PADLOCKED

REX BEACH

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A NOVEL

By REX BEACH

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"The Auction Block," "The Barrier," "Big Brother," "Flowing Gold," "Going Some," "The Goose Woman and Other Stories," "Heart of the Sunset," "The Iron Trail," "The Ne'er-Do-Well," "The Net," "The Winds of of Chance," etc.

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First Edition

E—A

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Chapter One

Everybody agreed that Henry Gilbert was a "good" man. It was the highest praise his friends could offer and the worst thing his enemies could find to say about him. The verbal quotation marks with which people surrounded the adjective indicated pretty correctly the type of man he was and the regard in which they held him. In the mouths of the highly virtuous the unnecessary emphasis applied to that word "good" sounded vaguely defiant—it was both an apology and a defense—upon the scornful lips of those not so highly virtuous it amounted almost to a taunt.

Henry Gilbert was honest, energetic, and devout, also he was intolerant, bigoted, and rich. Naturally, he was the most unpopular man in town. Those zealous citizens of Hopewell, mainly women and clergymen, who were known as "the uplifters" and who made it their business to pry into the local doings of Satan, respected Gilbert and deferred to him, but none of them ever by any chance addressed him as "Hank" or "Gill" or even "Henry"; neither did they call upon him at his home except on behalf of some of the numerous betterment movements in which they were mutually interested. He had never had a chum.

That, of course, is a penalty suffered by the pure. The man without a vice is a man without a pal. Blameless men are privileged to cast all the stones they desire, but other people engaged in the same occupation usually give them plenty of room for fear of being hit, inadvertently. Accidents will happen, you know.

The average man in Henry Gilbert's position would have found life rather dull, rather disappointing—quite a lonesome affair indeed. But not he. In the first place, he was not an average man: he was far above the average in every way, as he often told himself. He was, in fact, a practically perfect creation.

This blissful frame of mind was, likewise, in complete accord with Nature's law of balance and her mercy. No man can feel a lack of human contact, of love, of sympathy, and of understanding when inside of him the springs of righteousness gush a steady stream of self-satisfaction. Ever since

Gilbert had been old enough and tall enough to look over the top of a bureau and into a looking-glass he had been blessed by a soul-satisfying complacency.

He had always been good-looking; he had never experienced a sick day and he had lived temperately. Now at fifty years of age he was the handsomest man in the state. He was tall, erect, and vigorous; he had a heavy head of white hair which he kept soft and silky and well perfumed; he wore a closely clipped silver beard and mustache both of which were unstained by tobacco. His teeth were like gleaming china; his moist, red lips had never been profaned by the touch of rum—all beverages of a spirituous nature, by the way, he called "rum"—and his skin was as fine and as smooth as that of a girl. It was his boast that any child, yes, the purest maiden, could kiss him without fear of contamination. Oddly enough, it was a prophylactic privilege of which neither the children nor the young women availed themselves.

Physically Mr. Gilbert was exactly the type of man which a man of his type admires, and when he studied his own moral image the result was no less pleasing. He was thoroughly good. It was a source of poignant regret to him that there were so few people like him, but he had discovered, alas! that the world is a wicked place peopled with an enormous number of sinners and a considerably smaller number of merely frail and erring mortals. To the saving of these he had of late years devoted his spare time. He often complained because his business prevented him from spending his entire time and energy at this agreeable occupation, but to efficiently manage a large manufacturing concern is a task for any man and the second million is often more difficult to lay by than the first million.

A person so blessed as he should have been happy as well as contented, but he was far from happy and he was contented only with himself. To some of his fellow workers in the uplift organizations that he headed he occasionally confessed to a great discouragement and spoke sadly but with Christian resignation about his "crown of thorns." Most of his associates were women—fidgety, unsatisfied women with dewlaps—and they assumed that he referred to his family, which he did. Being women of that sort, they could not be expected to approve of a woman like Mrs. Gilbert or a girl like Edith.

Just to prove how badly out of joint the world really is, however, their disapproval was by no means general; on the contrary, most of the people in Hopewell—here, as elsewhere, the morally pure were in the hopeless minority—liked Henry Gilbert's wife ten times better than they liked him,

and as for his daughter, the young men and women with whom she went were frankly crazy about her. They actually sympathized with the two women for having a psalm-shouting, fatuous, old fool for a husband and father and wondered how it had come about.

Edith herself one day asked her mother some such question. It was upon her return from the Country Club where she had that afternoon played in the semi-final round of a mixed foursomes tournament. She stormed into her mother's room, flung herself into a chair, and inquired, furiously:

"Say, Mims! What ails papa, anyhow? Is he human or—or just divine?"

"What has happened now?" Mrs. Gilbert looked up from her work.

"Dicky Young and I won our match today. We've got the best sort of chance to walk off with the trophy tomorrow, but papa has—*forbidden me to play*! Imagine it! I've got to default—throw the match!"

Mrs. Gilbert flushed—she had a lovely, sensitive face. "My dear! I don't understand—"

"He saw my new golf suit!" Edith indicated her smart linen knickers. "Evidently he has always assumed that I wear skirts to conceal the disgraceful fact that I have legs—my trunk is supposed to hang on the end of invisible wires, or something. Anyhow he was horrified to discover that I'm a biped. I stopped in at the office and ran right into a meeting of the 'Holier-Than-Thous.' That abominable Miss Galloway was there and I fascinated her as a serpent fascinates a bird. She'd never seen a good-looking pair of legs. When the meeting was over papa started moaning. You know—the usual stuff! He was shocked; he was pained. A daughter of his immodestly exposing her limbs—yes, he called them 'limbs'! That fast Country Club set had corrupted me. Rum-drinking young men and cigarette-smoking girls! He hit the ceiling when I explained that nearly all the girls wear knickers."

"I was afraid he'd object to that suit," Mrs. Gilbert sighed.

"I may have been a little bit snippy," Edith confessed. "It's so hard not to be superior to people like him and—he *is* such a trial. Anyhow, he 'preferred' that I withdraw from the tournament and he kept on preferring even after I offered to wear a sport skirt. You know what it means when he 'prefers' a thing. Dicky will be furious and—I'm right on my game, too. This thing is becoming intolerable, Mims. I simply can't stand it any more. And I won't!"

The mother nodded wearily. "I'll have a talk with him tonight. Perhaps I can win him over."

Edith's blue eyes were shining defiantly; her face was flushed; she spoke in a tone of dark resentment. "I'll tell you one thing: I've about reached the —" She paused, swallowed, then shook her head in hopeless perplexity. "I can't make him out. I've never seen a person so odiously, so offensively good as he is. And the worst of it is he's getting '*better*'! He's the most cordially disliked man in Hopewell. Even you must feel it."

"*Feel* it!" exclaimed Mrs. Gilbert.

"I can't understand how I happen to be his daughter or whatever induced you to marry him."

"He wasn't always like this," the elder woman said. "He was different from the men I knew. I was tired, bewildered—I guess I was frightened, too. Everybody told me I had a good voice, but I couldn't seem to get anywhere with it and New York is a dreadful city for a friendless girl. You wouldn't understand. He was clean, decent; handsome, too—"

"Good Lord! How I hate handsome men!" Edith viciously kicked her slim legs.

"He was well off, even then, and he offered me everything I longed for. That wasn't what made me do it, of course; I really loved him. I know what you're going through, my dear. He put me through the same thing. We're very much alike, you and I. But he's a good man; he means to do right. Perhaps it's my fault that you're not more like him than me."

"How he ever had a daughter, I can't imagine," the girl exclaimed. "He's so horrified at anything sexy! I'll bet he was terribly ashamed."

Mrs. Gilbert smiled, laughed. "That's not as absurd as it sounds. We never had another."

"I admire his virtues. I suppose everybody does. And he's a smart business man, too. That's why he's so hard to understand. You'd think any man who can see both sides of a business proposition and who has learned to give and take could see both sides of a moral or religious question. But no. He's granite. And outside of the business of money-making he's a flounder—both his eyes are on one side of his head. He's totally blind on the other. If he weren't my father I'm afraid I'd detest him as heartily as most people do."

"He has given you a good deal to be thankful for. At any rate, you'll never have to go through what I went through."

“I don’t see that he has given me so much. Think of what he has taken away from me. My music, for instance.—”

“I know!” the mother acquiesced, hastily. “I had ambitions for you to accomplish what I failed in, but perhaps I was selfish. After all, we haven’t done so badly with your voice—”

“In spite of him!”

“Fortunately, I had a good teacher and I’ve been able to pass on her method. You have more talent than I had.”

“But what’s the good of it?” Edith demanded, still resentfully. “He’d never let me go on the stage, even in concert work. He thinks singers wear tights. Look at the friends I have—or rather, haven’t. Think of the places I never go, the things I never see, the people I never meet. I’m young. I’m full of life. I like adventure. I want to laugh and sing and dance and play.”

“Of course. So did I.”

“At least you had your chance. You know what it’s like.”

“Yes, I was ‘full of life’—” Mrs. Gilbert began, musingly, but the girl ran on.

“I have good clothes, and plenty of spending money, and a car, but no will of my own, no freedom to think or to do what I choose or to cultivate the people I like or to make something out of myself. I’m a prisoner. I’m smothered. But I’ll get my breath, you see if I don’t. What’s more, I’ll play in those finals tomorrow. I’d play if I had to wear hoop-skirts and a bustle. However, I don’t propose to let him make me ridiculous. I’ll wear these knickers, and if he steals ’em I’ll play barelegged!”

Edith did play on the following day, and she wore her chic, new suit. Henry Gilbert heard about it, of course, and he would have clashed with her had not her mother voluntarily taken the blame. It was not the first time Mrs. Gilbert had intervened thus, had tried to explain, to argue, to convince, and finally to excuse. Just what sort of scene occurred between husband and wife on this occasion Edith never learned, but there was weariness, discouragement, almost a look of misery in the mother’s eyes when it was over. Later she asked Edith to lay aside the costume that had given offense, and this the girl did readily enough. Her mother’s lightest wish was law to her.

For fully a week after that incident Mr. Gilbert did not speak to his wife except in the daughter’s presence.

This episode of the golf suit was typical of many, and Edith had not exaggerated her feeling of discontent, of frustration. From her mother she had inherited a really splendid voice and under the latter's instruction she had worked hard to develop it. It was a voice that Hopewell took pride in, and as it had matured certain ambitions of its owner had taken shape. But with those ambitions Mr. Gilbert was entirely out of sympathy. If Edith chose to become a choir singer or to teach vocal music, well and good, but as for appearing professionally before the footlights he refused even to consider such a thing. From the concert platform to the stage was but a step, and no daughter of his would ever become a painted Jezebel of the theater. Theatrical people were loose and immoral; the theater itself was a device of Satan. If he forbade his daughter to attend the theater, how could he countenance her becoming an actress? Actress! The very word was a hissing upon the lips of decent people.

Dancing and card-playing were sinful occupations, too; more destructive of the moral fiber even than theater going. It seemed to Edith as if anything in the way of amusement was an offense in her father's nostrils and as if everything that young people enjoyed doing was improper, if not actually wicked, in his eyes. It was quite a tribute to her personality that she had attained popularity in the younger set despite the prohibitions with which she was hedged about, but, if the truth must be told, she did not respect very carefully those prohibitions and her friends had joined her in a sort of joyous conspiracy to defeat them.

