, with a silk scarf folded carelessly over her arm helping her loose thin coat to disguise her figure, sat with the older women watching the dances until the heated air and noise and lights tired her, and she slipped away and walked home alone in the cool of the night. She had not been so happy in a long time. In her married life there had been no consciousness of unhappiness—no, indeed! But this visit home seemed to sum up her record for the past ten months, and brought to her a sense of security and achievement that was heartening. It was gratifying, somehow, to say "my husband" to all these old friends, in reference to a man whose professional record they all knew. It was wonderful to be shyly acknowledging to the interested women that in another dozen weeks there

would be a baby. This was living. It had not all been easy living, but it was not stagnating, and Gwen, with Van some thousands of miles distant, was quite willing to convince herself that his manners and mannerisms were not important. What was important was that he adored her, and took good care of her, and had for his single ambition the desire to make her a rich and happy woman.

She found at the house two letters from Scotland; their postal dates some months before. One was fat and bulky; that would be poor Dick's protest against being so summarily thrown over. The other was thin—a few lines at most. She read neither. There was a brush fire in the side yard one cool afternoon, and she carried the letters out to it and destroyed them unopened.

But they made her think of Dick. For one moment she had a dizzying vision of what it would mean to her or to any woman to be married to a man who was a comrade—a simple, gentle, unpretentious companion who lived his own hard life of service and labor and did not attempt to monopolize and control hers. A man who trusted his wife, who was sure of her as of himself.

She tried to put the dream from her, but for a distressing time it persisted. She was in the unknown streets of the Scottish city, going home to that snug little apartment up some dark, carpeted stairway, to find the fire burning cozily behind iron bars and the tea table set. She was sharing a holiday among the lakes and the heather with a square-built doctor in shabby tweeds; they were tramping along hand in hand, with the fresh air in their faces and the clouds racing overhead.

"This has to stop!" Gwen said. She put it behind her. She made herself think of Van and of her baby and of house hunting in San Francisco. She got a rake, and with Kip raked about the brush fire, sent its blue fumes billowing skyward into the cool afternoon. The sweet scent of the smoke of dried leaves drifted everywhere across the back yards and porches and gardens of the shabby neighborhood.

She had wired Van of her plan to come home for a visit while he was away, but as the too-short days flew by and she did not hear from him she came perforce to the conclusion that the telegram had miscarried. His addresses were often uncertain things; he had even predicted that he might have to go on at once to Washington, so she waited to hear from him, planning to return to Sacramento at least two days in advance of his return, and have everything in the house in order.

Polly Henderson had come back to Kenthill for a visit, by lucky chance, and offered to drive back with Gwen; indeed, offered to do the actual driving

and spare Gwen the strain. They arranged to start on Wednesday; Van's ten days' absence would not expire until Friday, even if he were very prompt about getting back, but Gwen was beginning to get a little nervous about his silence now, and wanted to get home and see if there might be news of him.

"He must have missed my telegram, Mother, and changed his hotel for some reason," she said a little anxiously. "He's been writing to the apartment, and the letters are probably piled up there, waiting. I've written twice to his hotel, and once to Mr Moore, who's handling the thing here, but for all I know they both went right on to Washington. I know Van wanted to see some man in the patent office there."

"That dratted patent will cost you ten times what you get for it!" her mother said.

"Well, it's given me this wonderful visit at home anyway, and so I'll always love it!"

"Don't go tomorrow, Gwen," her brother advised. "Wait until Saturday and I'll drive you and Polly up."

"I can't, Pete!" It was Tuesday morning; her car was at the door, and she had asked Peter to drive it downtown and have it serviced for the return trip tomorrow. They were loitering at the breakfast table; there had been a lovely letter from Sheila to discuss; there had been snapshots of the new baby to pass from hand to hand.

It was a burning hot morning even for Kenthill. The mountains seemed to have withdrawn toward the east in a haze of opal gauze; there was not a breath of air stirring the hot clothy leaves of the fruit trees in the yard. Acrid smoke had drifted over from the railway tracks and lay close to the hot streets; lawn sprinklers were already whirring up and down the line of gardens, and men in palm beach suits took off their straw hats and wiped their foreheads as they greeted each other.

"Going to be a smoking day tomorrow too, Gwen!" Polly prophesied with a sigh.

"Yep. But we'll have baths and rest when we get there. I've written Ho Loy, and he'll have the house open and the refrigerator going. Mother, I'm going to do a raspberry ice for lunch. What else is there?"

"Why, Gwen, there's meat there, but I don't know as anyone'll eat cold corn' beef a day like this——" Mrs Washburton was beginning, when there was an interruption. Rapid steps came up from the sidewalk, the hall door was unceremoniously opened and Van was in the room.

He looked hot and pale; his collar was marked with perspiration; he had not shaved. He gave them all a strained half-smile as he came in, but his look at Gwen was unsmiling.

"Well, I'm glad I found you!" he remarked coldly. He did not kiss her or otherwise greet her, as he sat down with a glance from her face to the other faces and the air of a man who expects an explanation.

"Van!" more than one voice said, with a well-simulated enthusiasm. Mrs Washburton added: "Give him some coffee, dear."

"Polly, you know my husband? Miss Henderson, Van. Well! When did you get in?"

Van pushed aside his cup, looked straight at Gwen.

"I didn't know you were here," he said levelly, holding himself in. "How soon can you get started? I've got to be back in Sacramento at noon. I've just come in on the bus. I flew back, got home last night."

"Why, I can—I can—— It'll only take me a few minutes!" She could not meet their eyes, but she knew what her mother's and Polly's faces expressed. He would say anything, he would do anything in this mood. The only thing to do was to get him away as fast as possible, and let them all think what they would. "I'll pack. I was—I was going tomorrow, anyway," Gwen stammered. "Polly was going with me."

"Very sorry to interfere with your plans!" the man said in a voice of iron. "But I'm afraid I'd like my wife to myself for a little while!"

"Oh, that's all right!" Polly said hastily.

"She doesn't have to be back until Sunday, Van," Gwen said, "she was going early to oblige me."

"I'm glad you were going eventually to come back," Van said with an icy politeness. Gwen laughed with a sinking spirit.

"Of course I was coming back! But I didn't expect you until Friday."

"I wrote you my plans."

"You're not going away today in all this heat; it wouldn't be a bit good for you!" Mrs Washburton said hospitably. "You must be tired if you just got in yesterday. You take a good rest and have lunch, and then get off in the cool of the evening."

Van paid not the slightest attention to her.

“How long will it take you?” he said briefly to his wife.

“Oh—three minutes. But I don’t think there’s any gas in the car, is there, Peter?”

“I’ll take the car down. And I’ll say good-by to all of you now,” Van said stiffly, getting to his feet. “I think someone might have informed me where my wife was; I’ve had no word since a week ago,” he added.

“I’ll go with you and get gas,” said Pete. But although he followed Van out to the garage, when Gwen looked down from her bedroom window a few moments later she saw that Van was driving away alone.

“What on earth is the matter with the man?” her mother asked, helping her pack.

“Oh, nothing, Mother! He gets like that when he’s tired and hot and thinks I’ve been trying to put something over on him. He’ll be all right.” Gwen spoke wearily, all her sparkle and vitality quenched as if by a breath of poison gas.

“Well, he may be all right,” Mrs Washburton said with spirit, “but I think it’s perfectly outrageous for him to drag you with him over the country on a day like this! You know me, Gwen, you know I don’t believe in interfering with my children’s lives, but upon my word I wouldn’t go! Your father’s face looked perfectly stricken when he burst in that way as if he was a jailer ____”

“The alternative is too—difficult, Mother,” Gwen said snapping a suitcase shut. “It means scenes and scenes and scenes, and I hate scenes. For the baby’s sake, the quieter I keep the better.”

“But it actually doesn’t seem safe to have you go off with a man like that, Gwen!”

“It’s perfectly safe!” Gwen said with a mirthless laugh. “He’ll quiet down the moment we’re alone. You see, he’s had no news at all. I gather from what he was saying to Peter as they went out that he and Mr Moore went right to Washington, and that he wired me to write there. But of course I haven’t had any mail. Well, he’ll get over it!”

“I don’t know why a man wants to act like a boor! I wonder if he saw Sheila?” Gwen’s mother said, off on a sudden tangent.

“Probably. I’ll write you everything. Now don’t worry about me, darling,” Gwen said with a final kiss, “for I’m all right. Peter!” she called.

“Come get my bag, will you? Polly, I’m so sorry not to be taking you along, but Van’s all upset and nervous and I’ll have to quiet him down.”

Van had come back and was sitting in the parked car at the curb. Gwen kissed everyone, said what she could in explanation and excuse, managed a gallant smile, and tucked herself in the front seat beside the silent Van with what spirit she could muster. Van turned a stony face toward the group on the steps, lifted his hat and started the ignition.

They drove through the town in silence. Gwen settled herself more comfortably, looked at the implacable pale hot sky, at the implacable face beside her. Van drove steadily, grimly. She said to herself that he must break the silence. She waited.

“Upon my word you have an extraordinary idea of wifehood,” he remarked at length.

“Aren’t you going to stop at Falls Hill to see June?” Gwen asked by way of reply.

“No, I’m not. I go East on your business,” Van said, “I sweat and swelter in the damnedest climate there is in the Union, I write you every day, and I come home to a house full of dust and flies and heat. No China boy, no ice, nothing but smells and heat. Why? Why, because the minute my back is turned you’re off like a fire horse to see your mother, and your precious friends in Kenthill, and Dick Latimer, too, I suppose. No word to me—what do you care what I’m going through——”

After a while, tired of the din of words that swooped about her ears like bats, she said mildly:

“Please be reasonable, Van. As far as Dick Latimer goes, he’s in Edinburgh, and you know it! It was burning hot at home, and I suddenly thought that it would be wonderful to see Mother and the others.”

“So you took your friend Polly down with you? You thought of that! But you didn’t think to tell me, a few hours earlier, what you were planning. And so I worry my heart out, cut my business short and come home to the damnedest, dirtiest house—everything silent—thermometer at one hundred and two——”

“Polly was there when I got there, Van. She was coming back with me tomorrow, but she went there by train.”

“You’re in a swell condition to drive around in this heat!”

“Poor Polly, I don’t know how she’ll get home now!”

“Well, if she’d gotten in the car with us, she’d have been asked to get out again; she could count on that!”

“You’re so silly to work yourself up this way. And I don’t suppose it’s the best thing in the world for me, either. All I did was go home to my own people for a few days, thinking you’d be away until Friday.”

“Were you going to tell me?”

“Van, don’t be such an idiot!”

“I’m an idiot. All right. You run off, after the doctor told you to keep quiet, drive for hours, keep me in the dark about where you are . . .”

It went on for a long time, but gradually he quieted down, gradually began to take a note more aggrieved than angry, gradually came to grudging questions, criticizing comments.

“All you had to do was to tell that Trumbull nuisance next door to forward your mail.”

“But I thought of course you’d get my wire, Van.”

“Well, I don’t care anything about that Henderson hen Polly—or whatever her name is—but I’m sorry I was rude to your mother!”

“She was almost afraid to let me come with you.”

“Oh hell, she was just putting that on! Why, Lord, if I didn’t love you, do you suppose I’d care if I didn’t hear from you for a few days? I tried twice to telephone from Washington; no good.”

“That reminds me, Van. Did you see Sheila?”

“Of course I saw her! Saw the kids, too. I had dinner with them, and believe me I’m solid with them. I had a grand talk with Link; he’s a swell fellow. I’ll tell you all about it when we’re home.”

Silence again, and the burning, pitiless heat of eleven o’clock.

“How d’you feel?” Van demanded suddenly, in an apologetic voice.

“I feel all right.” But she really felt faint and nauseated and dizzy. It was all very well to assure her mother and herself that Van’s sulks meant nothing, that she could handle him. But they exhausted her emotionally just the same, left her trembling and nervous. She saw a sign: “Sacramento twenty-nine miles,” and her spirit sank within her. “I think I’m going to throw up,” she said.

“I thought that stopped long before this. The baby’s moving, isn’t he?”

“Oh yes. He’s a contortionist. But—I suppose the heat—and getting excited—you’ll have to stop, Van.”

He was all concern now. Gwen got out of the car and was ill. Van went to the nearest house and brought her a glass of water. He asked anxiously if she would like to lie down; the woman in the house seemed very nice. But Gwen said with spirit that no, she was all right now and would rather get home. Yes, he said, that was the place for her.

They did not stop for lunch, but reached home at about one o’clock. Van helped her undress, got her between cool sheets, went to the kitchen and carried to her a tray of the most delicious hot tea, she said, the most welcome delicate tomato sandwiches she had ever tasted. Before he would touch his own lunch, which the Chinese boy had speedily prepared for him, he dashed off downtown, and when he came back it was to connect an electric fan with the floor plug in Gwen’s room, and leave her to drop off to delicious deep sleep with cool waves of freshened air blowing over her.

When she awakened it was late afternoon. Van was sitting in the big chair looking at legal papers. He told her that he had to go to the office after supper but he had waited to tell her how sorry he was to have been so ungracious during the day. Only, darn it, to have his wife gone, and that big horse of a Polly grinning all over the place, and the hot weather, and being afraid that damned doctor was home again——

“That’s all right,” Gwen said, rested, comfortable, at peace.

“Another thing I have to tell you,” he said. “I came home last night all ready to spring it on you, but I wasn’t going to tell the whole family until you knew. Don’t raise your eyebrows, Gwen, I’m made like that, and I’ll always be that way! I settled this Wallbestos thing while I was East, Gwen. I didn’t even tell your sister, but you can write them all now. Johnson’s son-in-law, McTague, he’s a nice fellow, has it down here in black and white. They want you to take—well, counting out the government tax, it comes to about eighty-three thousand dollars for your patent rights—and waive a suit.”

“Eighty-three what?” Gwen asked faintly, eyes starry in a suddenly pale face.

“Yep. Eighty-three grand. We’re rich, Gwen. We can snap our fingers at all of ’em now! I’ll make that one million in the next five years. We’ll move to San Francisco! I can make my own terms with any of ’em now! I want to

get down there, that's where I belong! I'll run down and hunt houses next week end, and take you down and show you what I've found afterward. Well!" Van said. "I'm going down to the office; I'll be back by eight."

"Too late," she said half audibly.

"Nope, we've had a late lunch," Van said. "It won't matter!"

"No, it doesn't matter now!" Gwen said. She felt a sudden pang of sharp pain deep within her. And for a little while the world turned black.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE house was old-fashioned, roomy, shabby. It stood in ten acres of orchard and garden; a canyon on the rise of ground toward the west ran up toward the hills. Here there was a heavy line of redwood forest unbroken except for a wandering footpath.

Whatever planting and cultivating had been done in the garden had been stopped long ago. Garden shrubs had grown rank and high; an evergreen hedge showed woody leafless inner branches webbed with dusty masses of spidery gray silk; into the webs dry brown needles had fallen. Roses climbed into the oaks, dropped long untended strings of dried foliage above the neglected beds. Some of these beds had been edged with rows of cream-colored bottles—bottles that were now broken and set askew. Others had merged into the dusty paths that still kept their prim Victorian curves and angles.

At the end of a quarter-mile of poplar-shaded drive the house stood; pretentious still in hopelessly outdated age. A wooden house with bay windows against whose dirty glass torn Nottingham curtains could still be seen among the shadows within—a house with narrow porches heavily balustraded, chipped paint everywhere on chipped wood, a cupola squared by four sets of narrow mullioned windows.

The season was autumn. Shoals of yellow and brown leaves were heaped everywhere and added to the complete forlornness of the place. But the oaks and elms and maples were magnificent, as were the darker redwoods up in the canyon, and inside the house there were shouting and stamping, sounds of feet and voices going to and fro. In the old rooms stained with the damp of many winters, crisped by the heat of many summers, neglected for two whole generations, dust lay thick as plush; papers peeled off in long festoons; woodwork smelled of mice and mold. There was a vacant rotted quality to the very air that circulated between the opened windows and doors.

But the voices rang with excitement and delight, and there was no dragging or dreariness to the feet. Mover's men, an old gardener, two maids, a Chinese cook, a girl of perhaps seventeen and two small children—six years of age—were all in violent agitation and circulation among the rooms and passages, and all more or less directed and controlled by a woman in a

blue smock and old tennis shoes who was everywhere at once—upstairs, in the kitchen, on the front porch, out by the old barns and windmills to decide what was safe for the children's investigation and what was not.

Furniture had been unloaded in the long double parlors; the maids, the Chinese and the gardener were assorting it, carrying small articles and linen upstairs, wheeling the chairs and tables about. A clock, temporarily placed upon a carved marble mantel, to which there still clung faded and torn old silk covers edged with raveled chenille, had just struck four, when a newcomer arrived and entered the place like an avenging army.

Gwen, her hands dirty, her hair rumpled, her smock stained and barred with dust and dirt, faced her husband tranquilly as Van came in. But within she was conscious of panic.

"Oh, hello, Van, my dear! I thought you weren't coming back until Sunday! How did you find us?"

"Mrs O'Connor was still in the house, cleaning," Van said in a voice of steel. He accepted his oldest daughter's kiss without a change of expression or a glance; his eyes were all for Gwen. "What on earth is all this?" he demanded.

"June, dash out, darling, and keep an eye on the children! And you might tell May to get started making the beds; we've done about all we can here," Gwen said. And then, as the girl went away: "Sit down, Van, and I'll tell you about it."

"I don't want to hear about it," Van said. "I think you've lost your mind. What is this place? Who owns it? Never in my whole life have I seen such a wreck! I go to New York on a case and the minute I turn my back you tear the house to pieces and come out here to this God-forsaken place! I tell you, Gwen, you push me pretty far. You don't think for one instant—not for one minute—you're going to stay here? Let's get out of here! Is this our stuff you've got down here? And the kids? Well, the quicker we get out——"

"Van," Gwen said, having guided him to the front-porch steps and sitting there beside him now in the streaming weak late-afternoon sunshine. "You knew I wanted to live in the country?"

"Certainly I knew you wanted to live in the country. And I wanted to live in the city! I agree with you that the Clay Street house wasn't entirely satisfactory, and I told you that when the right opportunity came Munson was going to find us a better place. But this place is out of the question! I

wouldn't permit my children to remain here one night! We'll go to a hotel ——"

"I want you to listen to me, Van," Gwen said presently, putting up her hand to silence him. "We've been married eight years—I'm thirty-one. I've got two children, besides June. But I've never done what I wanted to do, not for one minute, unless it happened to be something you wanted me to do. You took the money I inherited and did what you thought best with it——"

"Doubled it and quadrupled it!" he put in quickly.

"I admit it. But instead of paying off Dad's mortgage and doing what would make my parents happy, you bundled them into a little apartment, sent Kip off to school——"

"And turned the old place into six apartments that have brought your father in a handsome income," Van interrupted again.

"Yes, I know. I know all you've done! But money isn't everything, Van, and you've had your way about it and everything else! I've worn the clothes you liked; I've dropped the people you didn't like; I've cultivated those you did. I've lived five years in a city house, annoyed by the telephone, crowded for space, humiliated because you wouldn't be civil to the women friends I've made, having to beg you—to get you into a good mood if my father or brother came down, never seeing my mother, because you say that she 'makes trouble' between you and me! As if Mother ever made trouble for anyone!"

"So everything I've ever done for you and your family——" he was beginning hotly, when she interrupted him in her turn:

"I know what you've done! You don't have to remind me. But now I'll tell you what *I've* done, and what *I'm* going to do!" Gwen said, with passion. "I tried my best in that city house. I went to dinners that you ruined with your jealousy, and I gave lunches just to have you come home and ask me in a whisper how long these damn women are staying, or had you yell to me from the upper floor that the children needed me. I've lain awake wondering—wondering how I could get free! Well, now I am free. You can take any course you like; I'll take my own course. I want the children, of course. I want June, too, and she'd like to be with me. But I've bought this house—it's mine, and it's my home. The telephone won't ring here; there are no neighbors that I know; I'll not have to struggle and apologize and lie awake!"

"How do you mean you've bought the house?"

“I mean I wrote a check for it. Thirteen thousand five hundred dollars. She wanted fifteen thousand. I stuck out. It’s mine. The check was certified, and it’s gone through.”

“Where’d you get the money?”

“I drew it on the Western Farmer and deposited it to my account.”

“It’s no good. The check isn’t any good.”

“Well, you go tell them that!” Gwen gave him one scornful glance, looked away at the pale autumn sky, over which veils of fog were being softly drawn. There was a moment of silence.

“If you want a divorce, don’t think I’d prevent you in any way,” Van presently said, in a slightly softened tone. “I confess it’s something of a surprise, I confess it isn’t what a man expects to come home to when he’s been away for six weeks trying to make some money for his family. But I’d be delighted to get a divorce. Don’t think for one instant I wouldn’t! You make whatever plans you like; I’ll fall in line! You tell everyone that the trouble was you didn’t like your house on Clay Street, and so you carried your children off to a place like this! Well, *I* don’t like this. I’ll never spend a moment here! So whatever you do is all right with me!”

“Year after year,” Gwen said in a hard voice that she kept light and low, “I’ve put up with your utter—your utter unreasonableness! You’ve spied on me and suspected me and kept me cooped away from normal living—from friendships—from feeling that I owned my own children. I’ve done my best! I’ve tried to be a good wife and a good mother, I’ve lived for you and the children. But no more! I’m done. I’m going to live here, by myself, free, not having to worry ever again to think whether or not you like a thing or don’t like it, whether you’re going to make a scene or not.”

“And what are you going to live on?” the man asked.

“Shame on you!” was her only reply. She accompanied it with a glance of reproachful scorn.

“Well,” he said, “you don’t think that you’re going to take my children and my home away from me and then have me pay for it? Not a bit of it! June’s mine. June will come with me.”

“June will soon be of age,” Gwen said briefly, heartsick, not looking at him. She had steeled herself for this scene; she had not breathed normally for one moment ever since she had first foreseen it, but it was proving worse than she had thought.

“When do you propose to get your divorce?” the man demanded.

“I’m applying for it immediately.”

“All right. How far am I from the station?”

“About four miles.” This wasn’t the way she had meant it to turn out at all. “I’ll drive you,” she said.

“Thank you, I prefer to walk. Or I’ll stop somewhere and telephone for a taxi. I’ll see Dodge tomorrow. He’ll get in touch with you.”

Van walked away without a backward look. Gwen sat on the steps staring after him, her world laid flat by an earthquake.

They had had bitter quarrels before; they had had many of the scenes she hated. But this was final. She was committed to this. Whether she had really meant what she said or not, there was no retreating now. She was going to be a divorced woman.

It sounded strange. A divorced woman! Divorced, with two minor children, her six-year-old twins—Mary and Fred. Well, other women had managed it. Van was a rich man now, as he had always said he would be. But it had been her little fortune that had started him! She could claim something.

“Your Honor, we lived in a sixty-dollar-a-month house and I had one part-time servant when first I married Mr Bellamy——”

How horrible anything was, with a lawsuit and a judge as part of it! Van would never submit to a public investigation of his affairs. He’d give her anything she wanted rather than face that. Even she did not know exactly what his financial position was. They always had enough money; they had traveled in Europe more than once; had taken the children to Tahoe for summer holidays; had been back and forth to New York frequently. There must be plenty. Plenty to give her her freedom and enough to live on comfortably here with the children and Violet. Her friends—she dreaded their questions! She could imagine them:

“Tell me, honestly, why did you divorce Van, Gwen?”

“Oh, Margaret, I was so *tired*! Just tired of being *run*, policed, watched every minute! I’ve been married eight years, I’ve given Van two adorable children, I’ve never looked at another man, and yet he goes on embarrassing me and humiliating me and questioning me as if——”

“It isn’t another woman, then, Gwen?”

"Oh, heavens, no! It's not that. It's just——"

Gwen sat on musing in the autumn dusk, continuing imaginary conversations with anyone and everyone concerned:

"It was partly on your account, Mother. I hate divorce, God knows, as much as you do! But if you knew the trouble I have seeing you, even you, and how he resents my quoting Dad or Peter, and what bitter things he says about my people—calling you all 'clodhoppers' and 'hayseeds'! He has the greatest contempt for my opinion, and yours, too; he's sure he knows everything and can do everything.

"And I'm like everyone else. I like to do things *my* way sometimes. I like things simple and informal, the way they used to be at home. But not for Van! When we travel we can't make acquaintances because they might turn out to be bores, and we can't take chances on little French towns or English inns because they aren't listed and mightn't be comfortable——

"Now, even with you and Dad, Mother, he couldn't leave you comfortable and happy where you'd always lived, in the old house. No, you had to be bounced into an apartment, and everything torn out and shifted around, and the old playroom made into bathrooms and the old back stairs given a side entrance and a new street number, and then you get two hundred a month rent for life, and he thinks he's accomplished something!"

Then it was to Sheila her thoughts wandered:

"The truth is we've never been congenial, Sis. There are things I like about Van; there are things I admire. Even Link has to admit that Van's marvelous about settling things and putting things through. But from the beginning I've had to make too many concessions—put up with too much! I've given him the best years of my life; now I want my life to myself. I've loved handsome clothes and the best theater seats and all that. But they've never been *me*. This is me—this ramshackle old place where I can putter and garden and read books and live for my children!"

"Mother," said a small boy, appearing suddenly beside her on the porch, "Vi'lit says when are we going to have supper?"

Gwen gave the child a quick embrace and a kiss with her keen glance. Had the children heard anything? One quick look at the child's serene face reassured her.

"Fred, my darling," she said, getting at once to her feet, "we will have supper right now! We'll see if Sing Lee has anything ready."

They went in through the disordered hallway that was littered with crates and barrels and rolls of rugs and into the dining room which looked surprisingly homelike with the table set and the children gathered at it for supper. Sing Lee, being a Chinese, had somehow managed to get a meal together; June and Gwen were tired, but the younger members of the family, Mary and Fred, just reaching six, were in the wild spirits that only disorganized times bestow upon children. They had stopped at a grocery shop on the way down and bought everything they liked; each child threading the counters with a large basket and selecting peanut butter, boxed cookies, honey, anything he or she fancied. Gwen had shared their delight in the store; she always loved the marketing that preceded a picnic or an expedition. But she felt nervous now. The memory of her sharp short encounter with Van had left her shaken, and her mental excuses and explanations went on in spite of her desperate efforts to stop them.

The children asked for Dad. He was jealous of them, unreasonable with them as he was with everyone, but, rather surprisingly to Gwen, they adored him in his friendlier moments, and always liked to know that he was somewhere in the picture. Gee, little Fred said, dribbling honey on soft rolls in a way Van never would have permitted, wasn't Dad comin' home? June had a more adult comment to make.

"It's just as well, Mother, for you know how he hates things in a mess."

"He'd make us all go to a hotel," offered Mary. Mary was fair, and as beautiful as ever her Aunt Sheila could have been in a dotted-swiss gown against a wall of white roses, but the small boy was dark, tall, as if he might someday be like his mother, but in features much like Van.

Night came and night apparel was somehow fished out of trunks for the children. Not without many forays and much hilarity, they settled down in the strange, half-furnished rooms; the garish electric-light bulbs were extinguished one by one. Gwen heard Violet and May giggling in their own quarters; they were good-natured girls.

She lay long awake, thinking. It had to be faced now. Van, of his own accord, was leaving her. The forceful, the dominating influence that had absorbed eight years of her life would be gone.

The mere thought of it seemed to leave a great blank, a great empty quietness. Eight years so crippled a woman, her energies would be weakened and bewildered after so complete a dominion. She would not know what to do, what she wanted to do, without Van.

She thought of her children, and some fiber deep in her soul winced and shriveled.

"But it's his choice," she said half aloud. "And after a while I'll begin to feel free again. I'll—I'll not have to have salads in every meal unless somebody wants them!"

All very well in words, but the sense of soreness and shock persisted. Marriage went deeper than questions of salads or no salads. An unsatisfactory husband was nevertheless a husband; a father to complete the children's scheme of living; a base and a background for a woman's life. Divorce was first of all supremely undignified; supremely humiliating. No woman ought to be forced to that course.

But at the same time there were essential differences between human beings; between the minds and souls of husbands and wives. And unless these could be reconciled, or partially reconciled, bitter suffering for one or both ensued.

Gwen lay thinking; sometimes in a great wave of relief; sometimes with her heart wincing away from some consideration that frightened her. Her bedside lamp burned steadily; the rest of the big room was all shadowy darkness.

And in this shadowy darkness suddenly something stirred. The door opened; Van came in.

She told herself instantly that she had known he would. She knew now what he would say, penitent, crushed, humble. She knew the words; they had lived through this scene a hundred times before.

"Gwen!" he said. His voice was thick; his face streaked with tears. "I've been walking—walking—I don't know where!" Van stammered, coming toward her. "We can't quarrel, Gwen. You can have everything the way you want it!"

She smiled, holding out a hand to him, and he rushed toward her, sinking on his knees, pressing her hand against his wet face. And she knew, staring somberly above his bowed head, her spirit departed to some remote far space even while her free hand slowly stroked his hair, that it was all to do over again, that it would always be like this, as long as they both should live.

CHAPTER XXIV

VAN had had no supper; he didn't want any supper! But Gwen knew this gambit, too, and presently went downstairs for bread and coffee and two cold chops and three cookies.

When she returned he was in his pajamas, and while he ate she busied herself in making up a bed for him on her couch, and they talked.

The familiar talk. First all adoration and apology on his part. He had never loved any other woman; he could not live for a day without her. In their eight years of marriage had she ever known him to look at another woman? No, she never had, and she never would. How many married women could say that?

When her brother and his wife had discovered that their only son had a bone trouble, who was it that had brought the child down to San Francisco in his own car and seen to it that he had the best of medical attention?

Well, Van had, of course.

Gwen might think that Van treated her family oddly, but ask Peter or Jane or Sheila or Link what they thought. They all turned to Van when they wanted anything arranged or managed, didn't they?

"What the hell could you tell a judge if you applied for a divorce, Gwen?"

"It was you who wanted it, Van." Gwen was back in bed now; he had finished his meal and came to sit on the side of the bed and talk to her.

"You know that's absolute rot. You know you do kind of put the whole thing on me, Gwen. You may be always right, but that doesn't mean I'm always wrong. I put up with a good deal!" Van said, working himself, as she had known he would, into the attitude of the abused one.

She made no answer; she lay smiling thoughtfully at him, her hand in his.

"But you do love me, don't you?"

"I must, Van, or I wouldn't put up with you."

It was affectionately said, if in a tone of long endurance, and he laughed delightedly.

"Well, then let's not have any more silly talk about trouble between you and me."

"Agreed," she said, still with a mother's air of patience.

"May I ask you just one thing, Gwen?"

"Certainly."

"What would you have thought if I had bought a country house without one word to you?"

"I don't know. I know that I was living in a way that was completely unnatural to me, and that I wanted to end it. And that I found just what I wanted." There was no apology, no surrender in her tone.

"But it's a terribly shabby place, dear. It's an old rat's nest. The plumbing may be an absolute danger to the children."

"On the other hand, they'll live out-of-doors. They'll sleep on porches and ride old ponies and climb trees, and that'll offset the plumbing."

"We'll have the plumbing completely replaced," Van stated firmly, in a tone that asked for a contradiction.

"Certainly we will. We'll have June's friends here visiting, from college. We'll have a grill up in the redwoods where we can cook Sunday lunches."

"There are redwoods?"

"There's a beautiful canyon back of the house."

"What about schools?"

"There are fine schools, and I'm going to have an old Chinese or Mexican puttering around here who can drive the children to school and call for them."

"Bonfacio might work in. He's smart. Unless you prefer a Chinese or Mexican?"

"No, I have no choice. I want someone here who will garden when we don't need him and drive for us when we do."

"Leave that to me," Van said, and she knew his extraordinary capacity for management was stimulated, that he was slowly gathering interest in the details of the new home. "If you got this place for thirteen thousand five

hundred you got a bargain," Van said. "Of course it'll be lonely for you. You won't see your friends in town."

"I don't want to see anyone in town. I'm escaping from town."

"Well, I mean when June marries, and Fred's off in boarding school."

"Fred's not going to boarding school." It did not take them long to work up to trouble, she reflected in discouragement. But Van was mild tonight.

"You spoil him," he said temperately.

"I don't spoil him. It's that you're so jealous of him, Van, and always measuring what I do for him by what I do for you. . . . We're back where we started from," she thought.

"I don't seem to worry about Mary or June."

"No, they're girls."

"Gwen, that's ridiculous!"

A pause. Then Van said in a softened tone:

"Lord, I was thinking tonight of all the wonderful times we've had together! Ships, and Europe, and New York hotels."

"I know." She was going to add, "If you'd only learn a little common sense," but she refrained.

"You know I had an agent looking out for a country place for us, Gwen?"

"I know. But I knew it wouldn't be my kind of a place. This is."

Van countered presently that he did not see exactly what she had seen in this house, although it was certainly a magnificent old place and had some fine trees on it, and a wonderful view. Cheap, too, for acreage around this part of the country was usually a thousand an acre. The house was not worth anything, of course; he would have to get estimates as to whether it would be better to fix it up, or pull it down and put up a whole new place.

However, he would do anything she wanted. They could make it habitable, and then see how they liked it. It was never necessary for her to go to such extremes, because he was always willing and ready to do anything in God's world that would make her happy! As far as their circle in San Francisco went, to hell with it! He was as glad as she to get out of the Clay Street place; this new place was only a forty-minute run from town, and he personally had always liked the idea of living in the country. But she

would have to let him have the plumbing all overhauled, for that concerned the children's health.

"Now that may mean that we all get out of here for a few weeks. Only a few weeks, Gwen! I'll have 'em do it as fast as I can. We'll put 'em on night shift. I'll get a man into the garden, too. We'll have to have pretty much all that old rubbish torn out, and the place plowed up, and then we'll get a landscape architect in here. That is, unless you—*you*, mind you!—decide that you'd rather build the whole thing over. We could rent some little place in Belmont for Violet and the kids, and maybe go on a little trip?"

"I want to stay right here through it all," she said.

"O.K. Whatever you like," Van answered, after a moment.

He lowered his voice, his eyes on hers.

"Don't you think you can ever escape me," he said. "I'll do anything. My cards are on the table. There's no life for me without you. I'm fifty years old, and I'm in love with my wife! I know I throw you down. I know I'm a rotter in some ways. But don't fool yourself, you're tied to me for life. Why, I'd fight the entire state of California, I'd appeal to every court in the land before I let you go! I love you."

He slid to his knees and tightened his arms about her and kissed her. And she knew that for the hundredth time they were reconciled.

"Don't kiss me! I'm all dirty and horrid!" Gwen apologized. "There's something wrong with the water system, and we could only get hot water downstairs. But the man's coming tomorrow, and they said they'd have the telephone put in tomorrow, too."

"What did you do to your hand?"

"Oh, a nail stuck into it. It's not bad."

"Where's the drug outfit?" He went downstairs; returned with cotton and antiseptic and tape. "Gosh, there's a lot to do in this place!" Van said, returning. He worked over her cut hand tenderly and expertly. When it was bandaged, and she had found him slippers, and his razor and his brushes, they were talking together in tones not unlike their usual peaceful late-evening discourse.

He came over to kneel down again beside her and kiss her good night.

"Listen, no more of this divorce nonsense, Gwen! A swell chance you'd have, trying to run this place and raise our kids! Anything you want me to

do, you ask me to do, but no more fights."

"No more fights." One arm was laid loosely on his shoulder; her eyes were very near his. "I suppose it's no use asking you not to do the things that make me mad," she said simply.

"Not any more use than my asking you not to do the things that make *me* mad!" he countered cheerfully.

"Well——" Gwen said, on a sigh.

"You're thinking of that Douglas dinner. I admit I made a kind of a fool of myself. But that ass Campbell was making such a fuss about you, damn him! Now don't go back to that. I don't care a whoop what they think of me, anyway."

"It's what *I* think of you."

"Oh, you understand me! I'm not worried about you!" He went to his own bed. "I wish to goodness those kids wouldn't leave their bicycles right in the middle of the drive," he complained. "Someone's going to get killed on one of those damn things someday. Who drove the other car down?"

"I drove mine and Sing Lee drove May down in the old car."

"I hate that Chink to drive the cars."

"He's never had an accident."

"Not with our cars he hasn't, and after I talk to him tomorrow he never will!"

"Now please don't get him all excited, Van. We depend upon him, for these first weeks anyhow. I've got to get Mary and Fred started in school, and June's getting off and everything. I can't lose Sing Lee."

"You'll not lose him! Is there a furnace in this place?"

"An old coal one."

"Well, we'll have to get an oil one in, before cold weather, too. I don't know," Van said speculatively, having rolled himself comfortably into the covering of his couch, and lying on his back. "I don't know but what I ought to have this place torn down; it'll run into money to fix it up, and then what have you got? I could talk to young Preston; he was showing me some stunning plans for country houses the other day, and I could get an estimate, anyway. This is a good site. You're away from the crowd and yet you're within half-an-hour of town or the ball games. Any night we could motor in

to the theater or to a concert. If we put a Spanish place here—patios and tiles —that sort of thing——"

"I like it the way it is!" Gwen wailed in her soul. But she was too tired to start fresh arguing. She put out her light and went to sleep.

CHAPTER XXV

GWEN crossed the big hotel lobby to the desk.

"For Mrs James G. Baker," she said to the clerk. "Mrs Vandyke Bellamy calling."

"Please go up," the clerk said after a moment's telephoning. But Gwen was not destined to go all the way upstairs before meeting Sheila. The next descending elevator brought Sheila and two children down with a rush, and the sisters were in each other's arms.

Breathless, laughing, their arms intertwined, they presently went up to the big apartment on the east side of the hotel where green-grilled balconies hung over the fascinating jumble of Chinatown's belled and turreted roofs, and the spars and masts and ruffled waters of San Francisco's bay.

"Aunt Gwen, where's Mary and Fred? Mummy said we'd see them!"

"Fanny, my darling, they had to stay home, because I had to come in with Uncle Van, and he had to have a tooth out, and he's in the hospital. Isn't that too bad?"

"Really, Gwen?" her sister said.

"Really," Gwen said, solemn eyes upon the children. "But you will see them," she went on, "because I'm going to ask Mummy if you can come home with me and see their slide and their donkey and their windmill——"

"Oh, Mummy, can we?" Peter and Fanny begged, jumping up and down.

"Would Van stand for it, Gwen?"

"Stand for it! He'd love it."

"With a toothache and all?"

"He won't have any toothache. He had to keep an ice pack on it, so he went to the Stanford Hospital for a few hours. I'm to pick him up there at four. He always loves to have children at the house, Sheila, and I've loads of room. One wing of my terrible old barn of a house has a mansard roof, and all those rooms are nursery. You and Link can come down for them on Sunday, and I'll cook you steaks in the garden if it's decent weather. Or you can wait until after election."

“They’d love it, and it would be a perfect blessing to me,” Sheila said. “They’re going out to Minna Patterson’s children for lunch, but they’ll be back. Half past three o’clock. I’ll telephone her. Oh, Gwen darling, how good to see you again!”

“Do you know it’s two years, Sheila?”

“Do I know it! But it will never be so long again. Now that the children are so much bigger, we’re coming home every summer.”