Mrs. Gilbert, too, was oftentimes her ally. When, for instance, a really good play came to Hopewell she and Edith usually managed to see it, and frequently they went to motion pictures. This despite the fact that Gilbert was president of the Purity League and the League had voted that pictures were a pernicious influence and an incitement to lawlessness and lust. Privately Mrs. Gilbert scoffed at this.

"Moving pictures don't incite me to lawlessness and I can't believe they'll arouse anything very evil in you," she told her daughter. "Some pictures, I'll admit, aren't very nice, but you're a young woman, not a child. To the pure all things are pure—"

"Oh no, Mims!" Edith asserted, positively. "To the pure all things are rotten."

"Anyhow, I don't intend to let your father and his Miss Galloways crush the youth and the romance out of you. I wouldn't deliberately hurt his

feelings and I try to respect his views on important matters, but—we'll see all the good picture plays we have a chance to see."

This they proceeded to do.

But as time went on Henry Gilbert's prejudice against this form of entertainment grew and his attitude changed from one of mere disapproval to an active and vigorous opposition. There was a reason for this. His pet social-betterment projects had progressed very well, the various local reform movements in which he had taken part were in a fair way to succeed and, more important by far, prohibition was no longer a dream, but a dazzling actuality. As a result Mr. Gilbert and his earnest-minded cohorts were, in a manner of speaking, out of a job. They were faced with the alternative of finding a new dragon to slay or of permitting their swords to rust in their scabbards. The public's breath had been purified, so to speak, but its body was beset by other ills and of these perhaps motion pictures was the worst, the most insidious. So, at least, Gilbert convinced himself. With all the exultant fervor that is born of every new crusade he began war against the screen. He rallied his forces, he enlisted clergymen, he appeared before their congregations, before women's societies and mothers' clubs, and he exposed the growing menace of the silent drama. Motion pictures, he told them, were vulgar and salacious and by reason of their unhealthy appeal to the young they were indirectly responsible for the alarming increase of crime. They had ripped aside the veil of modesty and exposed all of the hideous and demoralizing secrets of sex. The industry itself was dominated by mercenary men who deliberately pandered to the basest passions of their audiences in order to enrich themselves. By their greed, by their criminal disregard of decency, they were making a mock of virtue, they were destroying American ideals, betraying the sanctity of American home life and corrupting American youth. Gilbert had a lot like this to say and there was nobody to deny him, so the movement grew.

He swung all of the welfare organizations into line behind him and induced the State Federation of Churches to indorse his views. He voiced a demand for a rigorous state censorship of films and drafted a bill providing for it. He it was who really forced that bill through the Legislature.

He was a clever politician and a skillful lobbyist; at the several hearings he went to the Capitol and, as the mouthpiece for the six hundred thousand indignant members of the Federation, he spoke in behalf of the measure.

Miss Galloway took an active part in the fight, and she, too, spoke. She represented the State League of Mothers' Clubs. She was not a mother, to be

sure, but she had “a mother’s heart” and the tears she shed over the erring children who had been led astray by the wicked, crime-inciting, sex-provoking films were “mother’s tears.”

Her speech deeply affected Henry Gilbert and he wondered afterwards why Belle Galloway had been denied the actual joys of motherhood of which she had spoken so feelingly. He had often asked himself why she remained unmarried, for she was still young—not more than thirty-five—and, unlike most of the other women reform workers with whom he came in contact, she was physically attractive. She was a strong, healthy, intense person, full bosomed and well proportioned. What is more, she radiated a peculiar, indefinable animal magnetism; at least Gilbert felt it very strongly when he was near her. And she was good-looking. She had black hair, her skin was dark, and beneath her somber eyes were deep shadows, sooty smudges which he considered extremely alluring.

Certainly there was no good physiological reason for a woman like her to remain an old maid. He decided finally that she must be keenly conscious of that distressing sex appeal which was inherent in her and that it offended her finer nature—the spiritual side of her. Some women were like that. But it was a pity. She had such emotional possibilities. She would make such a splendid wife for some good, clean man.

That struggle for censorship turned into quite a bitter fight and Gilbert was put to it to win. But win he did, as usual. Right was triumphant, virtue prevailed. However, it took a lot of money. Henry Gilbert thanked God that he had the money to spend and knew how and where to spend it so as to do the most good.

Even after the bill had passed, the Governor was reluctant to sign it, but through a fortuitous chain of circumstances Gilbert found himself in a position to put the screws to him and to force a signature. The Chief Executive, it so happened, was in private life a competitor of his, and—the details of their undertaking were never reduced to writing and they agreed to retain them as a secret between themselves.

Gilbert, however, could not refrain from breaching that confidence enough to tell Miss Galloway how he had forced the Governor’s hand; she was always so interested in his triumphs. She was deeply stirred by his account and frankly expressed her admiration for his skill and his determination. Her approval had come to mean a good deal to Gilbert lately, no doubt because they were in such sympathy.

“The way you conducted this fight is wonderful,” she told him with an enthusiasm she reserved for him alone. “Simply wonderful! Our children and our children’s children will bless the name of Henry Gilbert.”

“My dear child,” he protested, “the victory is as much yours as mine. I was merely the leader; you were my most able adjutant. Napoleon, you know, owed his military success to his genius for selecting good generals. But it is nice to hear a word of praise from one who is sincere—from one who understands. It is about my only reward.”

“You would have made as great a leader as Napoleon,” Miss Galloway said, earnestly. “You have the ability to fire us weaker people with your zeal, with your faith in the right.”

“Tut! Tut!” Her pleased listener beamed; he ran a soft, well-manicured hand over his silver beard. “You’re a flatterer, Belle. You spoil me. If there were more enthusiasts like you our struggle wouldn’t be so long drawn out.”

“Have I helped you?” she inquired.

“My dear!” Gilbert leaned forward and laid his hand over hers. It was a pleasing little familiarity which he permitted himself; it emphasized their intimacy and he liked to touch her—in a perfectly respectful manner. “Without your support I’d have become discouraged long ago. You’re the only person who seems to be in accord with me. At home—” The speaker sighed and shook his head.

Miss Galloway’s lips parted; she lowered her glowing dark eyes. “I—have a name for you, all of my own,” she confessed. “I wonder if you’d like to hear it.”

“Indeed I would.”

“You won’t laugh? You won’t think I’m—sentimental?”

Henry Gilbert was at this moment in an exultant mood; he answered recklessly:

“I certainly shall. I always have considered you sentimental. Deeply sentimental. You can’t fool me, my girl.” He wagged a finger at her. Some subtle change that leaped into his hearer’s face suddenly smote him with apprehension. He feared he had offended her, so he said, hastily: “That’s a sincere compliment. You are a woman of reserve—your strength of character is your finest quality, but back of it I know you have a beautiful, warm soul.”

The woman flushed more deeply. “Thank you. Well, then, I call you my —our ‘plumed knight.’ You are so firm, so fearless, so unwavering. ‘*Sans peur et sans reproche.*’ It is an inspiration to work with a man like you.”

Gilbert radiated pleasure; he thanked his companion for her compliment. He felt no inclination to laugh, for, as a matter of fact, he had called himself very much the same thing, as he now told her. By and by he said: “But to get back to that bill, my dear. As you know, it provides for one woman on the board of review. I wrote in that provision with a certain person in mind and I told the Governor that I proposed to name her myself. I have. There is only one woman in whose hands I would trust the moral welfare of the next generation of this state—Belle Galloway of Hopewell!”

“*Me!*” the woman cried.

“Exactly! It is a position of trust and you can make it one of great influence. It pays rather well, too; thirty-five hundred a year, to begin with. I think I can promise that the salary will be increased.” He winked and smiled benignantly. “Salaries of political appointees have a way of growing when some one of influence is interested in seeing them grow. You understand?”

“I—don’t know what to say,” Miss Galloway confessed. “The salary is an inducement, of course. You know my position: we who labor in the Lord’s vineyard—” She hesitated, flushed again, then paled. “It means I’d have to leave Hopewell and go to the city, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“I— We couldn’t— We’d have to give up our work together.”

“Right. I thought of that, but you deserve a reward. You can accomplish a great good. I think it is your duty to—”

Miss Galloway interrupted in a tone Gilbert had never heard her use. “I can’t. I’d rather stay here. It was sweet of you to think of me and I thank you, but— No! No! Please!” She averted her face suddenly; her bosom heaved.

Gilbert felt a queer excitement stir within him; his pulse leaped and his breath caught unaccountably, but he lacked the courage to analyze his emotion. He did trust himself to say:

“Of course I’d hate to see you go. I’d feel lost here alone. Without you to support me I’m afraid I’d falter; nevertheless—” The speaker’s tongue had been running on of its own accord, he was disappointed and yet relieved when his secretary entered with some papers for his desk. When she had

gone he was once more his usual self. Miss Galloway, too, had recovered her customary poise.

"I do thank you," she repeated, earnestly, "but my work is here. Perhaps I can accomplish something in my own small way. At any rate, I have you for an inspiration." She smiled and rose to go. Gilbert accompanied her to the door. There she hesitated, then said, regretfully: "Isn't it a pity that Mrs. Gilbert is so out of sympathy with our work? She could be such a help."

"It is indeed. I'm afraid she has a worldly way of—"

"I'm so fond of her. And I admire her so. Your daughter, too. It's too much to expect them to join our crusade, but if only they wouldn't show their disapproval. Of course, they're perfectly innocent—"

"In what way, Belle? Disapproval of what?"

"Why, of our war against indecent films, for instance. Mrs. Gilbert could set such a splendid example, if she would. But as you say she has her own views."

"Has she shown disapproval?"

Miss Galloway fell into confusion; in some distress she murmured: "Oh, I'm sorry! I shouldn't have spoken. I wouldn't *think* of criticizing her, you understand." When the husband insisted upon a fuller explanation, she reluctantly said: "Why, it's simply that she has been patronizing some of the very pictures we denounce—while the fight was actually in progress. Not that they could hurt a mature woman like her—a woman of her experience and strength of character—but Edith is young and everybody knows her. It's the example. That abominable picture 'Silken Savages,' for instance. I saw them coming out. Of course they haven't stopped to think how it looks. But it *is* a pity, isn't it? Especially with you fighting almost single-handed—"

"Hm-m!" Gilbert frowned. "I shall have to speak to Alice. As you say, she doesn't stop to think."

"Precisely! I wouldn't have mentioned it if I'd thought you didn't know. But I'm *so* in earnest; the work is *so* vital. I'm so closely in sympathy with your ideas!"

When his caller had gone Henry Gilbert continued to frown. So Alice was maintaining her attitude of indifference to his desires, nay, actually showing defiance of them. It was intolerable. No wonder Edith, their daughter, was a problem. It was enough to grieve Belle Galloway.

Belle—! There was a woman. Unconsciously Gilbert straightened his shoulders, stroked his beard, cast an approving glance at his reflection in the mirror. Yes, set in the mahogany paneling of his private office was a full-length pier glass.