The hotel rooms were full of trunks—Sheila’s smart trunks with the orange and blue bars on them. Sheila’s beautiful fur coat was flung on a bed. She and a hotel maid had been straightening and assorting her clothes and the children’s. But with Gwen’s arrival she stopped, and they sat on the balcony and looked off at the bay. Autumn sunshine was pouring over the world, but the water was flecked with whitecaps.

“Gwen, what a climate, when you can plan an out-of-door lunch in November!”

“We use my little grill all winter long. To think you’ve not seen my house, Sheila! You’ll laugh at it, but I know you’ll love it.”

“I’ve not seen the children for two years.”

“Think of it! And yours have grown so. Little Peter’s going to be tall, isn’t he?”

“He’s like me, we think. And Fanny’s like Link. A responsible, respectable human being. I’m so proud of her, and yet I adore my boy, too. And Fanny is good in school, and dancing school, a thoroughly satisfactory child.”

“Has it been all happiness, Sheila?”

“All happiness. I wonder why”—Sheila’s eyes filled—“I wonder why a few women get men like Link? Men they can be proud of; men the whole country is proud of,” she said. “It frightens me sometimes, Gwen. No woman deserves what I’ve had for ten years. Going about with him, taking possession of my darling old brick house in Washington; Fanny and Peter; friends and summer trips. It’s as if I had a guardian angel,” Sheila said, “someone standing between me and the shadow. I look at other women’s lives and see what they have to bear, and I wonder!”

“It’s a good deal the way you take what life brings you,” Gwen said with a wise air. “Lots of people imagine their troubles, make them up as they go

along. Whatever I had to bear, it seems to me I'd find some way to make it fit in."

"You bear Van," Sheila submitted, with a smile. Gwen flushed and laughed.

"He's my oldest child," she said simply. "But you mustn't judge him as the way he was when you were out here three years ago," she said quickly. "He was nervous then; he was handling the Hurley case and we were crowded into that Clay Street house. He had to read a roomful of letters on that case—a *room*ful! It was the biggest strain—and I suppose the biggest triumph of his life. You must admit, Sheila, that he was much nicer when we were in Washington that winter."

"Do you know you're tremendously good-looking, Gwen?" Sheila said, after hesitating, and deciding not to answer.

"Do you think so? I'd love to believe you. I was just thinking that you look lovelier than ever, Sheila."

"Fanny's cute-looking, but not pretty," Sheila pursued the subject. "Is your Mary still so lovely?"

"We think so. You'll see her. And June will be home, too. She comes down Friday, and she's bringing a girl and two boys. You'll not know June. She's come out of her shell like a new girl! Van's very proud of her."

"It sounds to me as if you were happier, Gwen. As if things were going the way you like them. A house full of children, and an outdoor grill, and the country."

"Eventually, I suppose, things go the way you like them," Gwen observed thoughtfully. "I always hated the city. And then, I've had Mother with me this year; she came down for a whole month, and she came to know Van better, and they really liked each other. And of course that was wonderful!"

"You're wonderful," Sheila said, watching her. "Well, come now, let's decide about lunch."

"Why not downstairs?"

"Oh, we'll have it right here on the balcony. Let's have crabs in some fashion, Gwen. I'm still Sheila Washburton of Kenthill when it comes to crabs."

“I don’t know that they’re in.” They sent for a menu, debated over it. When the man had gone away again, Gwen said: “Sheila, isn’t this fun? Imagine, you and me, here in the Fairmont Hotel ordering our lunch as calmly as if we weren’t the Washburtons of Kenthill who never had any money and never *would* have any!”

“I don’t get used to it,” Sheila said, with an almost awed look in her beautiful eyes. “Living in Washington, wife of a political personality—well, it still seems like a dream! And Gwen, it’ll be so wonderful if Link does get in, and I go back there as Mrs Senator Baker! We’re lucky, I guess.”

And much later, when they had been over the family news again and again, when plans for the week end had been made, and Sheila had given her sister some idea of the excitements and obligations of a senatorial campaign, she returned to the same theme:

“You feel you’re lucky, too, Gwen? You are happy, aren’t you?”

“I ought to be,” Gwen said. “Wait until you see my girl and my boy. My girls, I ought to say, because June is like another daughter.”

“More like a little sister. But wasn’t she a problem for a while?”

“I suppose she was. Van’s attitude toward her made her a problem, anyway. He was eternally afraid that she and I were going to make plans without him, cut him out somehow. It actually made him dislike her. Then when Mary and Fred came he rather washed his hands of the whole harem; he was in a minority. But gradually I got him to let June live with us—her grandmother had died and the poor little thing was so forlorn, and so by degrees, what with Mary beginning to captivate him, we humanized him.”

“That’s what you’ve done, of course. And you’ve worked it out for happiness for everyone.” Sheila paused. “You’ve never wanted to leave him, Gwen?” she asked suddenly.

“Why do you ask that?” Gwen said.

“I don’t know. Only, he’s so much older than you. And of course it was perfectly clear to us when you were in Washington that he was making life horribly difficult for you. Remember that you wanted to fly home because one of the twins was sick, and he was so—so harsh? And then your having to steal a march on him and literally elope to your new house a year ago ____”

“I wrote you that?” Gwen smiled. “Well, you have to manage him that way sometimes,” she said. “And now that he’s spent quite a lot of money on

roads and paint and a furnace and terraces, he's in love with 'Maple Glen.' Isn't that a wonderful name? It was over the gate in filigree letters when we bought the place. It just fits it. Van really loves it. He brings men down for lunches at the grill, and that's the kind of hospitality I like, and we've had tremendous satisfaction out of it."

"You're a wonderful woman," Sheila said slowly.

"Do you think so?" Gwen asked, pleased.

"Yes, you're perfectly charming, Gwen. I don't know any other woman of thirty-one who's in the least like you. You've got—dignity. You've won to something."

"I'm living," Gwen said. "It isn't always easy living. But when you have a husband and children and a stepdaughter and a mother and father and sister and nephews and nieces, you—you *live*. I suppose that's what I've always wanted."

"Does he ever act like a human being, Gwen?"

"Van? Of course he does! When we're alone together he can be perfectly charming. It's only that when other people are around he gets—queer."

"But other people always *are* around."

"Well," said Gwen with a laugh, "that's why I bury myself in the country. For years I fooled myself that it was just that I didn't like formal dinners, didn't like meeting strangers. But as a matter of fact I really like society; I have fun enough if I go to women's clubs or have guests over the week end. It was only—that. That he is unhappy if I pay any attention to anyone else. And you *have* to, Sheila, you have to be friendly and easy. So —I simply don't go," Gwen added, on a philosophical note.

"I like him, lots of ways, and I trust him," Sheila said. "But I do think he can be terribly trying. And why it should come to you," she went on, "when you've always been so good-natured and so sweet, I don't know. When I have an angel for a husband, a man who never fails me! Gwen," Sheila added, on a different note, "do you remember my wedding ten years ago, and what we talked about that night—the night before I was married, in our room?"

Gwen looked at her steadily; her face suddenly paling.

"Of course I do."

"Have you ever thought of it since?"

"I suppose so."

"I said we've never had a shadow," Sheila said. "But of course I've had that shadow. The knowledge that I'd been an utter fool. It was with me on my wedding night; it's with me today. When Link praises me, when he asks me questions about my high-school love affairs—there's always that to push into the background. But I've proved one thing, haven't I?" she went on in a lighter tone—"that one *may* bury it all, forget it, erase it and leave no trace."

"You surely have," Gwen said steadily. "You knew he died?"

"Who died?"

"Tony Lamont. He was killed in an accident last year. A plane that came down."

"I didn't know it! I think I'm glad."

"I was glad. It seemed to—close the chapter. His boy is cured, you know, and I believe he's in college. Fate has wiped it all out, Sis, and you ought to, too."

"You always know what to say," Sheila said with a grateful glance. "Yes, it's all over! Let's forget it!"

When Link came in, a few minutes later, both women were laughing.

"Gwen—you—are—stunning!" he said, holding her at arm's length, after a brotherly kiss. "You're thinner, and you've got such a lovely tan. Isn't she beautiful, Sheila?"

"I've been telling her so," Sheila said. Gwen looked, glowing, from one to the other, and there was an interval of compliments and laughter before she said that she must go. She had an errand at the White House; she had to pick up Sheila's children at half past three, and at four she would call at the hospital for Van. "Your posters are all up and down the Peninsula," she told Link. "Is it exciting?"

"The finish is. I'm on the air three times today; I fly to Los Angeles tomorrow. And now that you've got the kids maybe my wife'll fly with me. Back Saturday morning."

"Speeches down there?" Sheila asked.

"Four mass meetings. They say it's all very hopeful, which is gratifying, because the other man is a Glendale man."

"What do you think, Link?"

“I think I’m safe. Of course you never know.” Link was nicer, gentler, finer, somehow, than ever. He looked like what he was: a keenly absorbed, happy, honest man, serving his country with the same scrupulous affection with which he guarded the honor and safety of his wife and children.

“You’ll be President someday, Link.”

“Ha!” Link said, with his broad slow smile.

“He doesn’t have to be President to suit *me*,” Sheila said, with a look. Link sat down on the edge of her chair, put a careless arm about her shoulders.

“Nice girl, this wife of mine,” he said.

“I ought to be apologizing for all this confusion,” Sheila began. “I asked the hotel for a maid to help me, but she couldn’t do much, naturally, because she didn’t know where things went. I’ll send the children’s trunk down tomorrow, Gwen; it’s the greatest blessing in the world to have them there with their cousins during these last days!”

“It’s the greatest joy in the world to have them,” Gwen said.

“Sure Van won’t mind?” This was Link.

“He’ll love it.”

“There appears to be a convention on in this hotel,” Link said. “I thought it might be the election excitement, but they tell me they have about three national conventions a week here, all the year round.”

“Like the hotel in Washington that said, ‘We will always give you a bed regardless of the conventions,’ ” said Sheila.

“Then I don’t see you until Sunday, darling?” Gwen asked.

“It might be Saturday night, Gwen. I’m talking in San José and Mountain View on Saturday. And there’s a dinner in Redwood City on Sunday.”

“Oh, Link, do come for Saturday night!” But her heart sank a little. Van might not like this casual hospitality. However, she thought she could deal with Van. “Telephone when you get back from the South,” she said, departing. Sheila walked with her to the elevator.

“You’re the most satisfactory person in the world, Gwen,” she said.

“And that, I suppose, is the nicest thing one sister can say of another.” Gwen went on her way smiling, with a feeling in her heart that she liked.

Children to manage, appointments to keep, small toys to pick up somewhere for the expectant little people at home. And plenty of buoyant health and high spirits upon which to manage it.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE hotel elevator was filled with delegates to the convention with ribbon badges in their buttonholes. Entertainment Committee. Room Committee. Registration Committee. The American Medical Society was having its annual meeting.

Crossing the big foyer, thinking that doctors were unusually nice-looking men, she was stopped. She was looking squarely into a broad fine face; she saw white teeth flash against its brownness. Dick Latimer!

There was a shallow little parlor at the right of the big doors; against its walls chairs were aligned. Other little groups and couples were murmuring there when Dick and Gwen went in. She was only vaguely aware of them.

They sat down, his hand still tightly holding hers. Fog pressed against the Mason Street windows. At three o'clock on a November afternoon fog usually began to blanket the city. A slim Chinese boy in prune-and-blue brocade came in and lighted a few scattered lamps. A page looked in, repeated inquiringly: "Doctor Miller?" and went away.

"This is too much luck!" Dick said. "I'd been wondering where you were. I'd been thinking I'd drive to Kenthill on Sunday and see if you were there."

"We've never lived there," she said in an odd voice. "We did live in Sacramento, and then here in San Francisco. But we've been country people for over a year now."

"Gwen, you're so beautiful!" the man said, under his breath. She looked at him, speechless but smiling. The whole world was smiling. A strange glow, a quiet radiance of glory seemed to envelop the hotel lobby, the wide hallways in which men were talking and coming and going, the tall draped windows against which the fingers of the fog were spreading. The hush of something like recovered ecstasy was upon Gwen's heart; she had forgotten that there could be such a feeling. A feeling that put magic into everything, that sent delicate fibers of joy trembling through her entire being. She was exquisitely conscious of being Gwen Bellamy, young and lovely, with her warm, thrilling hand held by this brown, strong, bigger hand, and Dick's unforgotten blue eyes fixed on her own.

“Tell me everything, my dear,” he said. She remembered the voice of quiet authority. She remembered the feeling of being possessed by the greatness of him, swept off her own feet, carried out to sea by the sheer force of his personality.

They tried to talk, to break the silence of almost ten years. It was as if every word were tipped with lightning. They had to stop, to catch breath, to let its wonders break about them.

“You live in the country?”

“Back of Belmont—south of Belmont, toward the Skyline Boulevard. We have an old place there, and two cows and a corn patch and apricot trees. We’ve been there more than a year.”

“And you’ve children?”

“Two, besides my stepdaughter, who’s grown now. She’s a sophomore in college, but she comes home every Friday.”

It was getting easier. She told him about Sheila, of Link’s career, of the Washington brick house that she had visited two years ago. The news of Link’s candidacy surprised him. He said he had seen the name Baker on the roadside advertisements and in the paper, but had not identified the man as Sheila’s husband.

In return she questioned him. He had not married. He was to be in San Francisco only for the week of the convention. He had lived in Germany for a year; now he was working in Philadelphia. He had an apartment there; an old colored servant. His associate doctor was the great Van Dorn, the world’s authority in his special line.

“And your mother?”

“Still here, in charge of the linen room at the City and County. And still with the little apartment on Twenty-eighth Street. But she took time out to come and visit me last year. She arrived in the worst thunder storm we’d ever had in Philadelphia, and she stayed for the worst November blizzard on record. Then she thought she’d had enough, and home she came!”

“You finished up in Edinburgh, Dick?”

“I cut the last six months because I had a chance in Munich. I went there for two years, but when this Philadelphia man, Van Dorn, came there, we got working together, and he brought me back with him.”

“I didn’t know anything. I’ve often thought of telephoning your mother, she was so kind to me. But I was afraid.”

“Afraid of Mother?”

“Afraid she’d think I had behaved badly.”

“I knew you hadn’t, Gwen.”

Gwen was silent, unbelievably shaken.

“No, I knew there was some reason,” Dick went on. “You couldn’t have planned our little place in Edinburgh, and shopping for the periwinkles, and the green lamp—all that. You couldn’t have planned it and then—changed all of a sudden.”

Her faithful eyes met his.

“No, I didn’t change,” she said.

“That’s all I wanted to know!” Dick said. And then again, in a whisper, as if to himself, “That’s all I wanted to know!”

“You’re happy?” he demanded suddenly, out of a silence.

Gwen hesitated, smiled.

“I have times of being completely happy. I have adorable children,” she said. “Life—life has its difficulties, of course. Van, my husband, is a temperamental person; you never know quite where to find him. But loyal—loyal to the point of—of absurdity. And generous. And we’ve prospered.”

“I see you’ve prospered. You’re a very grand lady.”

“Not usually. Usually in Chinese cotton slacks and a bandanna.”

“It sounds more like you!”

“You’ll come down there and see us? See my children?”

“I’ll have to see your children.” He looked at her squarely. “I had thought I would go home on Sunday night—most of these men go then,” he said. “But I think—I wonder if I ought to stay and see your children?”

She glanced at him, ready to laugh. But her expression changed, and she looked serious, too.

“You see, my dear,” Dick said, “it took me two years to—get down to earth. To get over thinking and dreaming of you. For months I walked the streets of Edinburgh, hour after hour, pounding along in any direction, just trying to escape. I worked—it seemed to me that work would help. I studied

everything I was supposed to study, and everything else I could lay my hands on. German—I took lists of German verbs and went at them like a madman. There were streets in Edinburgh, Gwen, that I couldn't walk through without almost going crazy. Streets where there were little apartments that might have been ours. I thought I'd gotten rid of you. But today, the instant I saw you, I knew of course that I hadn't. I've got it all to fight over again. And so that's why, perhaps, it would be wiser——" He stopped speaking.

"I'm not hearing what you're saying," Gwen said, with a little laugh of nervous excitement. "I'm really not. It's so wonderful to be talking to you again!"

"I've thought of it a thousand times, wondered how it would come about. But I never dreamed that we'd have this little time alone, we two, to get used, just a little, to seeing each other again!"

"This little time is up, Dick. I have to get Sheila's children—they were with a friend for lunch—and I have to pick up a sick husband."

"Sick?"

"Just a tooth extraction. But he's had quite an ordeal; he was awake almost all night, and he won't want to be kept waiting."

"Are you afraid of him?" the man asked curiously.

"No!" she said, laughing.

"You'll want a taxi? I'll go with you."

"My car's parked right across the street."

"I'll go there with you." He walked across the street with her, and Gwen felt, even in this casual association, the old strange power of him, the quiet mastery. Her ears had been hungering for long years for the sound of his voice; her hand was tingling from the touch of his hand. It was all ecstasy, ecstasy, ecstasy!

She got into the driver's seat, smiled into the eyes so close to her own.

"San Carlos is the post-office address, Dick. We're four miles from the station, due west."

"I'll drive, when I come."

"And when will you come?" Her thoughts went to Van. He would not be cordial to this guest of all guests. That was a foregone conclusion.

"When may I?"

"Sunday, perhaps? For lunch?" Sheila and Link would be there and Van perhaps a little less likely to make a scene.

"Sunday! This is Wednesday. Sunday," Dick said judicially, "seems a long way off. You've a telephone?"

He wrote the number down.

"But not tomorrow, Dick. Van has to be in bed a day or two, and of course he won't feel like much."

"I'm talking to the crowd tomorrow, and tomorrow night I'm lecturing at a couple of hospitals. It won't be tomorrow. I'll telephone."

"Good-by." She put her right hand toward him and felt both his hands on it.

"Good-by, my dear."

That was all. Gwen turned the car carefully into California Street and went out to Buchanan; the children were ready, waiting on the sidewalk. It was quarter to four; she explained to their hostess that she had been unavoidably delayed.

"No matter at all," said the Patterson children's mother amiably, "we're sorry they can't stay longer. You're Sheila's sister, aren't you?"

"I'm Gwendolyn Bellamy, yes. Say good-by, darlings." Gwen lost no time in slipping down the hills to Broadway, flying back to Van Ness and the hospital doors. Clocks were striking four as she ran upstairs. Van would be furious; he was furious.

"What kept you?"

"I'm so sorry, dear. I got caught in traffic downtown. I had some shopping to do, you know, and then—I've Sheila's children with me. I hope you don't mind? It was such a blessing to her, and she hardly knew what to do with them in the hotel, and Mary will be all agog to have a cousin to manage. I told Sheila this was one of the things you were wonderful about!"

His angry eyes softened.

"I thought Sheila's child was older?" he said sulkily.

"That won't worry Mary!" Gwen had been deftly helping him dress.

"Take these children shopping?"

"Oh no. They were with Mrs Patterson, I don't know who she is, but Sheila knew them in Washington. I picked them up there just now."

"What time did you leave Sheila?"

"About half past two."

"Oh well," he said, mollified. "I thought you'd been gossiping with her all this time, and it made me mad. But if you've been shopping, that's different! Meet anyone downtown?"

"Not a soul that I knew."

"How long are the kids going to be with us?"

"Well, I thought until Sunday. But if you have the slightest objection I can telephone Sheila——"

"No, I have no objection. But it seems to me you do crowd me a little. I'm just out of the hospital, and a lot of noisy kids—— However. I sit on the front seat with you."

"Unless you'd be more comfortable, dear, with the rug in the back. I could take both children up front with me."

"I'd be more comfortable in the front with *you*."

"Then that's the way we'll do it." Gwen helped him with his overcoat, gathered his magazines together, paid the nurse and stopped at the desk to pay the bill. She gave Van her arm as they went slowly to the car; he walked lamely, like an old man.

Fanny and Peter behaved beautifully, and Van was charming with them. Gwen drove across Polk and Market; passed the City and County Hospital that was so full of memories, and Twenty-eighth Street where Dick's mother lived. She had never made this trip without thinking of him, but today the thoughts swept over her like a suffocating flame. Her whole being was on fire. The blood in her veins was like a thin hot wine; her heart paused, her thoughts wandered, and then with a quick warm rush both were with him again. She had been talking to Dick, looking into his eyes, feeling the touch of his hand.

When they got home in early autumn dark the first obligation was to get Van comfortable in bed, with an ice pack for his swollen cheek and a long drink clinking at his bedside. Then Gwen settled the small guests, saw Mary take capable charge of her taller cousin, superintended a meal at which the little cousins were all in gales of good spirits.

Van wanted aspirin and milk toast; nothing else. Gwen brought the medicine herself, went down to the kitchen to see that the toast was thin and brown and the milk not boiled.

"You're a darling to bring me this," Van said; "sit here while I eat it."

Her own supper was ready, and she was tired and hungry, but she sat chatting with him while he ate, arranged her hair and freshened her face, waited until his cigarette was finished, and left him composed and content, ready for sleep. He had missed much sleep the night before, and even while she watched him his eyes were closing.

After her own dinner she was held in the parlor for half an hour by a village woman who crept in like a thief, explaining that she knew Mr Bellamy hated unexpected company, but she did want Mrs Bellamy's help on the Rummage Sale Committee. Gwen, with Van safe upstairs in bed, could be gracious; she would do anything Mrs Hochheimer asked.

The visitor was just leaving when May appeared in the doorway to announce that Dr Latimer was there.

"Oh, dear me, and I've got to run!" the committee woman said, apologetically. She went out, and Dick came in. Gwen stood perfectly still, facing him, in one of the moments when life seems too full of sweet for bearing.

Gwen awakened with a sense that something pleasant was going to happen in the day ahead of her. It was just seven o'clock, but the alarm had not rung as usual because Van, who always shaved and dressed in time to be prompt at the eight-o'clock breakfast and expected everyone else to be prompt too, was away from home.

She lay warm and cozy in the blankets for a few minutes, thinking of her morning program. She would not bathe until later—at half past ten or eleven —for the strenuous demands of the nursery always did away with the good effects of a bath.

Morning light was coming in through the Venetian blinds. Gwen loved the tempered effect of the bars of light and shade, and Van often looked at them with great satisfaction. For it had been one of Van's shrewd business instincts to perceive just what these blinds were going to mean to housewives everywhere, and he had early secured the west-coast agency of one of the finest lines of them. Just another of his side interests, his "fliers" as he called them, that meant prosperity for the Bellamys. Everything he

touched of late had seemed to prosper, and if in earlier years he had occasionally made a mistake, and had lost what to Gwen seemed a breath-taking amount of money, she had lost her breath again at the speed with which he recovered it, shifted investments, adjusted his income tax, assured her that the loss was only about one third of what it sounded.

Her room was large and old-fashioned and comfortable; its darkness and heaviness had been lightened by successful wall treatment, brilliant hangings, furniture covered with a striped material of dull gold and tawny brown. On this crisp autumn morning sunshine was streaming in and lending a natural effect to the warmth that was pouring from the radiators. Van had departed by air at five o'clock the night before for Seattle, and Gwen had telephoned Dick an hour later. She would lunch with him today. The thought set all her pulses humming and lent a thrill even to the most commonplace events of the day.

But this day was not commonplace. It was election day, and she and Sheila were going early into town to join Link and share all the excitements of the campaign's finish. Sheila had come down yesterday to Gwen to be with her children; she and Gwen had made plans for the four of them. They were to have a special party today after Sheila's pair had been visitors all morning at school. The whole house was consequently in an uproar from the moment the earliest bird among them awakened, but when Gwen went in her house dress to the nursery they were already in full swing.

Sheila slept later; the breakfast gong had echoed through the stately downstairs halls before she appeared in wrapper and slippers to join Gwen and the children on the stairs. June was at home; she had come in the night before just to share some of the fun, but was to be off in her own car for an eleven-o'clock class. The little boys were riding on the banisters; the girls seated and bumping from stair to stair. All four presently circled like puppies over the stairway and hall and returned, taking the steps two at a time at the cost of a partial dislocation of their supple, slender little bodies, and swimming downward on their stomachs to an accompaniment of loud shouts and squeals.

"Well, Gwen, this is the day!"

"We'll know everything, this time tomorrow!"

"It gives me chills," said Sheila.

"It gives me cramps."

"I couldn't stand it if I were Uncle Link," June said. "I'd die."

"Maybe he *will* die," Fred offered, climbing to a chair seat that had been raised by a square carpet pillow. "Mom, can't we have jam? Can't we have jam? May forgot the jam! May, can't we have jam? Mom——"

"Hush-sh-sh!" Gwen said, tying napkins behind small scrubbed red ears. "May'll bring the jam long before you're ready for it, won't you, May? Sit still, Fred. That's my sweet girl, Mary, to pass the sugar first to Fanny. . . . I'll see Dick today! I'll see Dick today! I'll see Dick today! . . . What did you say, darling?"

"I said I wist we could always live here, Aunt Gwen," Peter Baker said in a defiant little-boy voice.

"I wish you could! You don't know how happy that makes me, Peter. Do you take cream on this, dear? . . . I'll see Dick. 'One o'clock under the clock!' . . . And here's the toast, Mary, and here are the strawberries. But everyone drink his orange juice first! Finish it, Fred. Now look what you've done! Upset it again! May, we'll need a napkin here, please. Did it get on your wrapper, Sheila? Do you know what some mothers would do to you, Fred? They'd take a knout——"

"With nails in the ends of it?" Fred demanded eagerly.

"Rusty nails. May, we'll all have scrambled eggs."

"Gwen, you have darling children, that's what Aunt Sheila thinks," said Sheila.

"May doesn't think so, do you, May? A glass of something spills at every meal."

"Well, whin ye haven't table clot's but just mop up the wood, who cares?" asked May.

"It's really a lovely room, Gwen."

"This room? It is lovely, if you like paneled walls and bay windows. And sunshine, of course. I was rather in despair about this room, but somehow we all like it now."

"Mother, I'm off, because I have to do a paper," said June.

"Good-by, my sweet, drive carefully. Have you money?"

"More people ought to take these old places and restore them, not change them," Sheila said. "When you wrote me about this last year it seemed perfectly terrible. But you've made it all homelike."

“What’s the plot, Sheila?” Gwen was presently asking in a businesslike tone. “What time should we start for town? I telephoned Miss Raikes last night, and she’s perfectly delighted to have Fanny and Peter for visitors at school this morning. They’ll all be home at one, and then Violet, my maid, has a regular program for them. I think the Wynne infants may come over for supper.”

“Well, Link said he would be at headquarters until noon,” Sheila said, considering it. “If we went there we would probably be raced about the polls; we’re slated for that Palace Hotel lunch at one. Then more of the same thing until we go to the Hunters’, say around five. They’re having a sort of open house for the faithful, and by nine we’ll be getting returns.”

“Oh, what thrills! But Sheila,” Gwen could say, for they were alone now, Violet having collected the children for the start in the waiting school omnibus, “I’ve a lunch date. Is that all right?”

Sheila looked up from the pages of the paper whose political forecasts and advice she was reading.

“Dick?”

Gwen nodded, flushing radiantly.

“How long will he be here?”

“Only a day or two more.”

“How often have you seen him, Gwen?”

“This will be the fifth time.”

“The fifth time! I thought you hadn’t seen him for years until he showed up here Sunday.”

“No, I met him the day you got here, Sheila. Wednesday. We talked in the hotel, and he came down here that night and we talked for about an hour. Van was in bed with a tooth, remember, and you stayed with Link? On Saturday Van had to go into town for a treatment and a consultation with two other lawyers on the Brown case, and I went with him. He thought you’d gotten back from Los Angeles and were at the hotel, but later when he picked me up there, I told him you weren’t getting in until five and would come straight here. He thought I’d been to lunch alone and to a movie. But I went out to the hospital, and afterward lunched with Dick, and we talked. And then Dick walked in here on Sunday and had lunch with us.”

“And Van liked him. Good heavens, if he knew!” Sheila gasped. “But Dick was especially nice to Van, and that always gets him.”

“It gets anyone. I began this only with the pleasure it was to see an old friend,” Gwen said. “I’m ending it by—breaking my heart!”

There was a silence. Then Sheila said in a low tone:

“Don’t say that, Gwen!”

“It’s true. That day at the hotel when we met each other, I would have said that it was only—only stirring an old memory. But when he came in here that night, the—the warmness of his hand, Sheila, the tone of his voice—just sitting there by the fire was magic——” Gwen’s voice stopped; she looked away, her eyes narrowed, her brow faintly wrinkled, as if her head hurt. “He’s everything now, Sheila,” she presently went on. “Everything. He’s all the confidence and laughter I lost when I married Van. He’s companionship, and—and delight. He’s the other half of me. When I’m with him I’m what I might have been, and life’s what it might have been, too!”

Sheila sat staring at her in uttermost distress, but Gwen did not meet her eyes.

“But Gwen dearest, he loved you, and you didn’t wait for him!” Sheila pleaded after a silence. “You could have waited. You didn’t have to marry Van!”

Gwen seemed to awaken, to come to herself with a start. This was Sheila talking to her; beautiful Sheila, whose own love and life had been a wonderful dream. The pain and doubt left Gwen’s face; courage and color came back, and she laughed on a sensible, shamefaced note.

“I know I didn’t! And a very good husband he’s been to me, too. And if I don’t go out and talk meals with Sing Lee we’ll not get off this morning for Link’s election!”

CHAPTER XXVII

"She's either a wonderful actress," Sheila thought, "or she doesn't care as much as she thinks she does. After all, there was nothing to stop Gwen from marrying Dick Latimer, if she loved him. But she did turn terribly white, at breakfast. Well, all women couldn't marry Link, and he's the only perfect husband I ever knew!"

She was conscious of watching Gwen for a little while; anxious and disturbed. But as the pleasant morning hour went by, and Gwen was out bareheaded in the cold autumn sunshine laughing with the gardener, was packing children off to school, flying upstairs for rubbers, answering insistent telephones, her misgivings were somewhat quieted.

To Gwen, however, there was one undertone to everything she said and did today; an organ note of pure ecstasy that swelled and dimmed as her busy thoughts came and went upon a hundred household details.

"I'll see Dick at noon—I'll see Dick at noon—he's thinking about it now just as I am! I'll see Dick at noon!

"Meals!" she said in despair to Sheila. "I don't know what anyone's doing. Do you eat on election days? Let me see, Sing Lee. You have the children's meals all fixed. Well, I don't think we'll be home at all tonight, we'll probably stay at the hotel. But if we do come back I'll telephone. Then tomorrow—get a ham for dinner tomorrow. We may have a mob. Or get a turkey—get one from Mike if you can. I suppose Link will have people down tomorrow, congratulating him and everything, Sheila?"

"God grant it! I'm simply jelly inside," Sheila said.

"Have a good dinner tomorrow night," Gwen resumed, turning back to the cook. "Don't bother about lunch. It's lovely and warm, and if they come, I'll get something for lunch outside, canned hash, maybe, and noodles—I'll know by breakfast——"

When she went upstairs Sheila was in her room, ensconced with the papers in a great sun-flooded chair. Sheila's own gold and brown tints were exquisite against the stripes of the brocade; the sun flashed on her bright hair as Gwen came in.

“Come over here, Sis, and sit down. You like that man, don’t you?” Sheila asked without preamble.

“Terribly,” said Gwen, her throat thickening.

“But you know that nothing can come of that, Gwen?”

“Yes. That isn’t what bothers me. I don’t want anything I can’t have; I’m not an infant of sixteen,” Gwen said. “I want just what I’m having now. I want his friendship, the—the wings he puts into my life. I’m not going to run away with him. He hasn’t asked me to. But Sheila, I want friendship, horribly. I’ve never had a man friend. Just to lunch with him, and have him tell me what interests him, and tell him what I’m thinking about—that’s elixir! That’s champagne.”

“Forbidden wine,” Sheila offered, shaking her head.

“Oh, Sis, that’s so easy to say! It’s so different when it’s possessing you—coming between you and everything else!”

“Gwen dearest, he *is* fascinating. He is—tremendous. Both Link and I see that,” Sheila pleaded. “But—you could have waited for him, Gwen, and you chose Van. Nobody forced you. Now there are the children to think of. If you loved Dick, why did you marry Van and have children? People don’t have to have them. You’ve adorable children——”

“I know all that,” Gwen began, after a little pause in which she had looked with an odd expression at her sister. “D’you think I haven’t thought it out that far? D’you think I’m enjoying all this? I simply say that it has—swept me off my feet. Why did I have children? Because I’ve always loved children, because I wouldn’t be married and not have children! If I married Van I had to give him what he was expecting to get—a wife, not a silly fool who made terms after the bargain was closed! He loved me—that way, as a man loves his wife. I wasn’t happy when the first baby was coming so promptly,” Gwen went on, her eyes narrowed and reminiscent, her tone as if she spoke half to herself. “But when we lost him it almost killed me.”

“That baby wasn’t born alive, Gwen?”

“No, I was only about six months. But you know how you feel! It was fearfully hot weather, and I’d driven home alone to Kenthill from Sacramento, and Van got back from Washington unexpectedly and came after me. He always said it was the drive. But I think perhaps if I’d just come back with Polly, as I planned——

"However, he's kept his end of the bargain," Gwen went on more cheerfully, "there's never been another woman in his life. We've had a lot more—more happiness than anything else, as people have to have if they've got any sense at all! But this—this is different! I know it will all be over when Dick goes away, and I know that's going to be in a few days, but that doesn't mean it will be any easier. I don't know—I don't know what I'm going to do without him!"

She ended in a whisper, looking away, and for a few minutes Sheila was still.

"Whatever he says," Gwen continued after a moment, "whatever he does, seems to be—just what I've been waiting to hear—to know. Just to listen to him, while we're sitting at lunch, is infinite—infinite rest for me. I've tried to think," she went on, speaking hesitatingly, as if half to herself and finding her words with some difficulty, "I've tried to think what it'll mean to me when he goes away—when that side of me is all a blank again—and it seems as if I'd go mad, knowing that he's in the world, and not able to speak to him! But I won't, of course. I won't, of course! Only now, while he's here, I *have* to see him."

Again Sheila was silent, looking in troubled fashion at her sister, looking away.

"Which isn't half as serious as it sounds, so don't look so sad!" Gwen said in a lighter tone, getting to her feet. "Now let me think what else I have to do before we start for town." And cheerfully she went about various errands in the roomy, airy old house; out into the November garden to talk to the old gardener; upstairs again to find Violet and ask if the children's new sweaters had come; back to Sheila, who was in the guest room now, busily dressing for town. "Sheila, I'm having a shower," Gwen said, "and doing my hands, it'll take me—oh, half an hour. Let's say half past ten?"

"I'll be ready! I wish this day's work was over," Sheila said presently, coming to Gwen's bathroom door. "Election day is enough to put you into a hospital bed!"

"But worth it—if you win. Like having a baby!" Gwen said gaily. "It'll be so wonderful, Sheila, if when you go to bed tonight and Link's all tired out with congratulations and compliments, you know that when you go back to Washington everyone'll be wild with joy! As for Mother," she went on, now dressing rapidly, "she'll simply expire with pride. When I telephoned her the other day that you were coming she hardly spoke of you or the children. It was 'Now you tell Link Baker that he's not to come up here until

it's all over. I won't have him sacrificing his chances because Sheila wants to see me!' She said the whole town's as safe for Link as it would be for George Washington, and that Keane and Joe Saunders had been making speeches."

"Joe Saunders! I haven't thought of Joe for ten years," Sheila said.

"He married the Carters' cousin—she came up from Stockton to teach at Miss Kent's and Joe was bowled right over. She's awfully nice, too, Pete says. Sheila, you're going up there?"

"Oh yes, Thursday or Friday, for two or three days. I wouldn't go back without seeing Mother and Dad, and Pete's new baby. Gwen, you look very nice," Sheila said. "I don't know that I ever saw you look so smart."

For Gwen, already wearing her fur coat and adroitly tipped hat, had embellished her appearance with small pearl earrings, brilliant clips, immaculate gloves, and a frill of delicate rose-point that set off the severe lines of her plain suit.

"I think I look lovely," she said. "I'm going to wear old gloves until we leave the car. My bag, my keys. I'm ready."

They talked all the way into San Francisco, but Dr Richard Latimer was not mentioned again. There were plenty of other subjects to discuss, for the election was being hotly contested all along the line, and the wayside signs reminded them of claims of candidates for senator, governor, congressmen. It was all thrilling, and to find Link the grave, composed center of a very whirlpool of excitement at headquarters was thrilling, too. The morning papers had carried a half-page advertisement by his opponent making some flatly untrue statements as to Link's position; there was some concern about it, and some talk of libel, but Link remained calm. "Everyone who knows anything at all knows that isn't true," he said.

Through it all Gwen was acutely conscious of the moving minutes that were bringing her closer and closer to her meeting with Dick. But when quarter of one actually came, and she left Sheila and Link at the Palace Hotel, she felt suddenly flat and ashamed. A married woman thirty-two years old with a home and husband and children, with a fast-beating heart and burning cheeks, walking through the autumn cold of the city to meet an old sweetheart! She wished Sheila had come with her. She seriously thought of going back to join her sister.

Then she was at the Saint Francis, almost suffocated by her own quick, shallow breathing now; and there was the clock with its hands marking

seven minutes before the hour. She was early; it would not do to be early.

She walked down the corridor and looked blindly at the display of magazines, and felt an arm half about her, and heard a voice at her ear.

"Hello, dear. Right on the minute! I was afraid I was late. But I had an unexpected operation," Dick said. "I took Mother to see some cousins in Berkeley yesterday, and when I came back the message from the hospital was there. So I went to the Dante and arranged to operate this morning at ten.— I must buy you some flowers," he added seriously, as they turned to the flower stand. "Violets. I like violets."

"I love violets!" She put the great wet darkness of them against her face before pinning them on her shoulder. "I was a little early, I think. I seem to have no shame. I am Madame Sans-Gêne."

"Is that what that means?"

"That's what that means." The world was all right again now; more than all right. It was singing and shining. She and Dick had had lunch here before; she knew that she would never come to the Saint Francis again without remembering those hours. Today, and before, they had a corner table tucked away from the sight of the room; the music and lights were soft; Gwen looked at the bill of fare blindly; she did not care and she would not know what the waiter brought her.

"Whatever you're having I'll have."

"I'm having pig's head vinaigrette."

"Dick, how repulsive! I've never had it. It sounds so German."

"You'd better try it. It's delicious. No, it's not especially German." He told her of his years in Munich, and of the little restaurant where they served a wonderful pot roast and where a pianist played only Bach. "I used to go there. I got quite fond of Bach," he said.

"Did you have marvelous music there, Dick?"

"Well, I could have. But I was pretty busy." His good, friendly smile; his narrowed eyes smiling, too. The sound of his voice. She must drink them in. There would not be much more of this. "What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"Thinking that this is pleasant."

"This is too pleasant," Dick agreed, and stopped short.

“Yes; it’s too pleasant. I told Sheila today that I didn’t know what I would do when you went away.”

“Did you say that?”

“Well,” she protested, “you don’t have to be told that.”

“I wish,” Dick said, “that there was some other way. If there is, you’ll have to write the ticket.”

“There isn’t,” Gwen said.