He was still deeply astonished at her refusal to accept that position as state censor; he was especially astonished at the manner of her refusal and what it implied. As he pondered it now he again experienced that queer feeling of suppressed excitement. Was the woman sincere? He dismissed that question at once. She was too good, too pure to dissemble. No, he had surprised her into a confession. People called her a cold, emotionless creature. Ha! That's all they knew about it. Volcanoes are cold, too, on the surface, but inside is molten lava. He was a good deal like that, but of course he had the strength of character to hold the fires in check. He was a married man. Alas! yes, a man married to a woman utterly out of sympathy with him and one who deliberately trod upon his most sacred convictions! It was time he had an understanding with her.

He put on his overcoat and hat and once more complacently eyed himself in the glass. Her "plumed knight!" That was very sweet and touching, but he really was a knightly figure, with his tall, clean, straight body, his handsome, ruddy face, and that fine head of silver hair. He examined his hair more carefully, ran his fingers through it. That new barber was careless; he had clipped it too short. Hair like that was more becoming if worn a shade longer.

Chapter Two

A man's home is often a pretty fair index of his character. The Gilbert residence, for instance, was impressive from the outside, and its grounds, inasmuch as they showed from the street, were meticulously kept. Luxuriant shrubbery and some fine old ivy softened the outlines of the house itself and concealed its unattractive features. Inside, it was chilly and formal and rather colorless in spite of all that its mistress had been able to do, for Gilbert had employed a decorator to furnish the more important first-floor rooms—those which visitors saw. The butler's pantry and the kitchen he had never remodeled and they were both antiquated and inconvenient.

Upstairs it was much the same. Mrs. Gilbert's and Edith's bedrooms were quite nice, but his was the largest and the most luxurious room in the house. The guest chambers were only fair—a fact of little importance inasmuch as they were seldom occupied. As for the service wing, it was dark and damp and the plumbing was wretched. The basement was horrid and the laundry a disgrace.

Mrs. Gilbert had long since abandoned her efforts to effect further betterments in the premises, for her husband declared that they suited him and he refused to allow her to make any changes. Having learned by experience how useless it was to try and dent that shell of self-satisfaction with which he was armored, she had to content herself with trying to run the place as well and as economically as possible. It was far easier to endure dissatisfaction with her home than to suffer the chill of her husband's disapproval.

Today, when he sought her out, she inferred from his expression and from his tone of voice that he was pained at something and she managed to guess pretty well what it was when he began by telling her all about his success with the censorship bill.

Having, as he thought, adroitly led up to the subject in his mind, he said: "In view of the outstanding position I have taken in this matter of salacious motion pictures, I am a little surprised that you are not more careful to respect it. I'm afraid you don't realize the full force of your example. As my wife you are a person of importance, and you must not forget that the community watches you with jealous eyes."

“Henry,”—Mrs. Gilbert spoke smilingly—“isn’t it possible that you exaggerate our importance? If you only knew it, Hopewell cares very little what we do so long as we behave ourselves decently.”

“Our conceptions of ‘decent’ behavior are at variance,” Gilbert said, stiffly. “ ‘Decent,’ of course, is not the word to use in this connection, but I repeat that it is inconsiderate of you to utterly disregard my views.”

“Perhaps it is,” his wife admitted. “But, Henry, are you considerate of my views? Or those of other people?”

The man stirred impatiently. “Let us not argue—play hide and seek with words. It is time we had a serious talk. Frankly, I’m not at all satisfied with—with the condition of affairs in my own household. For some time I have been aware of a growing resentment on Edith’s part, an increasing rebellion against my authority. As much as I hate to say so, I’m afraid you are to blame for it. She is not developing into the sort of girl I had hoped.”

“No, I dare say she isn’t. And of course you can’t understand why.”

“Right, I can’t. I have tried by word and by deed to inculcate in her the ideals of true womanhood, but the seed appears to have fallen upon sterile ground. Youth, I grant you, is prone to be headstrong and thoughtless, but her total lack of sympathetic—”

“Henry,” his wife interrupted again with a smile, “I’m just one mother, not a whole mothers’ club. For Heaven’s sake let’s talk like man and wife! Now then, you know very well there’s nothing wrong with Edith. What has she done this time?”

“It isn’t ‘this time’; it’s all the time. I am alarmed by her antagonism to my ideas. She is becoming a worldly girl. Take her manner of dressing: she refuses absolutely to respect my desires.”

“If you mean that she resents your ideas about dress, I’ll agree. I don’t like them, either.”

“She has more clothes than any girl in Hopewell.”

“And you pick them out, whenever she lets you. If you had your way we’d be the dowdiest women in town. Women have to observe styles, Henry.”

“I’m not going to argue that matter. What concerns me more deeply is the girl’s moral and spiritual welfare. I have reason to feel concerned. She is a young woman now; she is beginning to feel the impulses and the yearnings of her sex.”

“What do you mean by that?” the mother inquired, curiously.

“Oh, I have eyes! I’m shrewd in such matters. Have you ever observed the way she brightens up, sparkles, when men are around? She becomes a different creature. I trust you realize the significance of that—that peculiar animation, without my speaking more plainly.”

“Isn’t that natural; perfectly normal?”

Gilbert did not deign to answer. “Long ago I made plain my opposition to dancing. I did not actually forbid it in so many words. Why should I? How could I explain to her, without indelicacy, the fact that physical contact of that sort is bound to stimulate the baser passions? I discover that she has learned how to execute these modern jungle antics and actually practices them with young men at the Country Club! Her sex-consciousness is unmistakable. One day I surprised her in a disgraceful exhibition with that Dicky Young. They were romping through the house; he was chasing her; they were laughing hysterically. She wore one of those thin, knitted silk things—a sort of sweater—and there was no corset underneath. Her—well, the womanly outlines of her figure were most noticeable. I was shocked, really. He caught her; they wrestled, struggled: her hair was down and there was an unmistakable brightness, a glitter to her eyes. It could have had but one significance. The game they were pretending to play had only one purpose: he was hungry to get his hands upon her; her flight was a subterfuge to excite him.”

Mrs. Gilbert opened her lips to speak, then compressed them. She listened while her husband went on:

“Innocent amusement is one thing; a deliberate effort to arouse animal instincts in the predatory male is quite another. I’m no prude, but I tremble at thought of the precipice toward which our daughter is rushing. I have been too careless, too indulgent. I have left her welfare too much in your hands.” When his wife stirred, the speaker raised a soft, white hand. “Wait! I speak kindly. We have different ideas about many things and I’m not censuring you. I flatter myself that I am broad-minded, just. I dare say your love for Edith blinds you to the truth. But the fact remains that our little girl is being awakened to her—I can’t think of any word better than sex-consciousness—and we must begin at once to combat it. That is one matter I had in mind.”

“What you say frightens me, indeed,” the woman said.

“I’m glad—”

"Yes, it frightens me to think what would become of her if something happened to me." Before her husband could ask what she meant by this she said, "From what you told me a while ago I assume that you blame this awakening of Edith's 'sex-consciousness' upon motion pictures."

"To some extent, yes. I knew that you took her to picture shows now and then, but I assumed that you exercised a motherly care to make sure that she saw only clean, instructive pictures such as the news reels, the scenic views, and perhaps the historical film dramas—"

"Oh, Henry! You're quite absurd," Mrs. Gilbert wearily exclaimed.

Her husband colored; stiffly he said: "Please don't anger me. I had no idea you permitted her to see vulgar and salacious pictures—things like 'Silken Savages,' for instance, that are aimed directly at the passions."

"I suppose Miss Galloway told you we were there. She sees all the sexy features."

"Then you did see it?"

"Yes, indeed. The acting had been widely advertised. Both Edith and I thought the story itself was pretty stupid." The speaker's tone changed as she continued: "If you were like other men, Henry—or perhaps I'd better say if I had a mind like yours—I'd resent your intimacy with that woman."

"That is an unwarranted remark," the man declared with some heat. "Belle Galloway is a woman of the highest character and—"

"But I haven't a mind like yours. And besides, I'm sure she wouldn't do anything wrong."

"I'm glad you acknowledge—"

"She hasn't the courage. Neither have you."

There was a moment of silence during which Henry Gilbert had a struggle with himself. He ended it by saying: "We will not discuss her. What I wish to say is this—I am dissatisfied with the atmosphere in which Edith is growing up and the way you are looking after her. She is in danger. I have endured your lack of sympathy with my ideals, but I cannot tolerate your open defiance of them which is reflected in her. I tell you her soul is at stake. We must make a change and I think I have arrived at the solution. I propose to send her to my sister Ella and——"

"*What?*" Mrs. Gilbert exclaimed.

"Ella is willing to take her and exercise the same careful supervision over her that she exercised over her own child."

"Do you mean to say you and Ella have talked this over? You mean you want to send Edith there—to *live*?" The mother's voice was sharp with incredulity.

"For a while. For a year, perhaps."

"Why—it's absurd! I won't let you."

"*Alice!*" the husband cried in a shocked tone.

"I can't believe you're serious."

"I am. Quite serious."

It was an instant before Mrs. Gilbert managed to inquire: "You actually mean to tell me that I'm not a fit person to raise my own child? Is that it?"

"The facts are as they are. Edith is unruly. She refuses to respect my wishes or to obey my commands."

"That's not true!"

"I am forced to the reluctant conclusion that your lack of sympathy, if not your actual antagonism to my views, encourages her rebellion."

"Well, she isn't going to Ella's," the mother said, in a tone of finality. "We didn't argue the Galloway matter; we won't argue this."

"My dear! This is nothing less than defiance."

"Exactly. Defiance! A veto!" Mrs. Gilbert's eyes were blazing now. "You've had your own way for twenty years; I'm going to have mine, for once. I've listened patiently to you, although it seems incredible that a man of your intelligence can be so narrow, so bigoted—but you're honest, sincere! That's the amazing thing about it. You're an amazing man, Henry. So blind! And so—nasty!"

"*Nasty!*" Gilbert's voice quivered.

"You're the nastiest-minded man I ever knew. You proved it here, now. Dancing means nothing to you except physical contact, the rubbing of bodies! Music, rhythm, mirth, gayety—you can't understand them: all you see in a dance is sexual stimulus. Thank God, the boys aren't like you! Edith is sweet and clean and fragrant with youth. Dicky Young is a decent, healthy-minded lad. They've grown up together. You see them romping, laughing, and you take offense. Why? Because you see them through the

eyes of a satyr. Oh, you're clean enough in your body, but your mind is filthy! I suppose that's why you're a 'reformer.' You see enticement in that girl's actions and lust in the boy's. You're blind to the lovely lines of an innocent girl's figure; all you can see is the swell of her bosom. Your own daughter. *Faugh!*"

"That's enough!" Gilbert shouted.

"Oh no, it isn't enough. You say I'm not a fit mother: I say you're not a fit father. Neither is your sister Ella a fit woman to raise a girl—my girl. She's like you. We're going to understand matters once and for all, Henry. You're not going to take Edith away from me. You crushed me, but I won't let you crush her. You've done your best to strangle her, smother her, but you shan't steal her youth and joyousness; you shan't pull the wings off of her butterflies. Not while I live."