“It seems to be one of those occasions,” the man presently said slowly, “when old adages don’t apply. It isn’t a question of waiting and working, or planning or saving or sacrifice. Here we are, a man and a woman finding ourselves somehow in this world and in this fix, and there isn’t any out!”

“No.”

The music played softly on, and the scented, luxurious luncheon hour went its way into the past, and the restaurant was almost deserted. A few late lunchers, a few scattered watchful waiters alone remained. Gwen leaned back against the padded velvet of her wall seat; Dick had squared himself about so that he was almost facing her; their eyes were not far apart.

Sometimes her look met his with a fleeting, troubled smile; sometimes she looked away. His voice, his glance, his every word seemed to her—were to her, indeed—filled with a perilous value. Of her own monosyllabic replies, her own raised eyelashes, her own keen, questioning looks she was acutely aware. It was as if she and this serious, squarely built man were playing parts in some tremendously significant drama.

“Do we see each other again after today, Gwen?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I’m flying East at half past five. Can you give me until then?”

“What about your mother?”

“I told her I’d stop at the hospital to say good-by.”

“You’re packed?”

“Yes. I left my bags at the hospital this morning. I can pick them up any time.”

“Then let’s—let’s have this time together. But I told Sheila I’d be at headquarters at three. I ought to go there first.”

"I'll go with you. It's after three now."

"It can't be!" She glanced at her wrist. "It *is*!" she said, stricken. The musicians had long departed; the room was deserted.

"I've paid my check. Did I? Yes, I did. Shall we walk it, Gwen?"

"Let's. There's such a stew going on at the Palace," Gwen said, "that they won't know whether we get there or not."

So they walked slowly down Geary Street, and across Market at Lotta's Fountain, and past the bright banks of winter flowers on the sidewalks—chrysanthemums and cosmos and Transvaal daisies. The dying violets pinned to Gwen's furs gave forth a sweet, sad fragrance; the sun was hidden behind clouds now and the air fresh and raw as the afternoon fogs crept in. Big shop windows showed blanket coats and woolly slacks for winter sports at Truckee and Tahoe; men on the corners displayed trays of gardenias.

"I wish every inch of this was a mile, Dick."

"I wish you and I had to face everything else—anything else in the world except separation. I'd go to Africa—to an island in the Pacific—anywhere! If you were free, Gwen, the miracle of our belonging to each other would make me feel that there's never been a marriage in the whole world before. There wouldn't be a breakfast or a dinner—an hour of it that wouldn't seem different from anything a man or woman had ever experienced!"

"Strong wine, words like that, Doctor Latimer!" she said unsteadily, standing unseeing before a window filled with party slippers, party bags and clips and gloves.

"You'll remember that to the end of my life you'll be the only woman in it?"

"I don't want to know that. It seems so unfair."

"It will always be true."

They were at headquarters; Sheila and Link, flushed and excited after a campaign luncheon of some fifty supporters, had preceded them by only a few minutes; their lateness had caused no inconvenience; it had hardly been noted. The confusion of election day immediately enveloped them; Link was to go on a round of the various headquarters all over the city; Sheila, who was to accompany him, made only a distracted protest when Gwen said that she was going to do some shopping.

“What time are you going to the Hunters’, Sheila?”

“They said five. It’s open house, you know; there won’t be anything formal. Dick,” said Sheila, “you couldn’t come? It will be terribly thrilling, getting the returns.”

“He’s flying East at half past five, Sheila.”

“But he can change his plans, and take the early morning plane,” Dick said, smiling at Sheila.

“Do do that, then, if you’d be interested,” Sheila said.

“Senator,” said a young man, coming up to Link in the press of surging and smoking and loudly talking men, “here’s a telegram you may be glad to see!”

“Senator already?” Gwen said, awed and amused.

“We hope so!” Sheila was pale now, and beginning to look tired. But her beautiful eyes were like blue flames. “You’ll truly be at Hunters’?” she said, detaining Gwen.

“At five. Positively!”

“What’ll Link do if he loses?” Dick asked as he and Gwen turned back to the street again.

“Don’t even suggest it. But of course it wouldn’t mean ruin. He might go to Philadelphia. They were there for a few months last winter and they loved it.”

“I’m likely to be in Philadelphia. Even if Link gets in, Washington’s only three hours away.”

“Those distances—or nearnesses—always seem so strange to a Californian!”

“I suppose I was thinking that if you came on to visit Sheila——”

“If I came on to visit Sheila, Van would be with me.”

“And that would spoil it.”

“Naturally it would spoil that particular thing, our seeing each other. Not everything. But decidedly that.”

“Of course.”

They went to the offices of the Air Line and changed his reservation; they went to the Park, and wandered in the museum and galleries until

darkness came. It was nearly six o'clock when they reached the Hunters' big house on Broadway, from which lights gushed, and inside which was pandemonium already. A radio base had been set up; reporters were everywhere; the silvered bulbs of press photographers gulped and flashed on all sides. Dozens of light Vienna chairs had been set about; in the enormous drawing room a blackboard had been marked into an elaborate system of districts and expectations. Gwen, returning from a talk upstairs with Sheila and some other women seated on beds and tables in the hostess' elaborate bedroom, found Dick more or less in charge of this chart, in possession of various bits of colored chalks, and all ready to tabulate returns as soon as they should come in. The smoke of countless cigars and cigarettes floated in the air. A pretty girl of eighteen was occasionally heard to say plaintively, "Dad, Mother wants to know if you don't want some air in here?"

Presently trays of cocktails and tomato juice appeared; great platters of sandwiches. Mrs Hunter, an enormous smiling woman in pale blue satin, panted hospitably about, explaining that Clay had insisted on a buffet meal, and that there were salads and ham in the dining room. The press ate and drank ravenously, with the inevitable press air of being unconscious of what it was doing, and concentrating all the time upon the "story."

Shortly after eight the returns began to trickle in, and Dick to mark his blackboard. San Francisco County, ninety precincts out of one thousand and fifty-five: Fullerton, four forty-three, Baker, nine seventy-two; Santa Clara County, twenty-one precincts out of sixty-five: Fullerton, eighty-nine, Baker, one hundred and four; Marin County, sixteen counties out of seventy-six: Fullerton, seventy-six, Baker, one hundred forty-two. "Hurray!" said the company on a joyous laugh.

"You're in, Senator!" Gwen said.

"The betting changed today—seven to five on Baker," a man told her seriously in a low tone.

"That's encouraging."

"It's so terrible that it's all settled, that we can't change anything now," a woman said nervously. "I'll feel as flat as a pancake with no reading matter to hand out at headquarters tomorrow."

"Well, if Fullerton gets in, he gets something for his hundred thousand!" a dark, big man removed a cigar from his mouth to remark ominously.

"Did it cost him that?" Gwen asked, shocked.

“Are you Mrs Bellamy? I know your husband—known him thirty years. We worked together on the Lane case.”

“I was in court to hear the summing up on that. Well, you got him off!”

“He’d never have been indicted if he’d had the sense he was born with!”

“That’s what Van said.”

She went and stood near Dick. It fascinated her to see his absorption in the job he had found for himself. There was a lull at nine o’clock, and they went to the dining room and had supper together, someone else relieving him at the blackboard. They found chairs for one of the little card tables that had been set up all over the room and hall, filled their plates at the big table, and shared their meal comfortably unobserved, as if they were alone in the place.

At ten o’clock the reports were coming in steadily in more and more impressive figures, and Dick, back at his job, was assisted in his hurried erasing and chalking by one of the sons of the house.

“You got it in the bag, Senator,” said one of the friends of the family, a youth of perhaps twenty-five. “And you can tell ’m I said so.”

“They’ll be delighted,” said a reporter.

“No, seriously,” the last speaker said, hurt. “Seriously, I wooden fool you. ’Sin the bag.”

“Congratulations, Senator Baker!” Sheila said, coming up to Link and putting her hands on his arms. He bent to kiss her.

“I guess so,” he said. “I’m—I’m terribly pleased, dear.”

They gathered around him. Clocks were striking twelve; lights were bright everywhere. Messages began to come in by telegraph and telephone; the radio said its word. “Baker is piling up a landslide that is amazing the entire state. The following telegram has just been forwarded from Howard Jay Fullerton at Glendale to James Gunther Baker in San Francisco. Quote: My sincere congratulations upon what seems to be a substantial victory. I herewith assure you of my heartiest co-operation. End quote.”

“We have a moving picture here that the boys took during the campaign,” Mrs Hunter’s voice kept saying, “if anyone would like to see it—they used it in the campaign, but some of you have never seen it—I know we have a man here somewhere to run it——”

Link was at the microphone that had suddenly and mysteriously appeared in the center of the milling group. Everyone was silent, smiling at him; heads craning to see him.

“I only wish I could personally thank the hundreds of splendid workers everywhere who have made this victory possible. Perhaps the best way to thank them will be by continuing in Washington with those principles . . .”

CHAPTER XXVIII

GWEN and Dick came out into a warm, starry autumn night. Broadway was empty, dark, still. A late car spun by, vanished with two pin points of red light.

"Let's walk. Let's walk awhile, anyway."

"You're not too tired, Gwen?"

"I'm not tired at all. It was hot in there, but it's delicious out. We're not going back tonight, Sheila and I. I've a room next to hers at the hotel. I don't know how we ever thought we could go back, away from all this excitement."

They walked the dark blocks steadily, Gwen's hand in his.

"You're not cold?"

"No, warm as toast."

"This time tomorrow night," the man said, "I'll be in Philadelphia."

"And I wonder——" She left it unfinished.

"When we'll see each other again. I wonder." Dick spoke in a businesslike tone, and for a while neither spoke again.

Down the hill to Van Ness, up again to Taylor, then the level block along California, looking down at the bridge lights spanning the bay in an arc of stars. It was one o'clock, but Sheila and "the Senator," as the night clerk beamingly called him, had not yet come in, and Gwen and Dick took deep velvet chairs close together in the shadows of the enormous dimly lighted foyer, and Gwen took off her hat and set it on a near-by seat. She leaned back wearily, the soft black silk of her hair ruffled against the dark red velvet.

"This has been a dream, Dick."

"I was thinking that."

"A dream of what life might have been. Dick, I always knew there was feeling like this in the world. But I think you have to feel it yourself to believe it."

“I thought that perhaps if I saw you, married and busy and all that, you know, I’d go back cured,” Dick said, frowning a little, not looking at her.

“It’s going to be hard to go on, Dick. The places we’ve been—just the tables we’ve lunched at, and the stands where you’ve bought me flowers, are—well, more than I can bear. I’ll take pains not to go near them for a while. Even the telephone. I’ll look at it, and think that your voice was there just a little while ago—I could hear it——”

There was a silence. Then Dick said briefly:

“Funny.”

“I think,” Gwen said, “that if I hadn’t children it would be just the same. I think that I’d have to consider Mother and Dad, and Sheila and June, and of course always, and first and last, Van. I couldn’t cold-bloodedly——”

“I’ve waited a long time,” Dick said, as she stopped speaking, “and I’ll wait longer. Do you think—ever—*ever!*—there might be a change?”

“Van might die,” Gwen said with a slow smile that made the remark fantastic. “I suppose there never was a woman yet who wanted a divorce who didn’t mentally kill off her husband,” she went on, with a brief honest laugh. “But even supposing Van out of it, I somehow don’t see myself coming to you with a small girl and boy in each hand! I’ve always loved children, but I didn’t especially want children, at first,” she added. “I was unhappy and troubled, and didn’t want any more complications than there already were in my life! But when I lost my first baby—he was born dead—I thought my heart would break. And the twins have been nothing but delight. Van was proud to have a son. I would have deprived myself of years of happiness if I’d had no children. We don’t seem to be able to see in this world what is going to mean good and what bad, do we? Or even what we want or what we don’t. But I always knew, Dick, that you and I were being robbed. Robbed of the rarest companionship that a man and a woman can have. I always knew that!

“But what I didn’t know,” she went on with a smile, her eyes meeting his, “was that your coming would take hold of me, possess me the way it does. I’m not drawing a breath these days, Dick, that hasn’t you in it! Whether I’m dressing, or in the kitchen, or driving into town or stopping at the Post Office, it’s always there, quivering and thrilling through everything else. Now, when I’m with you, when we’ve been together for twelve hours without interruption, I think that perhaps tomorrow when I drive home, when I get ready to go to Mills Field to meet Van, it will stop. For a while,

anyway. But it won't. I'll be sick—I'll be *racked* to get in touch with you, to hear your voice. If there aren't to be any more messages, any more letters, I—I don't really know what I can do!"

"I know," Dick said quickly, briefly, and for a moment neither spoke. "I didn't have much to offer you ten years ago, I haven't now," he said. "But I've got a place outside of Philadelphia—an old farm, where I have my books. There's an old couple there who run it; I get away and go down there when I can. Eben Marshall—you wouldn't know that name. But he was the greatest research man we've ever had on spine work, and it was his place. He died last year—he was eighty-something, I guess—and left it and his books to me. I told you that?"

"You told me you had a farm outside Philadelphia."

"I was thinking. If you ever did break free—I just wanted you to know that—well, that there's room, that there won't ever be anyone else——"

"How about Doctor Clinton's little girl, Dick?"

"Anna? Oh, she's really a little girl. I don't know why I told you about Anna."

"I was with you at the hospital when her letter came. The day I met you there, to go to lunch."

"Oh yes." Dick smiled. "I've been her doctor for four years," he said, "and young ladies always fall in love with their doctor, especially if he hurts them."

"Did you hurt her?"

"We had to hurt her. She had an accident when she was riding, when she was about twelve. We finally got her wrenched round into shape, and she can dance and skate now. But she didn't put her foot to the ground for four years."

"Pretty?"

"The operation? It was extraordinary. Things simply fitted in and behaved themselves——"

"No; I mean Anna. Is she pretty?"

"Yes; I think she is. Very fair."

"She makes me feel very matronly and middle-aged," Gwen said, with a rueful smile.

“Every other woman makes you seem more and more a miracle.” He looked at her, a little tired, her face colorless, her silky black fringe disordered, her beautiful wide mouth still smiling. Under the lacy frill and the plain suit the fine lines of her body were apparent: slim hips, wide shoulders, exquisite abrupt molding of breasts. Against the pure soft tan of her temples the black brows rose in clean sweeping arcs.

Dick had rarely seen her so tired, so sobered and thoughtful. It seemed to give her new perfume, new charm. Here in the warm shadows, her dark rich coloring set off against the crimson velvet of the square armchair, she was at her loveliest, he thought. A woman to remember, just as she was now, with that anxious, wistful look in her eyes.

“When you consider,” she said presently, “the way Sheila and I started life, daughters of a father who never—well, who never has had a knot in his thread, always visionary, always dreaming—with no money, no advantages, just country high-school education, then—when you think of all that, it seems ungrateful to want anything more than we have. Sheila with her girl and boy, going on to Washington as the wife of the junior senator, and we with children, too, and plenty of money, and trips to Europe and New York. What are we made of, Dick, that we always want something more?”

“We’re made so that when we love each other, Gwen, nothing else matters.”

“And just one thing can—sort of—take the ground out from under your feet, make you feel that life isn’t real, that you aren’t really *you*,” she supplemented it.

“Is it that way with you, Gwen?” he asked. She did not answer, except by raising her eyes to his for a second and looking away again. “But you,” he said, “you can’t go on that way indefinitely. I don’t see how you can go on that way at all.”

“And have many a happy time along the way,” she said. And then, as a party of four or five persons came through the revolving door of the foyer from Mason Street, “There they are! There’s Sheila.”

They joined forces and stood smiling, and strangling yawns in a little group. Link was admittedly tired now, but Sheila was still radiant. They extended a sufficiently warm invitation to the company to come upstairs and have something to eat and drink, but everyone was wearied to the breaking point, and after a few minutes of rapturous reviewing of the election, and renewed congratulations to “the Senator,” they separated, and Gwen said

only a quiet good-by to Dick, with the eyes of the others upon her, before going upstairs with Sheila and Link.

Her room adjoined theirs; her bed had been turned down, the night light was burning softly, sending a disk of pale luminance to the pillow. She had no book. But Link always had books. And she must read herself sleepy tonight! Gwen stepped to the connecting door to see what she could find in the Bakers' little sitting room, just as the telephone rang sharply.

Its sound brought Sheila, partly undressed, to her bedroom door.

"That's someone congratulating Link," she said. "I wish they'd show more consideration! Twenty minutes of two, and we haven't even started on the telegrams! We're not going to open one tonight."

"That was my telephone, Sis. . . . Yes, this is Mrs Bellamy!" Gwen was saying, the instrument at her ear. "It might be the children; it might be Violet!" she said to Sheila, suddenly pale.

Sheila stood rooted to the floor; lips parted, fingers at her cheek.

"Yes, Mrs Bellamy speaking!" Gwen said, breathless. "You—you what? . . . Doctor—Doctor Carter? Yes, Doctor! . . . Where is he? Unconscious! . . . I will. I have my car here. . . . Where is that? Right on the Highway? I know. I know. In about twenty minutes! I'm dressed; I'm just in. In about twenty minutes."

"Link!" Sheila said. "Quick! What's happened, Gwen?"

"It's Van. He flew back from Seattle. He took a taxi at Mills Field for the city; he'd telephoned home, I suppose, and found I wasn't there. There was a smash-up just as they were coming out of the field—he's at the San Mateo Hospital. Unconscious. The doctor said they would try to get X-rays—I'm to go down at once——"

"You stay here, Sheila; I'll drive her. As soon as we know anything we'll telephone!" That was Link, dressed and ready to go, holding Gwen's coat for her.

"The driver was killed," Gwen said, her teeth chattering. "Link, you're so tired—I can drive——"

"Did he say dying, Gwen?"

"They can't tell how badly he was hurt."

"I'll telephone you right away, dear." Link hurried Gwen out into a dream world of black night. There were no stars, no moon, the highway

lights were gone. The car's lamps pierced a wall of ink, ran steadily along the center line. Neither Gwen nor Link spoke often; a monosyllable or two: his brief reassurance; her quick half-audible replies.

"Warm enough, Gwen?"

"I—— What did you say, Link?"

"Warm enough, dear?"

"Oh, very comfortable, thank you." What had she been thinking; had she been thinking at all? Or had the accident shocked her, as it had Van, into incapability of thought?

They ran through a marked gate: toward lighted high windows; stopped. The car doors slammed. They were in an entrance marked "Emergency."

"It's Mrs Bellamy."

"Oh yes, Mrs Bellamy. This way, please."

"He's still living?"

"I couldn't say, really."

A pretty, redheaded girl with a round face and a skin of cream. Smart little cap; smart white uniform.

"He was conscious a minute ago. I think he's resting," the nurse in the sickroom murmured.

Resting perhaps meant unconscious again. At all events Van did not stir as she sat down beside his white high bed. Link and the nurse went out. Someone had taken away her coat; she had worn no hat.

Van lay sunk deep against the white pillow; his brown hands—mottled, thin, middle-aged hands—resting quiet on the sheet. His graying hair had been pushed back in a way different from the way he wore it; his eyes were sunk in round pits of blackness. The mouth was a livid inverted crescent in the drawn lines of the bloodless cheeks; there was a dark bruise on his temple, where gathered blood showed purplish under the unbroken skin. She had never thought of him as freckled; freckles showed brown on his pale face now. His eyes were shut.

Now and then he made a fretful sound, deep in his throat, or a restless movement, and more than once an expression of pain crossed his face. Once a bubble formed at the corner of his mouth, broke in a little smear of blood. The nurse, who had returned, leaned over and wiped it away.

“Going?” Gwen breathed, turning her head, looking up over her shoulder.

“Oh no,” said the nurse. “He’s had a shock. And we moved him a good deal getting some pictures. But he’s resting nicely now. Yes, you had your pictures taken,” she said in an encouraging breath of voice to the sick man as he slowly opened his shadowed eyes. His weary, bewildered look moved, found Gwen.

Immediately he shut his eyes again, but his cut lip trembled, and two slow tears slipped down under his lowered lashes. She took his hand and held it.

CHAPTER XXIX

After a long time Link motioned her from the doorway and she slipped away. There were two doctors in the hall, ready to show her what the X-rays had ascertained. They took her into a consulting room near by. A clock, strangely enough, said ten minutes to four.

The injury was to the spine; the back had been broken. They could show her the concussive effect of the collision. Would she authorize them to call Dr Payne in consultation?

She would authorize anything, of course. Was there immediate danger?

Only from the heart, and the heart seemed strong. He was under opiates now, of course; they had immediately been able to relieve him of most of the pain.

Would Mrs Bellamy like to rest? No, she would go back to Mr Bellamy's room. Link took charge of her. Sheila had telephoned that she would come down and look after the children tomorrow. Gwen's home was only some seven or eight miles from the hospital, why not go home with Link and get some rest?

No, she would rather stay here, at least until the specialist arrived. But would Link join the children? She would feel so much safer if he was there! And she'd telephone Violet the first thing in the morning.

Link went away, and Gwen found a tray with rolls and coffee beside her. They did think of one's comfort in these hospitals! She could not eat, but she drank gratefully, and the hot stimulant braced and awakened her.

Then came a long vigil, sitting looking at Van, looking about the neat white room, drowsing, awakening suddenly as he muttered or stirred. But he was apparently out of pain now, except for twinges, and slept heavily.

At six there was another consultation in the hall. Gwen met another doctor, listened, only half understanding, to what was being said. She gathered that they could not get in touch with the specialist.

"Doctor Payne may have decided to go East with young Doctor Latimer. Do you remember they were discussing a Chicago case?" a nurse was saying. "Don't you remember, Doctor, that Doctor Latimer was here on Monday lecturing, and Doctor Payne——"

“Doctor Latimer left for the East—— No, he hasn’t gone yet,” Gwen said, glancing at the clock. “He’s flying east at seven. We could telephone him and ask about Doctor Payne.”

“I think he left last night, Mrs Bellamy.”

“No. He was to have left, but he stayed. My brother-in-law was elected to the Senate yesterday, and Doctor Latimer stayed to get the results.”

“Are you sure of that? We thought——”

“I’m very sure of it. But you can call the airport and find out. Or I’ll call him. I know him, he’s from my home town. I’ve known him all my life. I know where he’s staying. He’ll know at least where this other doctor is.”

“Could we possibly get *his* opinion?” the house physician asked. “This is his specialty. He’s a great spine man.”

“I’m sure of it!” The world was all whirligigs and strange flashes now. Van injured—and somebody saying that if they could get Dick—but Van and Dick——

She could not think. Everything was blurred and strange, but at least there was something to do. Gwen found herself at a telephone; it was Dick’s voice, sleepy and bewildered.

“Dick, it’s Gwen.” Then a complete silence, in which she could not go on, and then his beloved, slow, steady accents:

“Gwen. What is it?”

“Something’s happened, Dick; an accident. Van’s been hurt. His face cut, and they say his back is injured. I’m at the hospital, Dick——”

“Slowly, dear. It’s all right. Try to tell me what I can do.”

“They want you, Dick. They were trying for a Doctor Payne, and now they can’t get him, and someone spoke of you. Could you—they said you were the one—if you would come——”

“Right away, Gwen. Where are you, now? Be sure you tell me right. . . . The San Mateo Hospital. I’m writing it down. I’ll be—how far is that? Half an hour? I’ll get there as fast as I can.”

Then she was in Van’s room again, and the clean white walls were fading away into flushed, excited groups of smoking men—into the Hunters’ dining room, with the platters of food waiting—the peaked breast of a turkey—pink slices of ham slipping from the bone——

Again it was the dim Fairmont foyer; most of the lights out; all the guests gone; just a night clerk at the desk under a green light. Dick next to her, squared about, facing her, talking, talking, talking. She awakened herself with a start.

Van was in deep unconsciousness. On his forehead, where the silvered hair was rumpled, beads of sweat were shining. His hand, in hers, was limp and wet.

"Will you let me know when Doctor Latimer gets here?" Gwen said in a barely audible tone to the nurse, when the nurse came quietly in to lift up Van's hand and take his pulse.

"Doctor Latimer has been here for some time, Mrs Bellamy."

"Latimer, Latimer, Latimer," Van's bruised mouth said thickly.

Gwen went into the hall and crossed it to the consulting room, which was brightly lighted. Dick was there with two doctors; they all stood up as she came in, and Dick without looking at her took one of her hands and held it in both his. Nobody spoke to her. One of the other men had evidently been holding X-ray plates to the light, and he continued to shift and display them. Dick's face was grave.

"What do you think?"

"I'm going in there now." The house doctor went with them to the door of Van's room, and Dick spoke briefly to him:

"You'll give the anesthetic if we think it necessary to operate, Doctor?"

Gwen had never seen him in his professional capacity before, and even in her present confusion and exhaustion of spirit she had time to marvel at the power that is knowledge; the new expression on his face, half frown, half a stilly excitement. His quick glances at the nurse, his undertones to the doctors, above all his manner with the injured man were all alike thrilling to her.

He went to the bed and touched Van. When he spoke there was no sympathy, no softness in his bracing voice:

"Well, you had a bump."

Van opened his eyes, looked squarely at Gwen, looked bewilderedly at Dick.

"What'd we do?" he asked, hardly intelligibly, his eyes turning back to her.

“Your taxi turned over. You had a close call. How d’you feel?” Dick said. It was all open and clear and loud, nothing whispered or hushed about it.

“F-f-fine,” Van said, with effort.

“That’s good. We have to take you up to the surgery, Van, to fix up your back. How about it?”

The injured man frowned, closed his eyes, appeared to sink again into sleep. Dick sat there for a moment, watching him.

“Where’s Gwen?” Van demanded suddenly, arousing. “Where’s my wife?”

“I’m right here, Van.” Gwen bent over him. “How do you feel?”

“I feel—funny, Gwen.”

“You’re badly shaken up. Van, Dick wants to operate on your back. You’ve done something to some of the vertebrae. Is that all right with you?”

“What are they going to do?”

“Just pull things round a little. Straighten ’em out,” Dick said. The sick man scowled at him; turned his eyes to Gwen.

“Serious?” he asked, alarm creeping into his eyes.

“Well, not much fun. But we think it ought to be done.” This was Dick again.

“Any special—hurry—about it?” Van’s faint, thickened tones held a trace of his characteristic arrogance and suspicion.

“You don’t gain anything by waiting.” Dick’s placid look, significant in its very lack of expression, moved from Gwen’s anxious face to that of the hovering nurse. “You might as well get started,” he added, and the woman began to rub Van’s bared arm briskly with a bit of soaked cotton. The sharp, sweet scent of alcohol pervaded the room.

“I didn’t know you were out here in California,” Van said to Dick. “Did you know he was out here?” he asked his wife.

“Not until I met him in the Fairmont, Van. And he was just going to start for the seven-o’clock plane this morning when we caught him.”

“What time is it now?” Van asked restlessly, irrelevantly. He moved his eyes about with a discontented expression.

“It’s after seven now, Van.”

“I wish you’d told me Latimer was here, Gwen.”

“You were in Seattle, Van.”

“I know. But I’d rather have another opinion. I’d like another doctor’s opinion.”

“Three of us had a look at you and at your X-rays,” Dick said. “You don’t want to stay the way you are now a minute longer than you have to. We have you pretty well doped, now.”

Van looked at him steadily, with unfriendly eyes. When he spoke it was to Gwen:

“Why wasn’t I taken to the Dante Hospital?”

“This was nearest, Van. The accident took place on the Bayshore Highway on your way home, and they rushed you here.”

“I know where the accident took place,” Van told her sulkily. He looked from one to the other uncertainly, jerked his arm away from the nurse’s needle, and immediately twisted his head down against his shoulder with groans and cries that terrified Gwen and wrung her heart.

“Dick!” she said, trying to hold Van, trying to ease him. “Do something, Dick!”

“That hurts, doesn’t it?” Dick said, watching closely.

Breathing hard, Van sank back against the pillow, easier for a moment, sweat standing out on his forehead, his eyes pockets of darkness. With an expression of distaste he looked away from Dick.

“Gwen, do you think I ought to?” he asked, like a child.

“Oh, I do! It’s the only way, Van.”

“But I may not get out of it, Gwen,” he said, his swollen lips trembling.

“Ah, but you will!”

Van held her hand, tears running down his colorless face. For a long time they looked at each other.

“Go ahead, then!” he said in a whisper, and the nurse commenced her preparations for a hypodermic again.

When Gwen went out into the hall a few minutes later the nurse on duty told her that Dr Latimer would like to speak to her. She saw him in a small

room outside the surgery, where he was being buttoned into a long white gown, and bending at the same time over a basin to scrub his hands. He spoke to her over his shoulder:

"I'm glad you talked him into this, Gwen. It's his only chance."

"It's not a bad operation, Dick?"

"It's very bad."

"Dangerous?"

"I think it's been done twice successfully in America. They've done it in Germany several times."

"You've done it before?"

"I've seen it done; no, I've never done it. In one case the patient was a newborn baby who lived. In the other the patient succumbed on the table."

"On the table!"

"Yes. I was the anesthetist. It was in my last Munich year."

"But then, Dick—he left it to me to decide!—should we do it?"

"He has no chance otherwise, Gwen. He almost passed out, they told me, when they straightened him out after the X-rays. He's not lying right now. You saw what happened when he jerked his arm."

"You think it's right, then?" she asked, with white lips.

"I think it's right. But I may not get away with it," Dick said.

The nurse was holding up dripping red rubber gloves now; he plunged his hands into them.

"They could put an apron on you, but you don't want to see this," he said.

"Oh no, no, no!" Gwen went back to the sickroom. Van looked up at her quickly, but he did not speak; his sallow face, with the freckles in bold relief, his sunken eyes and disordered grizzled hair, looking dark and strange against the white sheets. She smiled at him, but he did not smile back; he had sustained a series of shocks in the last four hours, he was nervous now. But the opiates they had given him had partially softened the shock, and he put his hand out to her as she sat down close to him, on a low chair. Gwen gripped her own warm fingers about it.

"You say you think I ought to, Gwen?" he faltered.

“Van, they say it’s the only chance.”

“Latimer says it’s the only chance,” he muttered, discontentedly.

“Ah, but Van, he’ll do his best—you know that——” The horror of Dick’s responsibility smote her afresh, and she tried to reach Van with her own faith in him.

To her surprise Van seemed to have no misgivings on this score.

“Oh, sure he will!” he said carelessly, with his thickened dark mouth making the words, and all his words, almost unintelligible. “Did he ever marry, Gwen?”

“Say it again, Van.”

“Did he ever marry? Latimer?”

“Oh? Oh no.”

“I suppose he tells you it was on your account?”

She smiled, all mother, all comforter.

“I imagine a good many men are languishing for me.”

“You love *me*,” Van said jealously. He closed his eyes, tears ran over his face again. Gwen slid to her knees, spoke with deep seriousness:

“You know it, Van.”

“Ah, but Gwen, say it!” He was crying bitterly.

“I do say it. I love you, my poor old man,” Gwen murmured, her cheek lightly touching his. He did not answer, he was getting drowsy now, and it was with an effort that he opened his eyes and gave her a twisted shadow of his old smile.

When Van was carried away on a stretcher, Gwen went to a hall window, stood leaning against the casement and looking out. The hospital stood on a little rise of ground, with the low rolling mountains of the Skyline behind it. Over these mountains a blanket of fog was pouring; all the world, except the disheveled autumn garden, and the nearest pines and eucalyptus and the peppers, was swathed and lost in the soft mist. An election poster, across the highway, showed softened pink and black and yellow lettering: “Vote for Fullerton and Preserve American Ideals.” Gwen stared at it in dull surprise. The election seemed far, far in the past.

Where was Sheila, where were the children, what was the world doing outside of these hot, clean, odorous halls and lights? As she watched, a brisk young woman came to the door of a bungalow opposite and took in a twisted fog-wet newspaper and a bottle of milk. They had a baby in that house; on the path was a cart the size a two-year-old likes to drag. Happy, busy little wife and mother, putting her firstborn into his high chair while she and her husband shared breakfast in a tiny "dinette" and discussed the news of the election in the drying paper while the coffee bubbled in a shining percolator.

Van might be dying. Then what? She had been his wife eight years. She had married him just after another election. Eight years was a long time. Would she be sorry if he died?

Sorry, yes, for him, and for that last, trusting look he had given her when they were all leagued against him, when he was helpless and in pain. She would forever remember the look that trusted his life to her and to the man who loved her!

But not sorry for herself, except for an aching regret for the lost years, for the pain for what might have been. Young love, young confidence, young solving of the problems of homemaking and money saving; of these she had been robbed. Life would not bring them back. The shadow, the burden of living seemed heavy upon her as she stood staring dully out into the lifting banners of the fog and at the strengthening, misty rays of morning sunshine.

A clock ticked steadily in the hall. Nurses, fresh on duty, came in to take the place of the jaded night staff. Breakfast trays began to circulate.

The head nurse came to Gwen with a suggestion of breakfast, and she drank some hot coffee in a little upstairs room in which she saw various chairs and curtains, rugs and tables, without seeing anything at all. But still she could not eat. Excitement seemed to have closed her throat to solid food. The nurses came and went with cheerful lowered voices, even with subdued laughter. But she was conscious of none of it, except vaguely, as the background of a dream.

Once she stopped a nurse older than the other nurses, who seemed to have some authority.

"Is Doctor Latimer still operating?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"It's two hours now."

“It does seem long, doesn’t it?”

The nurse went her way, and Gwen turned back to the window, and leaned her tired head against the casement, and stared unseeing into the autumn morning.

CHAPTER XXX

It was on Friday, ten days later, that Gwen came down to the dining room at about nine o'clock to find Sheila breakfasting there alone. The autumn morning was clear, breezy, chilly. A good fire was burning, and making the sunshine at the windows seem warmer than it was. Sheila put down her paper as Gwen came behind her to lay her cheek for a moment against Sheila's and gave her a keen look.

"I thought you were going to sleep this morning, Gwen?"

"Sleep! Darling, what else have I been doing? I was in bed at eight o'clock last night."

"And you did sleep?"

"I had a pill from Dick, you know. I was so woozy yesterday that I really couldn't hold my head up, or think what anyone was saying. But Van simply wouldn't quiet down unless I was at the hospital, and there I stayed!"

"But you do feel rested?"

"I do feel rested." Gwen lowered her head almost to her plate, laughed on a great drowsy yawn. "Excuse me, May," she said to the maid, "but I don't think I'm awake yet!"

"Well, you cert'ny have had an ordeel," May sympathized promptly, bringing fresh coffee and putting down a plate of rolls. "How's Mr Bellamy this morning?"

"I just telephoned on my way downstairs and talked to him himself."

"No?" Sheila said, surprised.

"Yes, he was very much pleased with himself. He said he had been shaved and had had his breakfast and was reading the paper."

"Well! That sounds like progress," Sheila said. Gwen began on her breakfast.

"I may go back to bed and sleep this out; I don't know what sort of knockout drops Dick gave me," she said. "But oh, isn't it delicious to sleep! When I woke up, twenty minutes ago, I couldn't think where I was. The house was so still, and my room was darkened, and I couldn't make it out!"

“Your children are at school,” Sheila said, “and mine of course are still with Mother in Kenthill. I purposely tried to keep things quiet.”

“You and Link go up to Kenthill today, Sheila?”

“About noon, I think. That is, unless it’s any comfort to you to have us here.”

“Well, of course I want you here always! But I have to be so much at the hospital that I lost you anyway.”

“He’s coming on all right, Gwen?”

“Remarkably, Dick says. He says he has the resistance of an ox. Heart perfectly wonderful. And he’s beginning to be cross, which I suppose is a good sign,” Gwen said, with a not very happy laugh.

“It seems to be part of convalescence. No chance of your coming to Kenthill with us?”

“No chance at all. But I might send the children up tomorrow morning with Martin. I know Mother’d love to have all the grandchildren together.”

“But while Van’s in the hospital it seems such a good time for you to get away.”

“I know. But it would break his heart. And something still might go wrong. June comes home tonight, so I couldn’t anyway.”

“When will Van get home?”

“They say in about three weeks. He’ll have to be invalided for a long time.” Gwen pushed her cup aside and jerked her head toward the drawing-room door. “Come in here, Sis, I want to talk to you,” she said.

When they were in the pleasant old-fashioned back parlor, from which a wallpaper covered with dim roses, a rosy rug, and the freshest of window curtains had long ago banished a natural stately gloom, Gwen drew her sister to the window, and they stood looking out into the garden together.

“This is what worries me,” Gwen said. “You know you said that Dick seemed sort of serious at dinner last night. He is serious. He spoke to me just before he left—that would be about eight, wouldn’t it? I know I was ready to stumble upstairs to bed, more dead than alive, and I hardly said ‘good night.’ But he said he wanted to speak to me, and we went into the library.”

“I remember.”

“Well, he tells me that Van will never walk again.”

There was a silence, except for Sheila's quickly drawn, shocked breath.

"He'll never stand again," Gwen said. "And of course he doesn't know it. He had us send telegrams to Washington yesterday that he would be there before Christmas. He's got a case there—the Yolo Mills case, that 'meadowlands oil' case, they call it. He's been working on it for two months. But Sheila, Dick tells me he'll never go to Washington again. He can get into a chair—even that'll be hard. He'll have a nurse—a man nurse—to lift him. But he'll have to have a room downstairs here, and this will be his whole world now."

"No riding!" Sheila said, under her breath.

"Oh, certainly not! No—anything. Not to drive his car again, or go into his club again, or hunt or fish or anything!"

"Gwen, it'll kill him!"

"You see, there's simply a dead part, down toward the end of his spine, Sheila. Two vertebrae have become dislocated. It's just as if your knee or your elbow were filled in with plaster; no bone, nothing there but muscles and flesh. Nothing to brace with. Dick drew me a picture. And nothing else wrong at all—nothing else wrong at all!"

"Hard for you," Sheila said simply, out of deep thought.

"I suppose that's what I'm thinking of," Gwen said. "It will be harder than death for him, and harder than death for me. If he had died—and of course I thought of that, Sheila, Tuesday night and all day Wednesday, when he so nearly died!—if he had died, I would have thought that he had had a great deal, success, and money, and two daughters and a son, and he's had two wives. But this way it ruins his life, and yet he lives, and it ruins mine, too. No more picnics with the children," Gwen went on in a low tone. "No more trips with him, ocean liners and Paris and New York. We've both loved that, Sheila, loved going about. It means keeping him happy, keeping the children quiet, never getting away—never free——"

Her throat thickened, and she was still.

"It's horrible!" Sheila said passionately.

"No, it's not horrible," Gwen amended it courageously. "But it seems to make my life so much harder. And—and having this little time with Dick of course made me think—made me think——

"It's awful!" she went on, after a silence, with a broken laugh; "it's awful to talk this way about your husband! I ought to be thinking of Van—

poor Van! And I will, Sheila, as soon as I get used to the idea. We'll have more than enough to live on, and I said to Dick, when he told me, that that was one thing to be so grateful for! I'll let Violet go one of these days, or I'll let May go if Violet will do the dining-room work. I'll change things around anyway, so that we can manage very well!"

"Poor Gwen, you were always such a person for plans, and changing the furniture in our room about, and getting everything organized!" Sheila said affectionately, sorrowfully.

"I know. Dad said once that I started a club every Monday all through grammar school, and collected dues, and then forgot the whole thing until the following Monday!"