"I—I have never been spoken to like this," Gilbert stammered, in extreme agitation.

"I'm sure of that. Probably it is the first time you ever tried to snatch a child from its mother's arms. Not that you wouldn't do it, now that you make it your business to live other people's lives for them. You've lived yours, without interference, and you've lived mine for me. But you're not going to live Edith's for her. She's going to do that for herself."

"Am I to understand that you propose to go on as you have been going—to encourage her in her wickedness and her rebellion? Do you propose to widen the breach between her and me?"

"I—don't know what you're to understand except that you shan't take her away." The speaker's first flaming wrath had burned itself out, she was trembling weakly. "I don't want to feel that there is any breach between you. I want her to love you. I want her to be happy and to realize the full promise of all that life holds out to her."

"At least we are one in that."

In some hesitation the mother continued: "She's your child as well as mine, Henry. I must think of that. We must never have another scene like this—I'm not strong enough to stand it. I'll do my best to have her respect your wishes—I've always done that in important matters—but you must do your share. You must realize that she's no longer a child, but that she has a mind and a conscience of her own. Just because it isn't exactly like yours is no sign that she's willful or wicked. If only you could see that."

"I, too, deeply regret this scene," Gilbert said. "Your unyielding attitude shows me that I have a problem to meet—a problem which will require earnest thought and heart-felt prayer. We have arrived at a critical juncture, Alice; we must trust in Divine wisdom." He sighed deeply and turned to go.

"Don't try to take her away!" the wife warned him.

"There is a right road and there is One who will point it out," he asserted, piously. "I shall appeal to Him and we must abide by His will." With these words he went to his own room.

Now Gilbert, as a matter of fact, had not the slightest intention of leaving this matter entirely to God—it was something he considered himself capable of handling quite well—but he did feel the need of an excuse to end the interview with his wife without loss of dignity. He could not stomach defeat at her hands, and yet her positive refusal to even consider his demand left him high and dry, and for the moment at least he could think of nothing further to say or to do.

But no solution presented itself, even upon calmer consideration in his own chamber. It was not so easy to separate mother and daughter as it had seemed. His wife's defiance had come as a disagreeable shock and he was unused to shocks. They angered him. He had always had his own way. What had come over Alice? He paced the floor in frowning preoccupation.

The inconsistency of her! To pretend that she was the aggrieved party! That was like a woman. He had made a mistake, perhaps, in broaching the subject so boldly instead of leading up to it more gradually and proving by actual evidence how demoralizing her influence had become. It *was* demoralizing and he had no intention of permitting it to continue. No, a thousand times no! But how to remove Edith from her mother's malign influence was indeed a problem.

What a bitter tongue Alice had. She had called him "nasty"—a "nasty-minded man!" That was something he could never forget. Never! An outrageous remark. And so wickedly untrue. As if he were not the purest of men and the truest of husbands. Why, he had never been unfaithful to his marriage vows in word, in deed, or in thought, notwithstanding the fact that he and Alice had long since ceased to love each other or to be husband and wife except in name. A satyr! Oh, the calumny! Mr. Gilbert's white beard quivered with indignation.

The more he pondered over Alice's accusations, the more they rankled and the angrier he became. He was like that—given to nursing his wrongs

and to inflaming his injuries. He decided at last that he must indeed turn to prayer, not to ask guidance, but to seek refuge from the turmoil within him. Prayer came easily to him and when he sought guidance in public he always knelt. When he was alone, however, he did not kneel; that suppliant attitude, like his deep, resonant chest tones, he reserved for use in the presence of an audience.

He seated himself now in his most comfortable overstuffed chair and closed his eyes. His appeal was sincere enough; earnestly and silently he asked God to show him a way by which he could humble his wife and overcome her opposition to his own will.

He was tired; it was pleasant thus to relax, but, after the first few moments, he could not concentrate wholly upon his task, for he kept thinking of what Alice had called him. A nasty-minded man! . . . A satyr was a wanton creature with the hairy ears of a goat. . . . He could not see, beneath the folds of his daughter's sweater, the slim grace of a virgin figure, only the outlines of a woman's bosom! What a coarse, what a beastly thing to say! Alice would repent that speech. And she had been so low-minded as to suggest the possibility of an unwise intimacy between him and Belle Galloway. Such lewdness! But Alice had always been embarrassingly frank about sex matters. Casual. Why, even when they were first married she had suffered no feeling of shame. She was fleshly. . . . And Edith had inherited something of that—that wantonness. What a contrast between women like Alice and Miss Galloway! Imagine Belle putting such a vile construction upon his remarks. . . . Imagine her behaving as if marriage and—and its relations were perfectly casual! She was a good, a modest woman. . . . Funny that she should refuse to leave Hopewell, even to accept a position of influence. Just because of him. She had a deep emotional nature—those dark smudges under her eyes testified to that—but she possessed the strength to repress it. Emotions of the grosser sort are designed to develop moral strength, powers of resistance. . . . He had never seen Belle in one of those thin sweater things that Edith wore, but he could fancy how well she would look. She was so mature, so fully developed—

Mr. Gilbert dozed off; sleep put an end to his moment of prayer.

He awoke refreshed and with the realization that during his religious abstraction a new thought had indeed come to him, a possible means of forcing his wife's consent to his plans for Edith. It was dim, unformed; it seemed impractical at first, but the more he thought about it, the more promise it held. It would involve a trip to New York, the judicious expenditure of considerable money, even the straining of what he considered

to be his code of morals, but the stake was worth all that, and more. Something had to be done to turn the feet of his daughter from the path she trod and to set them in the way of the Lord.

Chapter Three

Mrs. Gilbert was a highly strung, sensitive woman. She was frail and she had suffered from more than the average number of physical ills; it is quite likely that her life with Henry Gilbert would have made her an invalid had it not been for a considerable reserve supply of nervous force. During the past year, however, she had failed perceptibly, not so much in appearance as in spirit. She had always been sunny, gay, possessed of a thousand charming, birdlike ways that were a delight to her daughter, but of late she had suffered periods of intense depression and the latter was frankly worried over her. On occasion she was irritable; again she was moody and manifested reasonless likes and dislikes to people and to things; several times she had become hysterical over nothing. The family physician assured Edith that the metamorphosis through which the elder woman was going was quite natural and need cause no serious apprehensions, and that about all anyone could do was to help banish the "blue" spells and to treat her with the utmost tenderness and consideration.

One of these black periods of depression followed her scene with her husband; she suffered from some repressed excitement; more than once she protested wildly that Edith must never leave her. Gradually, from words dropped now and then, the girl learned pretty accurately what had brought on this condition, and naturally she was aghast. She was offended at her father's criticism of her own conduct, but this feeling was lost in indignation over his proposal to send her away. It seemed incredible that any man could be so thoughtless or so unfeeling as to harrow the sensibilities of a woman in her mother's nervous condition by even suggesting such a thing. She said as much. Mrs. Gilbert neither admitted nor denied that her husband had made that proposal, but she did say:

"Your father is a fortunate man—he has never suffered."

"He'd be the last one to acknowledge that," Edith protested. "Why, Mims dear, he's in constant anguish at the wickedness all around him."

"He hasn't a nerve. He never had a sick day. How can he feel sympathy —?"

"I know. And he's never had a moral ache, or a pain in his conscience, either."

“Everything was made to order for him. He was never lost, bewildered; his road was always straight and smooth. The only impulsive thing he ever did was to marry me, and I’m quite sure he often regrets it.”

“Nonsense! Why, that would indicate that he was made of common mortal clay. He’s too perfectly well satisfied with himself to regret anything he ever did. The fact that he did it proves that it was right.”

“You’re bitter, my dear.”

“Yes, bitter! I used to admire him. I was proud of him. I’m old enough now to think for myself and I’m finding it harder every day even to respect him.”

“Edith!”

“Oh, I’m truthful with you! Selfishness is the most despicable sin there is and he’s thoroughly selfish. Not in money matters, of course, but in important things. Some people may be selfish in the small, material things and still be generous in the big ones that really count. I—I wish he were a broad, tolerant, weak, impulsive, affectionate, bad man. I’d adore him.”

Mrs. Gilbert was surprised one day when her husband announced that he was leaving that afternoon for New York.

“Will you be back in time for Edith’s birthday?” she inquired.

“When is it?”

“The fifteenth.”

“Yes, yes! Of course. But the fifteenth—” Gilbert consulted a pocket date book. “That’s the last day of the convention of the State Betterment League. I’m afraid I’ll have to be in Owensburg; we have some important reform measures coming up.”

“Can’t you get back for the party?”

“Party? To be sure, you’re giving her a party. I’m afraid not. However”—the speaker smiled acidly—“I dare say my absence will not prove to be an unrelieved misfortune. The young people Edith associates with will hardly miss me.”

Wistfully the wife said: “You could make them miss you, Henry. They’re nice youngsters and we’ve seen most of them grow up. They’re a little bit afraid of you, that’s all.”

“Conscience makes cowards of us all.”

"I'm sorry you are going to be away. I won't be here for many more of Edith's birthdays."

Gilbert glanced sharply at his wife. "Why do you feel that way?"

The woman shrugged and smiled faintly. "I don't know. Imagination; a premonition perhaps."

"Imagination, no doubt. Make it a nice party. See that everything is well done. I can't afford to have Edith's parties look cheap."

He left without kissing her.

On his way to the office that morning Gilbert did an impulsive thing: he stopped in at a florist's, bought an expensive box of roses, and had it sent to Miss Galloway. In the box he enclosed a brief note. It was the first time he had ever done anything of the sort and later he asked himself what had prompted him today. It was years since he had bought flowers for anything except a funeral. But it was a graceful thing to do, and he had felt impelled to tell her that he was going away. He hoped she would not consider him forward.

Evidently she did not, for she phoned him promptly; she was effusive in her thanks. She was, in fact, quite flustered.

"Do you like them?" he inquired in a warm voice.

Of course Miss Galloway liked them, but what completely overwhelmed her was to realize that he had thought of her, had thought to tell her good-by. One thing only could have added to her pleasure; if he himself had brought the flowers.

"What an amiable speech," Gilbert purred. "Didn't I say you were spoiling me with flattery? Do you know, Belle, those are the first flowers I've sent to a woman in—I don't know how long. I feel quite self-conscious."

There was a pause, then she said: "I wish you could see how cheerful they make my rooms. You've—never been here, have you?"

"No."

"I— It would be lovely if you would drop in some afternoon. I have so many things to talk about. I need your advice so badly. My place is very simple, of course, and I have no callers. Advice about our work, I mean. We could have a cup of tea. I'm sure you wouldn't mind the simple way I live." The speaker laughed without reason and Gilbert realized that she was quite

agitated. This, and the fact that a mile or more of copper wire separated them, induced him to say, promptly:

"You have only to ask me. A cup of tea from your hands, and a cozy chat! I'm enchanted at the prospect."

So much can be conveyed by a tone.

"I was thinking—this afternoon—your train doesn't leave until five thirty."

"Splendid! I'll stop by about four, if that is convenient."

Gilbert experienced a moment of trepidation, a panicky feeling of guilt, when he hung up. This he dismissed. Belle Galloway was in the habit of calling upon him whenever it became necessary for them to see each other. Why should he feel as if he were doing something clandestine in going to see her? Absurd. It was merely because he had never done it before. As if there could be anything between them, beyond sincere respect and mutual admiration! Why, she was the most rigidly decorous young woman he had ever known. . . . He smiled as he recalled her agitation when she invited him; no wonder she had faltered, for she was an obscure person and he was the biggest man in Hopewell. Knowing her as he did, he suspected that he would be about the first masculine caller she had ever entertained. . . . Her "plumed knight!" There was a pretty sentiment about that. . . . To have discovered that Belle Galloway was at heart sentimental was indeed a tribute to his shrewdness.

In spite of the anticipation with which he had looked forward to four o'clock, the hour he spent in Miss Galloway's little flat turned out to be intensely uncomfortable. Uncomfortable for both him and her. He could not entirely shake off a feeling of impropriety and he had to talk over it, to smother it with words. As a result he babbled. He was beautifully at ease; his voice was unctuous; his laughter was low and mellow; nevertheless, there were times when he experienced difficulty in co-ordinating his thoughts and his tongue and he talked as incoherently as a parrot.

As for the woman, she was in a painful flutter. At one moment she was pale and silent, at the next she was flushed and garrulous. She hung upon his every word with flattering deference; an absorbed, unblinking interest that merely masked a complete mental turmoil. For all she knew he might have been talking Volapuk. She was intensely aware of him, but conscious only of herself; and had a sudden knock come at the door she probably would have smothered a scream. Her impulse would have been to hide him in a closet.

They talked about the Lord's Day League and the effect of Sunday golf; juvenile delinquency; corruption in public office, and the campaign for funds for the new Anti-nicotine Society. It was all wretchedly stupid and impersonal, but it left both of them profoundly stirred and intensely excited.

Arriving in New York, Henry Gilbert made an appointment with the head of a well-known detective agency and when they met outlined a proposal to him that caused the latter to shake his head doubtfully and say:

"That's a pretty tough job. How do you expect us to go back twenty years and dig up anything against a woman?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. I have no acquaintance with this line of work, but I assumed you detectives could do the impossible. Especially if the—er—inducements were sufficient." The manager shot a quick glance at his caller, but the latter went on, "Perhaps that comes from reading detective stories in my youth. I've had no actual experience, outside of certain investigations made necessary by our local reform movements and—"

"I don't say it's impossible, but why go back so far? Why not look into her recent life?"

"That would be useless. She has conducted herself with rigorous propriety. She is very well thought of, quite respectable, I assure you."

"Then why be a grave-robber? If she has run straight for twenty years, the old stuff is outlawed anyhow." These words were spoken with some heat. "It's not my business to ask what yours is, but the thing doesn't look kosher. It sounds too much like spite work or—blackmail. We leave that sort of thing to our competitors."

Mr. Gilbert was shocked, pained. "I—I see I shall have to speak plainly. May I have your assurance that what I tell you will be held in strictest confidence?"

"You have that assurance."

"The lady is—Mrs. Gilbert, my wife."

"So?" There was a pause. "You understand, of course, that it's not probable we could uncover anything that would help you get a divorce; not after you've lived together for—"

"I have no desire to divorce Mrs. Gilbert. I could not do so, even if I wished, on account of my position. I stand for all that is best in my

community, all that is respectable and conservative. No, no! It is true that I married hastily, and perhaps unwisely, but I have no serious complaint against my wife as such. I make no accusations; I find no fault with her, except in one particular. As a mother she has failed. Her influence upon our daughter is not what it should be. I have told her so; she denies it. I have argued that the welfare of our beloved child should be placed in my sister's hands; she refuses to consent. I wish to confront her with the positive proof —evidence, at least—that she is inherently unfit to act as a moral teacher, a spiritual guide, to a young, innocent, impulsive girl."

"Hm—m!" The listener gazed curiously into Gilbert's ruddy, handsome face. "You think if you can show that she was wild, made a slip before she married you, she isn't fit to look after her child? Isn't that stretching it a bit thin?"

"It is a matter which will lie between her and me. My daughter's well-being is at stake; it is all I have to live for."

"All right! I don't see how you're going to help matters, but I'm not here to turn business away. Was there ever any scandal, any publicity?"

"Yes. There was one matter—a divorce case. I think the newspapers at the time had a good deal to say about it."

"That's something to begin on. I'll put the best man I have at the case, but you'll have to help him a lot, Mr. Gilbert. You know what you want; you're familiar with the facts; you probably know the friends and associates your wife had before you married her."

"I thank you. My heart yearns over my daughter; it cries out in her name for aid. Whatever the cost of your assistance may be, I shall evidence my appreciation by sending you a check for double the amount."

Gilbert spent more time in New York than he had anticipated; he returned home barely in time to clear his desk before leaving for the convention of the State Betterment League in Owensburg. Meanwhile, Edith and her mother had been enthusiastically engaged in preparing for the former's birthday party—an event which Mrs. Gilbert had always invested with great sentimental importance.

Now Hopewell was an ordinary town, peopled with average families who lived in conformity to the average standard of social conduct, and the younger set was as irresponsible and as pleasure-loving as most younger sets. They were jealous of their freedom and intolerant of old-fashioned ideas, hence it was not an easy task to entertain them under the Gilbert roof,

where dancing was taboo and where anything like ordinary youthful abandon and high spirits was apt to meet with the owner's disapproval. To succeed, without tolerating an actual trespass upon her husband's prejudices, had often tasked Mrs. Gilbert's ingenuity. This time she had hit upon the idea of having a "child's party." This made of it a costume affair, but, at the same time, was assurance that none of the costumes would be of a sort to offend even Gilbert's narrow-gauged ideas of propriety.

There was nothing startlingly original about the idea; nevertheless, it was sufficiently "different" to be welcomed.

It was during her first fitting that Edith had an inspiration. Without saying anything to her mother she instructed the dressmaker to prepare another costume for the elder woman, prettier even than her own; then she bought little spring-heeled shoes, short stockings, an adorable child's bonnet, and other accessories to match. When she finally told her mother what she had done Mrs. Gilbert at first protested that she was too old to appear in such a masquerade, but Edith was insistent and finally won her over.

On the night of the party the guests were astonished and delighted when they were received not by one, but by two hostesses dressed as much alike as two tiny twin sisters. With one accord they agreed that Mrs. Gilbert made the sweetest child present and promptly began to treat her as one of themselves, instead of as a mother or a chaperon.

The dinner was a lot of fun, for the juvenile idea had been carried out. The dining-room had been transformed into a nursery; the diners sat in high chairs and wore bibs; they were supplied with mugs and food pushers, rattles and teething rings and toys with which to amuse themselves. A hired quartette played and sang several songs written by Mrs. Gilbert and set to nursery tunes—verses topical enough and sophisticated enough to excite genuine laughter. The writer was voted a "peach," a "thoroughbred," a "good sport."

She it was who really sounded the note of animation and sustained it during the evening. Once she had set the pace, youthful spirits did the rest, for the girls made mischievous babies and the boys were amusing young clowns. They became almost riotous when, with the aid of an old-fashioned magic lantern, photographs which had been gathered at considerable effort were flashed upon a screen showing those present as they actually had been when they were children. Never had the Gilbert house echoed to louder laughter than then.

The party was an unusual success until Henry Gilbert arrived.

In order to explain the reason for his unexpected return and the frame of mind in which he came, it will be necessary to go back a bit. With him on his way home from New York he had brought a typewritten report from that detective agency, and this he read several times. He read it again on his way to Owensburg.

Arrived there, he plunged immediately into the business of the convention, and for the next three days he had leisure to think of nothing else. These conventions, by the way, were a joy to him; they were his principal hobby, for they brought him into contact with kindred spirits and what he had to say was reverently listened to. Being an earnest, restless-minded man, to whom the welfare of others was a matter of grave concern, he had more to say than anybody. Then, too, he was an ideal committee man, for he loved the work and hence he was always the most important figure at these affairs.

It was late on the afternoon of the fifteenth, the last day of the assembly, that he met Miss Galloway in the lobby of his hotel. He had seen her at a distance, but this was his first opportunity for a word alone with her. She confided to him that she had stopped in for tea: he suggested that they sit down together.

The main dining-room was empty, cheerless, but an orchestra was playing in the Palm Room and thither the two were shown.

Miss Galloway paused on the threshold when she saw several couples fox-trotting. “Why, it’s a dancing place!” she faltered. “Everybody knows you. Do you think we’d better go in?”

Gilbert shrugged. “There’s no other place to go. All the better-class places allow dancing at this time of day.”

“I never can seem to get used to it,” the woman said as she and her companion seated themselves at a table as far removed as possible from the center of contamination. “I always feel as if I were in contact with something lewd, something evil.”

“Tut, tut! You’re narrow-minded, my dear.” Gilbert smiled amiably. “Wrong-doing is largely a question of intent. These people are no doubt innocent enough; they’re merely blind. It is our task to lead them. What a blessed relief to enjoy a restful half hour with you, after these last three days.” He sighed wearily. “Sometimes I stagger; the spirit weakens, Belle.”

Instantly Miss Galloway became motherly, in a manner of speaking she began to hover her companion. It was a shame; he was working too hard. Better for him to spare himself than to risk a breakdown. There must be many who could attend to the exhausting detail of these conventions, whereas there was but one Henry Gilbert, one "plumed knight."

Alas, no! Mr. Gilbert shook his head. People were like sheep—they were lost without a leader. He wondered if anyone would really care if he did break down. Perhaps the work of reform would go on just as well, or better, if he dropped out.

Such words, Miss Galloway made him understand, were heretical, wicked. He was merely tired and blue, poor man.

Gradually the conversation became almost entirely personal: Miss Galloway found herself paying a tribute to Gilbert not as the peerless champion of a great cause—of many great causes—but as a man and a friend. He made bold to express for the first time his keen appreciation of her admirable qualities as a woman.

It turned out to be an agreeable tête-à-tête: confidences were exchanged which were ennobling as well as informative. Upon the occasion of their last meeting each had been painfully self-conscious; today each was greedily aware of the other and their minds met, explored each other. A certain boldness took possession of them; inhibitions were ignored; they spoke obscurely and yet with a meaning which each believed the other comprehended. As a matter of fact, neither did fully comprehend, and both were too diffident to pretend entire comprehension for fear of error.

It was a timid reconnaissance, a mental holding of hands that were clammy with dread. Emotionally, they were in a fever; physically, they were in a cold sweat. For once repression was not a pose, but a stern necessity; they played with their emotions, deliberately excited them, until they refused further to react. It was chaste but indecent.

Gilbert finally spoke about the festivities scheduled for his house that evening and expressed a hypocritical regret at missing them. His daughter's birthday, a festival of youth and spirits, in which he was denied a part! Heigh-ho! The life of a crusader was not all beer and skittles.

Of course, he meant near-beer.

Miss Galloway knew all about Edith's party, as she knew all about everything in Hopewell, and she agreed that it was indeed a pity.