"It seems as if we weren't the same girls, Gwen, the same persons. Suppose someone had come and told us all that was going to happen; we wouldn't have believed it. Only—" Sheila finished, a little shyly, "my life seems to have been so much easier—so much happier than yours. Oh, I don't mean," she went on quickly as Gwen half turned her head as if she would speak, "I don't mean that you haven't had your good times, too, Gwen. No woman can have three children and not have times of being happy! But there's so much besides—I know it! We've seen it, Link and I, when you've been in Washington, whenever we've been together!"

"Well, whatever it is, no use to be a baby about it," Gwen said. "Van will get used to it, as everyone has to get used to what can't be helped! Only—his music, Sheila, that's perhaps the very worst of it."

"He can't play the piano any more?"

"He can't do anything that means using his back! And all his music—a whole chest of it!"

"You knew this yesterday, Gwen, and you never told me!"

"But I'd guessed it before that, from the way they talked. They had a man there talking about braces—this was yesterday morning, and I thought of it then. They weren't talking as if they were just to be casual braces. After lunch I asked, Dick, and he told me it might be so. But when I got here last night I was too tired to talk; I was afraid I would cry. So I took my pill and went to sleep instead. Don't worry, Sheila," Gwen went on in a lighter tone, "things that seem too bad to bear smooth themselves out, somehow. Van will have a radio and a phonograph and books—he doesn't read much, but that's because he's been so busy. But I'll get him crime books—books about big

cases—and he'll become interested. And the children will be growing up. It'll all work out!"

"You're a good sport, Gwen. You're *wonderful*."

"Well, that's, I suppose, the best thing you can be, when life comes along with all its mix-ups. I presume," Gwen said a little wearily, "that there's a purpose behind it all. Let's hope so!

"I thought when I got up that I'd go right back to bed," she added, as they went upstairs with their hands linked in the old fashion of their girlhood, "but now I feel so much more rested I think I'll go down to the hospital. Dick's going today."

"Back East?"

"Yes, at twelve. Strange thing, Sheila, that I was thinking," Gwen pursued. "They all say—I mean the doctors at the hospital say and everyone seems to think—that if Dick hadn't been here, knowing something of this special operation, Van mightn't have lived. And if you and Link hadn't been out here for the election I wouldn't have met Dick again, I wouldn't have—have had these few days, when I've been seeing him, and he would have gone back East with the rest of the doctors right after the convention."

"Isn't it a strange chain?" Sheila agreed. "These days have made it harder for you, haven't they, Gwen?"

"You mean since the accident?"

"I mean since you saw Dick again."

"Oh yes, Sheila, much harder. Incredibly harder. Because right along I've been thinking, I've been making myself think, that what I felt for Dick long ago was partly a girl's imagination, a girl's dream. But now I know it wasn't. I know now that we were—we were made for each other."

"It was pity that made you marry Van, I suppose," Sheila said in a musing tone; "and Dick being so far away. And of course the force of a—a tremendous character. Then he was so much older, which always seems to mean something when you're young. Somehow I don't think the fact that he was making money had much to do with it."

"No, that didn't have anything to do with it! As a matter of fact," Gwen said, brushing her hair vigorously with her head upside down and her slender back bowed into a curve, "I was looking forward to poverty—romantic poverty with Dick. I felt that it was the fitting prologue to a great surgeon's career, I suppose."

"You were married before Uncle Elmer's money came in?"

"Oh yes; nine months. I was expecting my first baby—the baby I lost, then. It was all so queer," Gwen said simply, "doing all the dramatic things, clearing off the mortgage, fixing things for Mother and Dad. Not that they liked it so much! They've moved out of the apartment, you know, where Mother had everything so convenient, and they're out on the old Tinsey place, worse off than they were at home. However, they love it, and Mother has plenty of room for us all when we go up there and Dad putters around with a corn patch and beets and mushrooms; so that's all right. But it seemed so strange to have money. I was terribly niggardly about it at first, terrified when Van would tell me what he planned to do. And then, when the twins were quite small—oh, perhaps three years after we got it—he told me that he had almost doubled it. It was the nucleus, but a nucleus was all he needed!"

"Are you going to tell him about his—his being crippled, today, Gwen?"

"Dick thinks I ought. Dick's so quiet about it. He says—and of course it's true—that they're telling people things like that all the time in the clinics and hospitals. Van's fifty; Dick says he's had a great run for his money, and no matter how much it shocks him he'll get used to the idea. But it makes me sick to think of it!"

"Here's Dick now. I thought you said he was going at twelve?" Sheila said, looking down at the drive.

"He is. I imagine he came up to say good-by. After he goes I'm off for the hospital, but I'll come up and say good-by to you and to Link if he's back from town. Are you having lunch here?"

"No. I'll tell May just the children." Sheila vanished, and Gwen went downstairs and met Dick at the door.

"Come out onto the terrace," she said; "the sunshine is like April this morning."

"I've only a minute," Dick answered, guiding her instead toward the drawing-room door. "This is good-by, Gwen," he went on, looking down at her, hands on her shoulders. "I don't know when I'll see you again. I don't know quite what I'm going to do. If I can get away for a while I probably will."

"Gloucester and Shanghai and Rio?" she said, smiling through sudden tears.

“Maybe,” he said, with a quick contraction of the muscles of his face. “All those places we were going to go together, if ever I had five thousand dollars, Gwen. Funny how much money means when you haven’t got it, and how little it buys when you have! Good luck to you, my dear, I’ll think of you always. I’ll think of you always.”

“You’ll write me, Dick?”

“No; I don’t think I’ll write. I’ve got to forget, now. I knew it before, but I didn’t go at it, I didn’t work it. But I must now.”

“Dick, if I hadn’t happened to meet you in the Fairmount, would we have seen each other at all, this week? It was two weeks and two days ago today. Would you have gone away without trying to see me?”

“Is it only two weeks and two days Gwen?”

“Less, by a few hours. It was half past two.”

“I don’t know whether I would have tried to see you or not, Gwen. I had planned to go Sunday night; I had only gotten here Tuesday morning. I meant not to. I meant to work along from hour to hour, saying, ‘I’ve not called her yet. I’ve not looked up her number in the telephone book yet.’ ”

“As a matter of fact you’d not have found us in the San Francisco directory.”

“No; I thought of that. But I’d have found Van’s office. They’d have given me your home number there. But I had meant to fight it off.”

“You knew you still cared, Dick?”

“But not how much,” he said briefly and unsmilingly. “It isn’t easy for you to go on as things are, Gwen,” Dick added; “he has no idea of the real state of affairs. I’ve just been talking to him. He won’t be easy to handle. And he’ll blame me for a bungling operation. But it wasn’t that. There was no chance of saving his back. It was jammed; it was gone.”

“It won’t matter what he thinks if I can only keep him happy. June will help, and Mary’ll help. He’s not half so patient with Fred. But I’ll work it out, Dick, I’ll work it out. For a while I think this will be harder for him than death—at least we don’t know that death is hard. But I think he would have wanted to live, even if he’d known. And thanks—thanks—thanks for so many things! Whenever I think of you I’ll be thanking you in my heart!”

“In any case,” Dick said, “I couldn’t let your husband die, Gwen. He was there in my hands—one instant’s carelessness would have ended it. Nobody

expected him to survive it; I didn't myself. But I had to work as if it was your life I was holding."

"Do you know, Dick, what changed the whole thing for me, what made me see that going to you—now or ever—wasn't going to be the thing I could do? It was when he turned to me, Wednesday morning, do you remember? When he'd realized that you had been here, and that I'd seen you, and that you were the one to operate on him, and yet—*yet* he trusted me! Yet he said, 'Gwen, do you think I ought to?' "

"Yes, I know, I thought that, too," Dick said, quickly. "And I looked at you," he went on, "so beautiful, Gwen, so much—I don't know what to call it! So much *woman*. Your slenderness and your white throat, and the way your breast lifts up your gown—as it is now!—and your wrists and your hair, soft and smelling so sweet, and the way you smile, and your voice ____"

His arms were tight about her, their hearts were beating together; Gwen's hand crept up about his collar, and she clung to him, silent and breathless.

"Good-by to our dream, and to spring, and to everything!" she said on a sob.

"Good-by, my darling."

"God doesn't always make the right man king!" Gwen said, tears dazzling on her lashes. "It—it mightn't have been right, Dick, it might have been that even if I'd run away from it all, even if I'd told him, last week, I mean, that I belonged to you—always have belonged to you—that it wouldn't have worked! There are my children, and June, and everyone who trusts me. This—his being so ill—has settled it once and for all. I couldn't leave him now. And perhaps it's better this way."

Dick did not speak. She felt his face hard and cold and fresh against her own, smelled again the smell she loved, of tweed and shaving soap and sunburned firm skin, and then he was gone.

Gwen went to the door and looked after him, and saw him turn at the curve of the drive, where a taxi was waiting. He looked toward her and lifted his hat, and then he got into the taxi and was driven away.

She stood very still, just where she was, until Sheila came down the stairs and joined her. Then she turned quite cheerfully and composedly and said that she must be off to the hospital for the regular morning visit.

CHAPTER XXXI

THERE must always be some preparation for it. She had to take Van his letters, any telegrams that had arrived, she must always carefully follow a list of things that he had given her the day before. His other glasses—a special pen—his own coffee cup. Also he wanted linen pillow slips, some of Sing Lee's vegetable soup, and a certain kind of bread only procurable at the San Mateo market. Gwen had had only a few days of steady visiting at the hospital, but she was already exhausted by it.

"How are you this morning?" she said today, as she went in.

"What was the delay?"

"No delay. But I had to go into town for the bread. There's the bread we were speaking about, Miss Rickett, if you'll take charge of it and see that Mr Bellamy has some at lunch. Thank you. Letters, Van, and two telegrams."

"No delay?" Van echoed. "It's after eleven. Did you see Dick downstairs?"

"He's gone, Van. He's flying at noon."

"I know he's flying at noon." Van was always annoyed at the assumption, however slight, that he did not know everything. "Didn't you see him to say good-by?"

"He was out at the house about an hour ago to say good-by to Sheila and me."

"Ah well! No wonder you were late. How'd he get out there?"

"He took a taxi."

"Wait for him?"

"Yes."

"Or did you drive him down to the field?"

"No, no; he had a taxi."

"I wish to goodness they'd let me sit up," Van grumbled, making notes on the margin of a telegram. "This screwing over sideways is no fun! Maybe

now that Latimer's gone the doctors will make a little less fuss about all this."

"It was pretty serious, Van. It amounted to a broken back, really."

"I know what it amounted to! My Lord, do you suppose a man doesn't know when his back's broken? What's-his-name, Carter, the house doctor, was telling me today that he hadn't thought there was one chance in a million of my coming through. But they're talking about a belt. I don't want to wear a belt!"

"I should think you'd get used to a belt in no time. Like a corset, really."

"D'you know how long I'll have to wear the damned thing?"

"No, I don't. But I should think it would depend upon how you felt, wouldn't it?"

She had settled down near him, reading such letters as he passed to her, commenting on the day's news, taking her crocheting from a big brocade bag.

"Who's that for?"

"Wilcox baby. Isn't it cute?"

"It's terribly cute. You going back for lunch?"

"I thought I'd have a tray here, if Miss Rickett doesn't mind."

"I wish to goodness you would! I won't be happy, Gwen," Van said, "until I'm out of this place. It's all right, it's all right. But Lord, you get so bored!"

"Bored? But you've just had a narrow escape from death."

"I know, I know. But a miss is as good as a mile, Gwen."

"You know you'll have to be awfully good for a long time, Van. No driving, no riding, lots of rest."

She was trembling as she looked at her fine yarn, looked at it critically.

"Who says so?" he asked quickly.

"Well, wouldn't it be natural for them all to say so? After a smash like that."

"Dick Latimer said so, eh?"

“Dick did, and Doctor Carter did. And that doctor from the city, on Sunday, kept saying, ‘Take it easy, take it easy.’ Don’t you remember?”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t drive into town one of these days. Twenty miles. That’s nothing!”

“I wouldn’t count on it, Van, or try to hurry. Just take things as they come along, and do what you feel equal to doing.”

“I’ve got to get to Washington before Christmas.”

“Well, I’m sure you can’t do that,” Gwen said composedly.

“What makes you so sure?” He was eating his luncheon now, a performance rendered infinitely difficult by the fact that he was lying almost level on a tipped bed and could only look down his nose at his tray. His tone was milder; he busied himself with his fork and spoon.

“Want any help there? Cheer up, when you get your belt, like it or not, you’ll be almost erect,” Gwen said. She had her own tray—chops and peas and potatoes, salad and clear red gelatine, two cookies. The odor of mutton and potatoes filled the room. Poor Van, she thought; no wonder he would like to get home and have things his own way. “For a while,” she began, “how’d you like to be fixed up in the old library? We could turn that little back hall into a bathroom, and then you’d never have to come upstairs.”

“I wouldn’t consider it,” Van said definitely.

Gwen continued her meal in silence, thinking. He would *have* to consider it. Van could never go up and down stairs again, unless he was carried. With the old library opened up and brightened into a cheerful bedroom, and the old back hall a bathroom, and a runway for a wheeled chair down to the terrace on the south side of the house, he would have a pleasant range, a change of locations. But how to get him to realize that he must be reconciled to this program?

“I’ll be round again in a week, and without my belt, either,” Van said. “They can’t make an invalid out of me.”

“You’ll find you’re weaker than you think after all this. If I were you I wouldn’t worry. They’ll let you do what you can do, and what you can’t you’ll discover soon enough.”

She carried the trays into the hall, aired the room, saw him settle off to sleep. He slept on his back after a week of discomfort when he had to take a position on his face and keep to it day and night. But she knew that he had not moved by himself since his accident, or had made any attempt to do so.

He was in a cast from his hips to his waist; he had to ring for his nurse when, with the help of an orderly, he wanted to change his position.

When she took him home a week later he was still utterly unconvinced that any permanent damage had been done to him. The nurses had hinted it; the doctor had soothingly answered his irritated inquiry with a reference to all the activities that could be carried on from a cripple's couch, but still Van would not understand, and persisted in a position of scorn and unbelief.

It was a day or two before Thanksgiving that Gwen guided the orderlies with the stretcher and the nurse and doctor up the old avenue of maples and poplars to the house. The world was flooded this morning with pale wintry sunlight. Van had been moved in an ambulance, he was rolled in blankets, but he was watching keenly as the familiar home scene came into view. May was at the side door, which was approached by an old-fashioned porte-cochere; Sing Lee hovered in the background, interested and eager to help; Violet had everything ready indoors. Van's bed had been set up beside the library windows, the covers neatly turned down and a fire lighted in the library grate.

"Where you taking me?" he asked suspiciously, as the stretcher bearers turned in the side hall.

"Wait until you see," Gwen answered cheerfully with a sinking heart. "We've turned the library into a bedroom for you, and next week, if the noise of the carpenters isn't too much for you——"

"I'm not going in here," Van said. "Take me up to my own room. I won't stay one moment in here!"

"Van, just while you're in bed!" But it was no use to plead; upstairs he would go, and upstairs he went, to be uncomfortably established in Gwen's bed, while Violet and May ran up and down stairs, bringing him his things from the library to which they had been moved, lighting a fire; warming the bed with hot-water bottles.

Gwen was silent during the first part of these preparations, conscious of an inward struggle that made speech impossible. But she presently was quite herself again, outwardly at least, talking to him amiably enough as she settled him in the place he had chosen. She saw that he was suffering terribly. When the orderlies had gone and he was alone with her and his male nurse, he collapsed into his smooth sheets and blankets with a look of a dying man.

"What was the idea," he said, "of trying to keep me downstairs?"

“That it would be nearer things for you. Nearer the kitchen, nearer the garden, less trouble to get about. And less noise from the children at night.”

“When I want to move downstairs I’ll say so,” Van said in a weak, resentful voice. “I’ll be around in a day or two.

“This is damn pleasant,” he conceded an hour or two later, when the eleven-o’clock opiate he always was given began to have its effect, when the room was quiet, and the children were not yet home from school. “It’s the damnedest thing,” he added, “that since they’ve taken that cast off I don’t seem to have any back. I try to jerk myself up in the bed and only my shoulders move. How long d’you suppose that’ll go on?”

“Nobody seems to know. That’s why I thought you might like to be downstairs. With a wheel chair you could go all over the lower floor, and in the spring down onto the terrace.”

“A wheel chair!” He echoed the words bewilderedly, staring at her from his pillows. “The spring! What are you talking about?”

“Well, you have to resign yourself to being an invalid for a while.”

He was silent for a few minutes.

“My God, how you women love to dramatize things,” he said then.

“I *hope* we’re all dramatizing it,” she answered equably. “It certainly isn’t any fun to take it so seriously. But if you must be quiet—say for a few months—it seemed to me you’d be more comfortable on the lower floor.”

“Certainly I would be if I was going to be like this for a few months or a few weeks! But I’m not. You sent that telegram to Cutter?”

“Yesterday; yes. And I sent him another telegram, on my own.” Gwen said only the first two words aloud.

“Well, I told him in that that I’d be in Washington before Christmas.”

“I know. But it’s going to take much longer than you think to get over this,” Gwen said firmly. “If you’ll take my advice you’ll just take every day for one day, and not worry about the future.”

“I’d like to see Younger.” This was his office associate.

“I think he’s coming down Sunday, and Emily, too. He telephoned, and I said that we’d love to have them come to lunch.”

“I wish to goodness I knew why I can’t seem to get any strength into my back!”

“Well, when you consider that you actually broke it, Van! I’m amazed they could do anything with it at all.”

“You say that because Latimer operated.”

“They all said so. I had you so nicely fixed in the library,” Gwen said in a mildly reproachful tone, “with the radio and your table and everything! I can’t see why you didn’t try it at least.”

“A man likes his own room and his own bath.”

“If he’s on his feet, yes. But getting over a bad smash——”

“It delights you to think of it as a bad smash,” Van said. “I’m sick of the whole thing!”

Gwen went downstairs to superintend his lunch tray. She talked to his nurse.

“Does Mr Bellamy ever speak to you as if he knew that he will not walk again? Perhaps never again?”

“No. He certainly does keep his spirits up,” the man said. “The doctor was talking to him about a wheel chair this morning, and he acted real mad. The doctor had a catalog, and he was showing him the different kinds. Mr Bellamy threw it on the floor.”

“I knew something had ruffled him.” She sighed. “Well, he’ll just have to find it out for himself.”

She had her lunch with Fred and Mary. Afterward the children went out with Violet to order a list of drugstore necessities, and the house was quiet. Outside a chilly sun shone brightly in the garden, varnishing the leaves of the oaks, filtering down in lacy patterns through the bare branches of the fruit trees.

Gwen put on a sweater and walked about the place. Van’s riding horse came across the paddock and laid a velvet nose against the bitten upper pole of the fence. The Jerseys were coming down the hill to be milked, their heavy udders swinging from side to side as they slumped through the dead brown grass. Chickens were picking on the floor of the barn; they cocked bright eyes at her; resumed their eternal hunt for a meal.

The berry bushes were bare and tied into black faggots; on the leafless rose branches a few red hips and haws lingered. The turned clods of the orchard, under Gwen’s feet, were stiff and rough, and delicately frosted on

their northern sides with white. Where the spade had sheared them they shone like polished metal.

An old whitewashed grape arbor ran across the back of the kitchen dooryard; beyond it was a long-deserted tennis court with benches tipped by wind and winter weather. Beyond that again, toward the pale sky down which the white sun was descending, the hills rose, rounded fold on fold. In the shadow of the evergreen hedge the path was damp and marked in tiny curled patterns with worm casts. Sing Lee was out in the back yard, gathering stiff, dry dish towels from a line. The children's wagons and bicycles and holiday activities were all about; bottles ranged on an upturned box; ropes, bits of wire, strings, pans, spikes.