“But what a novel idea to make it a children’s party,” she exclaimed, enthusiastically. “Our younger set is pretty wild, I’m afraid, but Mrs. Gilbert can hold them in check if anybody can. She’s a wonderful woman.”

“Yes. Yes, indeed.”

“And it is so lovely of her to take an active part in the affair. How many mothers would go that far?”

“Quite so,” Gilbert acknowledged.

“As a matter of fact, not many women of her age *could* go that far.” Miss Galloway emitted a dry rustle of laughter. “They haven’t the high spirits nor —the figures. I envy her; I really do. She’s so youthful and vivacious. Why, the dressmaker said she didn’t look a day over sixteen in her costume.”

“Costume?”

“It was the sweetest thing—for anyone who could wear that sort of thing, I mean. But she’s so clever at playing parts and of course she learned how to make up her face on the stage.”

“I don’t understand. You must have seen Edith’s costume.”

“I saw both. Edith’s is pink, hers is light blue, even to the shoes and the little socks.”

“*Socks?*” ejaculated the husband.

“Why, of course. Didn’t you *know*? A complete French doll’s outfit. Low neck, bare arms and legs. It’s very chic and—” The speaker paused. She was swept by a sudden agitation which deepened into panic at the incredulity in Gilbert’s face. “Oh, I’m sorry!” she gasped. “I supposed of course—”

There was a moment of silence, then Miss Galloway fluttered breathlessly to the defense of her sister. “I *hope* I haven’t given a wrong impression. I never *dreamed* she didn’t want you to know. Perhaps the costume isn’t as daring as I thought. It’s all in the way such things are worn, you know. She’s *petite*, of course, and she has a pretty neck and limbs. Then, too, it’s only a lark and all the others are going to wear something of the sort.”

“Hm—m!” Gilbert pursed his lips, frowned. “Her intentions are all right, that I admit—but for the wife of a man in my position— I’m glad you told me, Belle.”

His companion evidently felt that she had seriously blundered, and in a nervous effort to cover her dismay she clumsily drew on her gloves. She rose and mumbled something about having to go. Gilbert went with her to the main entrance.

He stood there for a while in meditation, then he looked at his watch. There was no train for Hopewell for several hours, so he ordered a car and a driver at the desk, then he went to his room and flung his things into his bag.

Bare arms and legs! Socks! Skirts to the knees! A woman of her age. Outrageous! It was time to settle this matter once and for all.

It was nearly midnight when Henry Gilbert arrived home. Instead of entering his place by the front gate, he pushed through the hedge and stole across the lawn, hoping to peek through a window and thoroughly satisfy himself that he had reason to be indignant.

The house was lighted from top to bottom; his ears told him that a high-jinks was going on. There was a hammock swung in the darkest corner of the piazza and in it Gilbert made out two human forms. His worst suspicions were at once verified. Here was a "cuddling party"—he had heard this phrase from Edith—two young people secretly spooning!

He saw something else that shocked him; a group of fantastically garbed people were sitting on the front steps and they were smoking. Girls as well as men! They profaned their lips with tobacco! On his front steps! No doubt they had been drinking, or would indulge their appetites if he gave them a chance. He waited and watched, but in this he was disappointed, for after a few moments the smokers flung away their cigarettes and romped back into the house.

He followed them.

An astonishing spectacle was revealed when he looked into the living-room; it seemed to him that the place was crowded full of bare arms and legs. He had been prepared by Miss Galloway to expect some sort of a revel, but nothing quite so undignified as this. Mature young men were clad in waists and knicker-bockers, in sailor suits, in Boy Scout uniforms and in "shorts" which showed their bony knees. One burly six-footer wore a wig of yellow curls and an enormous two-year-old baby's dress. He was playing the piano loudly and inaccurately and he was singing. He reminded Gilbert vaguely of the infant Gargantua pounding upon his mugs and pannikins.

As for the young women, most of them were garbed in a manner that Gilbert considered positively indecent.

To the discordant notes of the piano some sort of a game was going on —"musical chairs" he believed it was called—but at his appearance the laughter ceased; the pianist suddenly stopped playing. Then, for the first time, Gilbert saw his wife. He gasped. No words of description on Miss Galloway's part could have fortified him against the shock he experienced. Alice was indeed a French doll. Bare arms and neck, bare knees beneath the lacy ruffles of a child's party dress, her blond hair in fluffy curls about her face! And she a respectable, married woman of forty-five. She was blindfolded and she was groping toward him.

Yonder was Edith, enough like her mother to be her twin.

Warned of something amiss, Mrs. Gilbert removed the blindfold and found herself facing the accusing gaze of her husband. The bitter quality of his disapproval was instantly obvious to her; nevertheless, she ignored it and exclaimed:

"Why, Henry! How nice of you to come back!"

"I'm glad I did." He allowed his gaze to rove over the startled guests. "I'm sorry I didn't arrive earlier."

"Father!" Edith ran forward, her face white with sudden apprehension. "Let me take your things. You mustn't interrupt the fun. Go ahead, folks, we'll be back in a minute." She tried to lead her father back into the hall, but he drew himself away.

"First, you had better tell your friends good night," he said, acidly.

At this there was a nervous titter from some of the guests who suspected this to be some sort of a joke—some further prank arranged for their surprise. But Gilbert's face did not soften; he appeared to be quite in earnest. There was a rustle, a movement of indecision; it was a sick, uncomfortable moment.

A pathetic, stricken look had come into the daughter's eyes. Mrs. Gilbert was murmuring something to her husband, but he ignored both women and to the others he said:

"I am afraid I must bid you good night on behalf of my wife and daughter. My ideas of decorum are not the same as theirs and it strikes me that this affair has gone quite far enough. I am chagrined at what I have seen. I shall take it upon myself to talk to your parents about it. No apologies, please! Let us spare each other as much embarrassment as possible."

Consternation, confusion followed. As the last of the guests fled from the house they heard Henry Gilbert frigidly order his wife and his daughter to their rooms.

Chapter Four

Gilbert put out the lights and locked up the house before going upstairs. His wife was not in her room, so he seated himself and waited until he heard Edith's door open and close, then he rose to his feet.

Husband and wife faced each other silently for a moment or two. Mrs. Gilbert was painfully agitated; her eyes were burning; her cheeks, underneath their theatrical makeup, were chalky; her voice, when she spoke, was thin and unnatural.

"Well, what is the meaning of this extraordinary behavior?" she inquired.

"Sit down," Gilbert told her. "You must be exhausted after your—after what I saw, and I have a good deal to say to you."

" 'Sit down'? You want me to be seated while you read me a lecture! At this time of night? After the outrageous thing you have done? . . . Do you realize that Edith is in a collapse? Do you realize that you have brutally insulted her and me—humiliated both of us and offended our guests? . . . Or *do* you understand? I'm wondering if you are in your right mind."

"I am in possession of all my faculties. It is you who appear to have taken leave of yours. I know exactly what I have done—I have cleansed my house of vermin. I propose, now, to put it in order."

The woman made a visible effort to control herself, but her hands fluttered, her movements were jerky as she crossed the floor and sank into a chair. "Whatever induced you—? . . . What is it you took exception to?"

Gilbert's pale-blue eyes enlarged and he assumed an expression of amazement. "You ask me that? You sit there in that abominable masquerade and ask me—? Look at yourself. In Heaven's name, are you blind physically as well as morally?"

"You really object to our costumes?" the wife inquired, incredulously.

"Most emphatically. To permit Edith to flaunt her nakedness in public, nay to encourage her in that shocking indelicacy, proves you to be wholly without sense of modesty. To outdo her indecency in your own person convicts you of—of complete degradation. I am stupefied!"

“Don’t you understand? It was a children’s party,” the woman moaned. “We were in character. It was all perfectly innocent.”

“*‘Innocent’!* I beheld evidence of that ‘innocence.’ An abandoned couple, embracing in the shadows of my porch! Locked in each other’s arms! Girls and boys smoking on my doorstep! Drinking, too, I’ve no doubt! And inside the house a bacchanal, a saturnalia of vulgarity and nakedness! These are the companions you select for our child: this is the manner in which you signalize her graduation from girlhood into maturity. And you a mother! For shame! Has the word no meaning for you?”

“Young people nowadays do things we never did, and think nothing about it. I couldn’t watch them all. But no man with any pride or—or any humanity, would humiliate his family as you humiliated us.”

“When I heard about this affair and was told that you had taken advantage of my absence——”

“Who told you?” the wife broke in, sharply.

“When I learned that you had selected a costume designed to advertise your person, your body——”

“Who told you? Miss Galloway?”

“——I suspected that——”

“Of course it was Miss Galloway.”

“Very well. She it was.”

“And you presume to accuse *me* of immodesty, indelicacy!” Mrs. Gilbert’s lip curled. “How far have you gone with that woman, Henry?”

“*Silence!*” the man shouted.

“Oh, I’m not jealous! And I don’t accuse you of actual impropriety. You’re too cautious for that. But aren’t you playing the hypocrite?”

“This is too disgusting.”

“Right! What could be more disgusting than the yearnings of lecherous middle age? You’re a timid old man and she’s an erotic old maid. I’ve watched you.”

Gilbert’s rage grew to enormous and terrifying proportions: he shook with a palsy; his face became apoplectic. He rose and with heavy tread marched up and down the room, waving his arms, barking incoherently; he clapped his palms over his ears to shut out his wife’s words, but he could

still hear such phrases as “indecencies of thought,” “starved emotions,” “inhibitions of cowardice,” “flickering desires.” He flung himself into a chair finally and closed his eyes; his lips moved; his spirit strained. He prayed for self-control; begged forgiveness for this outrage against high Heaven. Slowly he regained mastery over himself. When he spoke it was in freezing tones:

“I shall ignore your unclean imputations. When you are calmer you will no doubt feel shame at your own vileness, but—please do not apologize. Spare yourself the ignominy and me the pain. We shall never again allude to the subject. It is closed.”

“All right. Please go, and let’s have this out in the morning!” Alice exclaimed, brokenly. “I’m on the verge of hysteria.”

“We have gone too far to stop here.”

“Please—!” his wife implored. “I’m too nervous. I’m not in very good condition.”

“When we had our last discussion you were not only unjust to me, but also you refused to acknowledge the truth of my contentions. I tried, in all kindness, to show you that Edith’s future is in jeopardy and to point out the inevitable consequences——”

“Are you still harping on that subject? Are you going to talk again about sending her away? Don’t try it, Henry! I warn you; don’t—try it!”

“This affair tonight should illuminate your blindness, unless you refuse to see.”

“So! *That’s* it! *That’s* why you created a scene—over nothing. I might have known you had a reason for mortifying me, disgracing me. You sneaked home just to—to prove your case! Well—don’t try it, that’s all.” The speaker fell back, rolled her head weakly. “For God’s sake, don’t torture me this way! I’ve been at the breaking point for weeks. *Won’t* you go?”

“Not until we have thrashed this out. Your fatigue is of less importance than that child’s salvation, and I propose here and now to assert my authority.”

“You mean you propose to drive me crazy, destroy me.” The speaker raised herself and stared wildly at her husband. “I believe you’d do that very thing.”

“Nothing of the sort, but——”

“Doesn’t a mother’s love mean anything to you?”

“It is sacred. I revere it. But how can you talk about true mother love when your short-sighted and thoroughly selfish attachment for Edith has all but ruined her? You showed tonight how incapable you are of caring for her moral welfare; it must be placed in other hands.”

“Not while I live!” The words were voiced fiercely.

“The animal is speaking. It is animal instinct to fight for its young, however unwisely. Listen to me quietly and spare yourself—I have no wish to harrow your feelings—but again I repeat my charge.”

“Words! Words! Bigotry! Lies!”

“A woman’s denial. But can you deny your part in tonight’s debauchery? Can you deny that you deliberately exposed your person for the purpose of arousing sinful desires in those young men and of teasing your own illicit passions? Those games! Those scuffles! An excuse to be pawed over by adolescent young scalawags.”

Mrs. Gilbert exclaimed in a choking voice, “Of course I deny it! But things haven’t the same meaning for us. Not even words. It is an insult to talk with you. Again I ask you to—leave me alone.”

“Will you consent to Edith’s going to her Aunt Ella’s?”

“Never!”

Gilbert sighed deeply; resolution, it seemed, came at a grievous cost. “I think you will consent when I’ve done talking.”

“You’re never done talking.”

“When I was in New York recently, it occurred to me to look up the records of that Mills divorce case——” Mrs. Gilbert gasped, sat up, but the speaker disregarded her movement. “It happened prior to our meeting, before we were married, and you told me your side of it. I assumed, of course, that you were truthful——”

“I was truthful. I told you—everything.”

“Lately, I regret to say, doubts of your complete frankness have assailed me and I have discovered that I was right. It seems that I was the victim of deceit.” Gilbert drew from his pocket a large envelope from which he extracted and deliberately unfolded a considerable sheaf of typewritten pages. His wife watched him, wide-eyed. “Read this,” he said, handing them to her.

"Read? How could I read anything—in this condition? What is it?"

"It is the report of a detective agency which I engaged to examine into that Mills matter. It contains, I regret to say, an altogether different version of your part in the case than you told me and that my youthful ardor induced me to—er—swallow. It involved a deal of effort and expense to get it, after all these years; the searching of court records and newspaper files, the locating and interviewing of such witnesses as are still alive and——"

"What does it say?"

"I can repeat the whole wretched story. Heaven knows it is engraved upon my mind! But you must know; your conscience must tell you the gist of it. Hm—m! It seems that you were not the innocent victim of a wife's unreasoning jealousy, but the guilty paramour——"

"That's a lie! I was cleared of that. Nothing was proven and Mrs. Mills admitted, later, that it was all a miserable mistake. I told you the truth, Henry. I swear it!"

"You made me think so, but here," Gilbert tapped his sheaf of papers with a well-manicured index finger, "is the proof that you sinned, not alone against that woman, but against me, your future husband."

"Proof? After all these years? Don't be absurd! You can't believe any such thing."

"I must believe it."

"Very well, believe it if you must. That doesn't make it so. But, in God's name, what is the use of going into it? What good can it do?"

"It has done this much good to go into it. You can't again deny that your character is inherently—loose. You can't maintain any longer that Edith is safe in your hands."

"Why? I don't follow you. Suppose it were true; characters change. But I tell you it's a lie if it says——"

"Edith will have to judge that for herself."

"*Edith!*" Mrs. Gilbert stared at her husband with suddenly affrighted eyes. "You're not—going to tell—Edith?" The words ended in a whisper.

"You leave me no choice. I have wrestled long and earnestly with this problem. On my knees I have asked for light to see the way and for strength with which to follow it. For her own good she must know the truth. Then, I venture to hope, the scales will drop from her eyes and she will——"

The words were drowned in a cry from the woman. She rose unsteadily and clutched at her husband's arm. "Henry! You can't put any faith in that—that thing. Not after all these years. What could those people learn about a case forgotten twenty years ago? I'm—sorry if I offended you tonight. I didn't mean to and—it won't happen again. . . . We've been married too long to quarrel like this."

It was the moment of victory; Gilbert seized it. "You convict yourself, Alice. You convince me that your professions of innocence were counterfeit."

"No, no, no! You've worn me out, that's all. I'm perfectly innocent, but—I'm ready to give up. I—surrender!" She tried blindly to push past him but he inquired:

"Where are you going?"

"I promised Edith— She's beside herself; she can't sleep."

"You shall not see her again tonight." Gilbert strode to the door and stood with his back against it. "You're in no condition to harrow the child's feelings and I don't intend to permit any impetuous appeal to her sympathies."

The woman had been tottering upon the verge of collapse; she broke down now and lost what feeble hold of herself she had maintained. Frantically, she cried: "I will. I must. You shan't see her first—poison her mind with those lies. She wouldn't believe them; she loves me. Let me out ____"

She tried to thrust herself past him, tried to drag him away from the door, but what little strength she had ran out of her and at last she flung herself upon a couch. She began to weep, quietly, weakly, then her breath caught and her sobbing turned into broken laughter, into mirthless explosions of sound that racked her whole body.

"Calm yourself," Gilbert directed, harshly. "Instead of yielding to this futile hysteria it would be far better if you sought solace from on high. Make your peace with God. He is merciful; He is the refuge of the sore at heart, the sick in mind and body." With these words he removed the key from the lock and stepped out into the hall. He closed and locked the door behind him, then pocketed the key.

For a few moments he stood listening, until he convinced himself that his wife was doing her best to smother her sounds of distress and did not

intend to make an outcry that would arouse the household, after which he went to his own room.

It had been a trying scene and it had exhausted him, but he was well content with its outcome. Henceforth, he felt sure, there would be no divided authority in this house; there would be no more opposition to his will, no more interference with his plans for Edith's future. He had not the slightest intention of telling the girl what was in that detective agency's report—he knew his daughter too well to risk anything like that—and, as a matter of fact, if Alice were not so completely upset she would realize that he could not do so without sacrificing for all time whatever regard the child had for him and thus defeating the very object he had in mind. But it would not do the mother any harm to endure a few hours of suspense; it might do her a lot of good.

He undressed deliberately and with a grateful sigh resigned himself to sleep. It was pleasant to be relieved at last of this burden which had caused him such concern and to realize that his conscience was at ease.

He did not sleep very long, however. It seemed to him that he had barely dozed off when a cautious tap-tapping disturbed him. Faintly he heard a voice calling. He dozed off again but the sounds were renewed more loudly; he awoke to find that they were at his door. Some one was trying to rouse him. It was Edith. He was dazed and impatient. He arose, groped blindly for the light button, and collided with a chair. This brought him to his senses.

"Yes, yes!" he mumbled. "What is it?"

"Open the door, father! Quickly!" The words were not spoken loudly, but an imperative quality to his daughter's voice cleared his head. He switched on the light, turned the bolt of his lock, and opened the door. He saw instantly that the girl was frightened; her face was strained, her eyes were terrified.

"Oh, quick—! Mother! . . . She won't answer!"

"Eh? Won't answer?"

"Her door is locked. I've been knocking, calling—I didn't want to rouse everybody—but *I smell gas*!" Edith clutched at her father, tried to drag him with her. She was shaking wretchedly and moaning.

Gilbert was thoroughly awake now. It was but a step to his wife's door. He tried the knob and called, "*Alice!*"

"Don't *you* smell it?" Edith suddenly emitted a cry and began to pound with her fists upon the door. She flung her weight against it.

Terror smote Henry Gilbert at last and aroused him to action. He ran back into his own chamber and returned with the key he had taken from his wife's door; with trembling fingers he fitted it into the lock.

"Stand back!" he ordered, then he flung the door wide. He was all but smothered by the fumes that rushed forth. He seized Edith as she was about to enter and shoved her down the hall, then, holding his breath, he dove headlong into the room. It was as brilliantly lighted as when he had left it; on the rug immediately in front of the fireplace lay his wife. She still wore her little blue party dress; her head rested upon one bare arm; she lay curled up like a tired, sleeping child.

As Gilbert stooped to pick her up he heard a low, steady hissing from the open valve of the gas logs.

He remembered vaguely staggering out of the place and into his own room, laying the inert figure upon his own bed, and then returning to shut off the gas and to fling open the windows in his wife's room. By the time this had been done and he emerged, dizzy and gasping, the house had been aroused and was in terror, in chaos. Half-clad servants had appeared, there were cries, the wringing of hands, a swift scurrying of feet. From somewhere came a frantic tinkle of the telephone bell and an urgent call for the family physician. Meanwhile, futile efforts at resuscitation were going on in the owner's room, and in these Gilbert took a mechanical part.

It was all like a hideous nightmare. He could not rid himself of the conviction that he was dreaming. This was too terrible. Unavailingly he tried to throw off that horrid feeling of unreality.

It seemed only a moment—or was it hours?—before the doctor arrived. He, too, was half clad; he had run the block and a half from his house. His examination did not take long. He straightened himself and his lips moved, but Henry Gilbert did not hear what he said, for there was a roaring in his ears. It was like the rumble of a heavy surf—or the sound of shouting voices. That was it. Men shouting! The hoarse howling of an angry mob! The city was awake; from its house-tops people were shouting that Henry Gilbert had killed his wife.

And in the husband's nostrils, in his throat, in his lungs was the stench of gas. He knew that he would smell it, taste it, the rest of his life.

Chapter Five

Pearl Gates, the dancer, had achieved the ambition of her lifetime: she had "stopped the show." The audience was in an uproar, it was shouting, "Bravo!" "Encore!" From the packed gallery came shrill cries of, "Atta Pearl!" The curtain was rising and falling, the orchestra was playing loudly to drown out the din, even the house lights had been turned on. But the tumult persisted. The toughest audience in the greatest vaudeville theater in the coldest city in the world was "standing on its head."

It had been a wonderful dance, but, oddly enough, the artist experienced no fatigue, no shortness of breath from her terrific exertions; on the contrary, she was beautifully exalted, she seemed to soar upon effortless pinions. Talk about your thrills!

And here came Mr. Adee, head of the Allied Booking Offices and the czar of American vaudeville! He rushed out from the wings and—Why, he was embracing her, taking a bow with her!

"You are marvelous!" he was saying. "Nothing like it ever seen. . . . New contract. . . . Forty weeks. . . . Two thousand a week and——"

It was hard to understand Mr. Adee's words on account of the clamor. Miss Gates stirred impatiently, then flopped over on her side and buried her head deeper in her pillows.

"Yes? You were saying 'two thousand a week——?' " she repeated, encouragingly.

But it was no use. Mr. Adee, the stage of the Palace, the tumult of its patrons, disappeared, died out, were gone. Pearl Gates woke up.

"*Damn!*" she cried, this time speaking aloud.

After a moment she opened her eyes, yawned, stretched, then rubbed her lids until she could make out the dial of her dresser clock. It was ten-thirty.

Unwelcome sounds, those no doubt which had aroused her and had cost her forty weeks on the big time, were issuing from the next room. Mrs. Mullaney, the landlady, was saying:

"It's not large, dearie, but it's clean, like I told you. They're all clean and I only take nice people. Ten dollars a week is the best I can do. They're getting twelve next door."