The air that touched her face was chill and sweet and lifeless. The day was lifeless; no branch moved, no twig creaked in a sudden breath of wind; the birds were gone. Only the chickens now and then uttered a desolate "caw-caw caw."

She walked up to the edge of the woods and leaned on an old strip of fencing. Below her lay the boundaries of her own property; the roofs of houses and sheds and barns rose through thinned autumn foliage. Oaks still wore their shabby dried leaves, but the poplars and maples and willows were stripped and threw clean shadows on the lawn and across the drive.

Beyond again, the hill, with scattered homes and gardens here and there, descended to the village. Gwen could see the highway where ants of motorcars flashed to and fro, and the Bayshore beyond with its own string of ants moving incessantly in two narrow streams on this silent afternoon. Here and there the smoke of house fires rose white into the still air. The whole world seemed hushed into a stilly autumn sleep, the occasional far cry of some whistle or faint honk of a distant motor horn only underscoring the silence.

Well, it was a goodly heritage, none the less, Gwen thought, when one compared her lot to that of millions of the women of the world. These acres were hers, with all their beauties and interests of garden and farm; these plump fowls and handsome Jerseys, these comfortable sheds and barns, fences and windmill and little dairy, were hers. The canyon behind her, with its damp loamy soil and rich scent of redwood balm, was her children's safe and happy playground in a world of dangers and disruptions.

The old house, with its generous hallways, its benign lines of mansard roof, its ridiculous cupolas and porches, was capable of infinite alterations and improvements. The elaborate woodwork cut away, she mused, the

porches widened; the choppy little rooms on the third floor cut into two or three generous apartments for a growing daughter, a son in junior college, Sheila's children visiting their western cousins, Peter's children always glad to be with Aunt Gwen——

Gardening and books, of course, and some sort of study. Bookbinding, or sociology, or German, perhaps. Reading aloud to Van, keeping him interested in the world to which he no longer belonged. And then consultations with her cook and with Violet, and daily marketing, and Christmas presents to think about, and letters——

It summed up into a full life. A life for which millions of childless, homeless, solitary women would gladly give their own. Everything was in it: husband, children, home, garden, friends, family.

Everything except a square-built simple man with a surgeon's clever hands—a man whose eyes, whose voice, whose touch of fingers on her shoulders——

She would not think of him. Instead she took from her pocket a letter from Sheila. It had been read before, but now she went over it again.

"Our return was along the line of a triumphal progress," Sheila wrote. "It was wonderful getting back, and finding the house warm, and Millie and Grace in attendance. To make it perfect there had been a fall of snow; Washington looked its loveliest, and the country all round about simply magical.

"And as if there were really a special guardian angel looking out for us, Gwen, as I once told you I suspected, we're going to get the Abercrombie house! They decided to sell it the very day after we got here. Isn't that a perfect miracle, for everyone's been after it at one time or another! Link met the son-in-law downtown, and he said the old lady was very lonely there and asked if Link knew anyone who was interested, and it was a deal from that second on. Imagine, Gwen, one of the historic houses, with twice the room we've got here, and a view and stables and everything. Link says the north view is only cemetery, but I don't care; I've always wanted that house! It's only three blocks away from where we are now, so the move will be easy, and when I establish myself there I'll feel that there isn't anything left in the world for me to want.

"What you write of poor Van . . ." the letter ran on, but Gwen read no further. She folded the sheets with a spasmodic motion of her fingers, her thoughts once more with Dick. He was there somewhere; in some bright,

warm upper floor of the Pennsylvania hospital, looking out on snow, too; perhaps crossing in spirit all the long three thousand miles to this hillside, where she leaned on a fence in the chilly sunshine, and dreamed over the pages of all her life.

CHAPTER XXXII

WALKING home, planning a glance at Van to be sure that he was still sleeping, planning for a bath and change before she should settle down beside his bed, the fire replenished, and himself refreshed with whatever he fancied to eat or drink, she dreamed of a scheme of days that should include him, even crippled and helpless, and that yet should have its times—its long intervals of pleasantness and peace. But even as she mused she knew that with Van there would never be dependable pleasantness, there would never be peace!

If he were established in the library now, with his books and his radio, if there could be a fire there, and the children come in with their homework, then she would lose the sense of being imprisoned and trapped; she would build anew on that foundation, bringing the world to Van rather than freeing him to go to the world.

It could not be. He was constitutionally unable to accept small domestic pleasures as they came along; his questioning, his suspicions, his criticisms destroyed them all. The children's spontaneous outbursts, the accidents of their befuddled little days which she found so deliciously amusing, were all serious and annoying matters to him. He nagged them, snubbed them when he felt tired of their company; he demanded of them extravagant demonstrations of loyalty and affection when the mood suited him.

As she entered the house she heard him shouting for her—wild, uncontrolled shouts that rang through the house. Gwen rushed upstairs, to find nothing seriously amiss, except that he had suspected her of being for a few minutes out of the reach of his voice.

She straightened his bed, arranged his pillow more comfortably. He complained that the room was cold.

"It's a bleak, quiet sort of day. How about something hot to drink? Would you like it? It's three hours to dinner."

"I don't think so. If I thought this sort of thing was going to last I would move downstairs," Van said. "It's as lonely as hell up here."

"I really believe you'd be more comfortable down there. Especially if you could wheel yourself out into the garden as spring comes on."

"No bathroom."

"I mean after we put in a bathroom." As if he could ever walk to it, ever take a shower again!

" 'As spring comes on'!" he said, seeming suddenly to catch the phrase. "What the dickens are you talking about? This is November!"

"Well, if you're able to get about, so much the better. But it's just as well to be ready for anything."

"You don't think I'll be walking by spring?"

"They don't think so."

"*They!*" he said scornfully. "You mean Dick Latimer!"

His wife replenished the fire, lighted a lamp beside the bed.

"How much were you ever in love with him?" Van presently demanded. "He was crazy about you, I know that. But I don't believe you ever were so mad about him."

"I suppose in the natural course of events we would have been married," Gwen answered seriously, keeping her tone level and light.

"How d'you mean 'in the natural course of events'? D'you mean if you hadn't met me?"

"Probably. I suppose there are a dozen potential marriages in any girl's life," Gwen said. "Chance must have a lot to do with it."

"I asked you before he did," Van said.

"I know you did."

"And you would have been completely miserable married to him," the man went on. "We've been married more than eight years; he might be able to make a woman comfortable now; but you'd have had a hell of a time for those eight years!"

"He has a fine practice now, I believe. But he didn't say so. And I think a lot of it's charity."

"He'd tell you that. I don't like him," Van said simply.

"He saved your life, Van."

"I'd just as soon he hadn't, if I have to sit around this way much longer."

“I believe, if you’ll just be patient, it won’t be so bad. If you’ll just get into the habit of listening to the radio programs, and playing solitaire, and reading, and of course playing your phonograph——”

“I’ll not stay here. I’ll get into town, where I can go to court. As soon as we get the kids packed off to boarding schools——”

“I hate to hear you say that,” Gwen said. “It means separating them, and they do so depend upon each other. She makes him gentle, and he’s such a wild, boyish sort of boy. And he drags her into everything—climbing and pirates and swimming—and it’s so good for her, because she’s such a girlish little girl!”

“School’s the place for him. I don’t care if you keep her home.”

“But they’re such company for me, Van. And now, if I’m to be so much at home, until you’re better, anyway——”

“That’s exactly it,” he said. “I need you every minute. I don’t propose to have my own children separate me from my wife!”

“But good heavens, babies of six!”

He did not hear her; his thoughts had returned to the earlier topic.

“You married me because you wanted to. Because you knew I could give you everything.”

“Whatever I married you for, we’ve had pretty good times,” Gwen said cheerfully. But she felt an ugly, familiar trembling begin within her.

“You said it was for Sheila,” the man said. “Well, you knew damned well that they wouldn’t touch Sheila.”

Gwen was drawing a window shade against the cool shadowless quiet of the late afternoon.

“How do you mean?” she asked levelly, over her shoulder.

“Why, my dear girl, you didn’t ever think that Miller’s outfit would use an argument like that against a woman? Come on, now, admit it!” Van said, in a tone of lazy amusement. “Did you ever hear of any party digging up stuff like that against a candidate’s wife? Why, Miller and his wife lived together for three years before they were married, and then he shook dice for her with Matt Thorney, and who ever brought that to light? Nobody. But everyone knew it. All I hoped to do with that letter was to scare Baker’s wife—I didn’t know Sheila and Link then. I thought she might be scared and talk him into dropping out. But if she’d ever told him, he’d have laughed at

it. He'd have known. No, it might have busted up their marriage, or he might have thrown it up to her sometime when they were fighting, but politically it hadn't the slightest value."

"It would have been just between Sheila and Link, you mean? No publicity," Gwen said to herself rather than to him, in a low tone.

"Not even between them, if she could have talked him into dropping out on some pretext or other." Van opened a magazine, glanced at a page indifferently. "You knew that as well as I did."

"No, I didn't know that," Gwen said, still in the same musing tone, still at the window. One shade was drawn; she stood with her fingers on the ring of the other, looking down at the frostbitten garden and the bare whips of the berry bushes against the stained whitewash of the fence.

"It would have made a big difference, I suppose?"

She did not answer. Instead she suddenly opened the window and put out her head, to speak to the twins, who were busy in the path below.

"Fred, turn off that water! Instantly, dear. Mary, come in right away and change your shoes! Get nice and dry and I'll be down in a few minutes. Ask Violet to light the fire in the library!"

"I suppose you've been thinking all these years that if it hadn't been for Sheila's letter you wouldn't have married me?" Van persisted, his eyes still on the pages of his magazine, his voice careless.

"Hard to say, now," Gwen answered composedly. The sight of the children had helped her. Those two sturdy, rosy, vital creatures made all these pinpricks worth while, by the mere fact of being, and being hers.

"Come over here." He caught at her hand, drew her down to sit beside him on the bed. "Tell me you've always loved me better than anyone else."

She answered indirectly, with the shadow of a smile:

"I wonder how many women would give their lives to hear a husband ask that after eight years of marriage!"

"How about some tea? Will you have some with me?"

"I want to get the children started with their books or blocks or something! But I'll bring up the tray as soon as Sing Lee has it ready."

"You don't have to go down. Violet can get them going."

“Well, I said I would. Next week we’ll get you down there, and then we’ll all be together! We’ll make tea a regular daily event,” Gwen said, her spirit rising as she considered it. “And presently we’ll let Violet go, or let May go. We’ll shorten sail.”

“You mean while I’m not making money?” he instantly challenged her.

“I mean that we can live very nicely and simply on our income, and keep June in college, too. But we don’t need both Sing Lee and May. I’ll get an old Chinese who’ll cook and wait on table, too.”

“You could get June a job in the five-and-ten,” he suggested coldly.

“No, you idiot, don’t talk like that! I mean that of course it’s going to change our lives, and we might as well face it.”

“The first day I get home you throw it at me that I can’t afford to take care of my family! I’ve got three cases slated that ought to bring in . . .” He was off on a long protest.

“I’ll be right back,” Gwen said, in the first pause, opening the door, disappearing into the hall. She felt sick and weak, and took hold of the banister rail, and stood there, swaying. “It isn’t true about saving Sheila! Oh, I couldn’t bear it,” she said half aloud, “I couldn’t bear it if it was all unnecessary! If I was just a sentimental, imaginative fool!”

“Mom!” The twins had surrounded her, clinging and laughing, their firm sweet little faces still cold from the fresh outdoor air. “We changed our shoes!” they shouted. “Can we go down with you before we go in and see Dad?”

“Yes, but not too noisy, sweets.” Oh, they comforted her; they justified it as they would have justified and made endurable a burden ten times heavier. No woman could go back into her life, beyond and before the time her children had come, and say that she would have the years wiped out and the children with them.

There would be comfort, there would be joy in this house again. When Van knew just what his life must be, he would be moved downstairs, he would reconcile himself to that program she planned for him of games and letters, books and music, meals made just to his liking, friends coming to see him. He might even grow milder, more reasonable, when the hard strain of legal work was over, when he was reduced, or promoted, to the position of spectator, commentator, adviser.

The children would be growing more and more responsible and companionable all the time. June and her affairs would bring new life into the house. Gwen would find more and more interests for her invalid, form her own life upon the needs of his. If he would study anything, she would study with him. She would take her walk each day, spend certain hours reading aloud, ask the men he liked to come, turn off on their way down the Peninsula to stop and have luncheon or tea with him.

Thinking these things, and with the children still clinging to her, she had reached the foot of the wide stairway when she was confronted by the vision of a rosy, hearty man of perhaps fifty—a man in a loudly checked golf apparel, with an enormous top coat and a soft brown cap.

"Tom Sylvester!" she said, pleased. "Van will be so glad to see you!"

"Say, what's this? I ought to have gotten to see him in the hospital, I was away! What's this about his being pretty badly cracked up?" the big man asked, anxiously.

"Yes, he had a bad smash," Gwen said. "A spinal twist that did something to the cord."

"But they can fix it up? Lord, they do anything these days!"

"Not this; they can't fix this." She slowly shook her head.

"Sure of it?"

"Oh yes. There's no talk of any further surgery. It's two of the little vertebrae that got dislocated, and they can't touch them."

"I know," he said nodding. "Fisher did that. But he didn't live, poor fellow!"

"Van may live for years. The doctor told him so this morning. But we're afraid he'll not walk. He'll always have to have a nurse with him." Gwen's cautious nod warned him not to speak too loudly.

"Say, what a hell of a break!"

"Well, come up and see him, Tom. He'll want to see you." Gwen led the way upstairs, saw Van's smile of welcome as Tom came in. The two had played many a game of golf together, spent many a day bass fishing or duck shooting.

"What you been doin' to yourself, feller?" Tom Sylvester said at once, sitting down next to Van. "I was down at Catalina, tryin' for bonita and marlin or something, and Rogers came in on his yacht and I went on down

to Ensenada. I just got back yesterday, and I was at the golf club playing round with Joe Hunter when he said something about you being smashed up."

"Tom, I'm just going to bring Van a cup of tea. Will you have something stronger?"

"Nothing, thanks. I've got to get on home. But I'll sit with the old boy until you get back."

"We're going to move him downstairs next week where he'll be in the middle of things."

"You say," Van said resentfully.

"I should think you'd want to get downstairs," the visitor said. "Wheel chair? Can he work a wheel chair?"

"Certainly he can. He can do lots of things when he feels up to them. But he's just home from the hospital today, Tom, so don't expect too much of him."

Gwen went on her way downstairs, the children, who had waited, pressing close against her. They accompanied her enthusiastically into the kitchen, and Sing Lee gave them lady fingers to munch while he finished an inviting tea tray.

"Did you children go in to see Daddy?"

"We were going to, Mom, and then we saw you in the hall and we came down with you and we forgot!"

"Well, brush off those crumbs and trot right up there now."

"But that big man's there with him, Mom."

"That doesn't matter. Only stay a minute, unless Daddy asks you to stay."

"I'll take that tray for you," May said.

"I think Mr Bellamy would like me to take it in. But you might carry it to the top of the stairs if you will."

Following the maid to the landing, Gwen met Tom Sylvester coming down. The big man looked agitated. He delayed her for a moment.

"Say, Van's in a bad way, isn't he?" he asked.

“He’s tired today. It’s very hard for him to reconcile himself to being an invalid.”

“I was telling him that Fisher did the same thing,” Tom went on innocently. “He looked at me a long time—the darnedest look I ever saw! ‘Fisher had it easy,’ he said; ‘he went out on the operating table.’ ‘Oh,’ I said, ‘cheer up, the worst is yet to come! You’ll get used to it,’ I said; ‘you’ve got a nice wife, fine kids, enough money to live on; pipe down, feller,’ I said. ‘You and I are in the old fellers’ class now,’ I told him. ‘Fifty’s fifty, anyway you look at it.’ I told him my mother’d gotten round in a wheel chair for ten years before she died, and had a pretty swell time of it, too. I asked him about the horse, too.”

“The horse?” Gwen echoed, bewildered. “You might take that tray right in, May,” she added to the maid, “and tell Mr Bellamy I’ll be up in two minutes. And send the children down. What do you mean by ‘the horse,’ Tom?” she asked, vaguely uneasy.

“I asked him what he was going to do with his hunter. I was with Van when he bought that horse a year ago. He must be about eight, now, the feller told us he was five, but I know horses. That’s why Van took me along when he bought it,” Tom said, with a fat man’s comfortable chuckle at nothing. “Funny thing; my nephew, Daisy’s boy—you’ve met him at our place football days,—he was askin’ me about a horse the other day. He’s eighteen or thereabouts, and his mother wants to make him a present. I told him I’d keep my eyes open for a good buy, and thinkin’ that poor old Van won’t be up again I asked him if he wanted to sell.”

“Oh, Tom, I’m sorry you said that! It might have shocked him. He’s still taking the attitude that he’s going to be about one of these days.”

“No, he seemed all right to me. Van can take it. He said he’d let me know about the horse, and about the duck club.”

“The duck club?” Gwen began to feel frightened, and yet under her fright she was conscious of a sensation of relief. Blundering old Tom had done what none of the rest of them had dared to do. He had let Van know beyond any doubt that his hunting and riding days were over. Whatever the storm, it would presently die away, and after that everything would be plain sailing.

“Yep. You see Van was a charter member. Ten of us put up five hundred apiece as charter members, and those memberships are worth about five thousand now. Fact! I had the feelin’ that with doctors’ bills and hospital

bills and what not Van would be glad to let his membership go. Larry Bruce would snap it up in a minute."

"You told Van that?"

"Sure. I told him I thought it was a rotten break, but he ought to be glad he wasn't killed. I said I'd handle anything he wanted me to; fact is, I think the world and all of Van! His guns, you know. He's got a couple of swell guns, and there's no use lettin' 'em rot, what?"

"How'd he take it, Tom?" she asked fearfully.

"Oh, he seemed a little shocked, y'know. He said: 'I'm out of it, all right!' He said you'd been tryin' to tell him, but he hadn't seemed to get it through his head. He said he guessed he was dumb."

"Poor Van!" Gwen said, her heart wrung.

"Say, I hope I didn't put my foot in it?" the man said, alarmed.

"Oh no, no. He had to know. I'm not sure but what you've done me a great service, Tom, and him, too. It'll shock him, of course, but he'll get used to the idea, and then we can all make it up to him."

"Well, I certainly will do anything I can, Gwen. But we surely will miss the old boy, fishin' and shootin'. I was dove shootin' with Van this year down at Paso Robles."

"Mommy, Daddy said we were to come straight down to you and tell you he loved you!" The twins were shouting the message as they came downstairs. Gwen stooped to kiss her son's flushed eager little face. "Mom," he said, "I didn't know Dad had a pistol. He had it in the war. He fired it, too!"

"Of course he did! Did he tell you so, Fred?"

"He wanted his pistol, Mommy," little Mary said pleasantly, "and it was in his bureau drawer and Fred and I got it for him."

"In his bureau drawer! You gave it to him!" Gwen's face was suddenly white. Her knees weakened under her; as in a terrible dream she could not seem to move. Her eyes went to Tom's, saw her own fear flash there.

"Yes, Mommy, and he said to tell you he loved you!" little Mary said.

"Oh, my God, Tom!" Suddenly shocked into life, she and the man had taken two flying steps toward the stairs when the clean sharp stab of sound

that is like no other in the world went through the house, leaving a frightful silence behind it.

Gwen stopped short, panting, the man's eyes still on hers. Even the children were still in the still winter dusk. But May, who had just left the sickroom door above, came flying down to them with a wild scream, and from the piano downstairs there came an answering reverberation, faint and somber, like the echo of a closing chord.

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.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Lost Sunrise* by Kathleen Norris]