Why do all landladies shout like first mates? And why do lodgers shop for rooms at sunup? Evidently Mrs. Mullaney succeeded without much trouble in renting this one, for soon she took herself heavily downstairs and silence followed, broken only by the faint sounds of movement beyond the partition.

Some jump, from the Palace to the third floor of this rooming house! Two thousand a week! Sweet spirits of niter! Miss Gates tried to go back to sleep, hoping that she might dream even of fifteen hundred a week, but she could not, so at last she rose and languidly prepared for the daily battle. Getting up involved even a slower process than going to bed; hair is such a nuisance and these egg facial treatments are so tedious. So nauseating, too, if your stomach is weak.

Having lighted the gas under her coffee pot, Pearl cracked an egg and ran the white into a saucer. The yolk and the shell she dumped into the pot; the contents of the saucer she applied to her cheeks. She busied herself at other things while her sticky face-covering hardened.

Pearl decided she simply must have that permanent wave before long, for her "bob" had grown out to the awkward stage. Humph! She would have had it before this only for that last touch. Those girls at the cabaret seemed to think she was made of money, but—never again! Not *never*! Generosity wasn't an indication of a tender heart, but of a soft head. If they got another tear out of her it would be with an onion and hereafter her salary would be safely socked, "down where the silk begins." Yes, and with a rubber band around it and a safety pin to keep it from skidding! Henceforth, she would wear a tin chemise and they could call her "Old Ironsides" if they wanted to.

Look at that nifty next door—the one who had moved out a week before. Broke and too shabby to visit the agents' offices, so she had borrowed Pearl's pet sport suit. It must have been a lucky suit, for she got a job and left town the very next morning, without so much as a "thank you." Somehow or other, she had got that suit mixed in with her handkerchiefs and her wash-rags. Laugh that one off!

It wasn't as if it was the first time something like that had happened, either; why, it was as much as ever Pearl could do to keep a decent stitch to her back. No, charity didn't pay—not with money so expensive. She began to hum an aimless air, creating a lyric as she went along. Meanwhile, the albuminous varnish upon her face set, began to pull.

Miss Gates ceased singing, after a while, and listened, for it seemed to her that she detected a sound, alas all too familiar. There could be no

mistake; through the thin wall separating her chamber from the one adjoining came a muffled sobbing. Good *night*! Another gusher had come in. The eavesdropper shrugged; she would have sneered, but by this time the muscles of her face were immobilized within the steadily shrinking veneer. Loudly and defiantly she resumed her mumbling song—something about "Nickel-plated Nell from New Rochelle."

The sobbing continued. It was very low, very unobtrusive.

"Oh *Lord*!" Pearl finally cried, in exasperation. Rising, she drew her faded kimono closer about herself, wrenched her door open, and knocked on the one from behind which came those smothered sounds of distress. Through lips that barely moved she exclaimed:

"Ship ahoy! What's wrong in there?"

There was a moment of silence before a quavering voice answered, "N—nothing."

"C'mon! I can hear you from my room. You sick or got a nail in your foot or something?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disturb anybody——"

Without waiting longer, Pearl turned the knob, opened the door, and stepped inside. A girl of about her own age was sitting on the edge of the bed; a suitcase and bag were open beside her, their contents were partly unpacked; on the cheap bureau stood a large-sized photograph in an expensive leather case—the photograph of a woman. The girl rose and hastily dabbed at her tears; again she apologized. "I'm so sorry I made myself heard!"

"Humph! I was just signing for a season on the Keith Circuit when that howling Mullaney woman woke me. I hadn't recovered from that when your heart broke and threatened to spoil a perfectly good beauty mask."

The newcomer, having dried her eyes, was now staring at Pearl with a very natural expression of astonishment. There was ample excuse, for Pearl's countenance had the rubbery appearance of a hot-water bag, her hair was wet and her head bristled with marcel combs which gave her a bellicose appearance. The general effect was made even more startling by reason of a wrapper as disreputable as a prize-fighter's bathrobe. It was, or it had been, a garment of brilliant colors, but, like the linen of Isabella which the imperial owner had vowed never to change until Ostend fell, it had gathered the dingy hues of discouragement.

“Sure you’re not sick? Nothing I can do?”

“Oh no! Really!” The speaker smiled wanly. “I’m just lonesome. And homesick. A little bit frightened, too, I guess.”

Pearl had noted by this time that her new neighbor wore a costly traveling dress; that her bags which lay open upon the bed were of real seal leather; and that her hat, her shoes, her whole get-up was smart and represented a really extravagant outlay. With genuine relief, she said:

“Well, I see you’re not broke, so three cheers for that. I’m hard boiled and nobody can cry me out of a cent. But I know what it is to be lonesome and scared and it doesn’t cost anything to cure it. Vamp into my room and have breakfast with me. My name is Pearl Gates. Not Pearly Gates! Gee! That gag makes me sick!”

These words, like those that had gone before, were enunciated indistinctly through lips that were stiff—Pearl had used her last egg. But the listener seemed to understand, for again she smiled.

“Mine is Edith Gilbert. I had breakfast at the station, but—I’d love to go in and just talk. You’re awfully sweet to take pity on me.”

“Well, out with the bad news.” It was perhaps fifteen minutes later. Pearl had rescued the coffee pot as it boiled over, had washed and dried her face, and now her morning meal was spread out on the top of her trunk. “Or wait! Lemme tell the sad story of your life. You’re a small-town girl and this is your first time in New York. All the heroines, these days, are small-town girls. They come to the great city and set it afire. Love affair! Fatal heart strain! Boy friend is a big, simple, manly chap; one of nature’s freckled noblemen. And he works in a filling station. All country boys do. Or maybe not. Perhaps his father owns the Honey Center National Bank and Boy is wild. One of these night-hawks who never get in before ten o’clock. Anyhow, there’s a boy friend and heroine’s parents love him like the scarlet fever. So heart-broken Hester leaves home and comes to New York to live her own life in a bigger, broader way and to wait for Boy. Boy starts in to make a man of himself and begins by jacking up the price of gas.”

The last shadow of melancholy had fled from Edith Gilbert’s face by this time; she laughed frankly. “Of course you’re all wrong, but you’re perfectly dear to joke with me. There’s no ‘boy friend,’ and I haven’t any idea I’ll set New York afire.”

Pearl shrugged. “Even Roosevelt made mistakes. But it’s your first visit to the wicked city and the big buildings frighten you. They make one feel so

small and so friendless——”

“No. I’ve been here before and there’s nothing strange about it—except this rooming house.” Edith allowed her eyes to rove over the cheap furnishings and the disorderly contents of Pearl’s chamber. “I’ve always stopped at quiet, expensive hotels on the upper East Side. . . . Tell me, you’re an actress, aren’t you?”

“Oh, mercy, yes!” Miss Gates smirked artificially. She had a homely, irregular face, but it was expressive and interesting and Edith fancied she must be quite attractive when in her normal condition. “Yes indeed. I’m just building my own theater—dressing-rooms are so stuffy, and Mrs. Fiske and Ethel Barrymore and the others are so jealous of me!” She suddenly dropped her pretense and said, seriously enough: “No, dearie, I wish I were. I’m just a dancer; I spread the hoof-and-mouth disease in one of Broadway’s gilded gypping joints. Cabaret is the English word. I help the orchestra to drown out the soup course, from seven to nine and eleven to one. Ever been to a cabaret?”

“N—no!”

“Well, they’re better than no liquor at all. Now then, what about you? Why the salty tears?”

“Do you really want to know? It seems so selfish to talk about one’s troubles. Well, then, I was crying over my—mother. I lost her not very long ago. That was her picture on my dresser. She was beautiful, don’t you think so?” Miss Gates nodded; she said something sympathetic. There was a moment of silence. “She had a fine voice and she had studied for concert work, but she gave it up when she married. She taught me to sing and it was her dream for me to have a career. My father disapproved—he disapproved of everything we did or wanted to do—and after mother’s—after it happened, something occurred that induced me to leave home. Father and I quarreled; he washed his hands of me. I came to New York to look up my mother’s old teacher, a woman who had befriended her years ago. Madame Modena was her name and she lived near here, but when I went to her address I found that she had gone back to Italy two or three months ago. I was referred to this address——”

“I see. No wonder you cried. This dump would give a hobo the blues. But why stick here? Those Fifth Avenue hotels you spoke about haven’t been raided.”

“I haven’t any money.”

Pearl choked; her cup shook. Here it came; another touch! Wasn't she the prize Patsy of the world? Why couldn't she learn to mind her own business?

"Father didn't offer to provide for me," the other was saying, "and of course I wouldn't have accepted help from him even if he had offered."

"Oh, of course! Naturally!"

"When I got into my room here and realized what a change—what it meant with Madame Modena gone— You see, I intended to study with her. It was a natural let-down. I've been through a good deal lately."

"Are you perfectly flat?" Pearl casually inquired.

"Oh no! I happened to have something in my purse when I quarreled with father. Two or three hundred dollars."

"Two or three—*what*?" Pearl's mouth fell open. "Any clothes?"

"Yes. Rather nice clothes, too. My trunks are coming up this morning."

"Trunks is pleurisy for trunk, isn't it? Or maybe it's a slang phrase with you. Have you got more than *one* trunk?"

Edith smiled, dimpled. "Three!"

"Two hundred smackers and a trousseau of three trunks! And you shedding briny tears! What ails you? Take a trip to the Orient and cheer up. I would. Yes, and you're pretty, too."

"Thank you."

"I don't know as I ever saw anybody much prettier than you are. Some people don't know their luck. . . . You say you've got a voice? How much of a voice?"

"Why—it's pretty good."

"Hm—m! They're all good in the town hall; they go great at strawberry festivals and on hay rides, but this old town is full of 'good' voices; home-grown, milk-fed voices. I was a good dancer, too, in South Bend, but I haven't caused a panic here. Ziegfeld hasn't lost a wink of sleep over me."

"I really sing very well. I've been told I have a possible—grand-opera voice. That's why I wanted Madame Modena's help. Now I must find another teacher."

There was new interest, new respect in Pearl's gaze. "That's different, of course. If your friends haven't kidded you, why, you've nothing to worry about. But you'll have to go to work. They say it's harder to break into grand opera than the Sub-Treasury, and lessons cost money."

"Exactly. And I don't know quite how to start."

Pearl lighted a cigarette and inhaled deeply before she spoke next. "I've seen so many amateur wonders flop when they meet second-rate pros that I'm naturally skeptical. But who knows? Maybe you are an honest-to-God warbler. If so, and if you get up against it bad enough, I can always get you a try-out at our hash foundry."

"The—*cabaret*?"

"That's the colloquial term for it. Why not? A good many musical comedy people have come to it on their way down; you might tackle it on the way up. If you develop into a Tetrazzini you can probably live it down."

"It's a long way from what I had in mind. Where I come from cabarets aren't considered altogether—well, respectable."

Pearl nodded. "And strangely enough, they're *not* very respectable. Pretty rotten crowd. But you'll meet a rotten crowd wherever you go or whatever you do: especially a girl with your looks. Pretty stenographers in Wall Street meet the same thing. Shop girls, chorus girls and even society girls, from all I hear. Men are about alike."

"What a scandal it would mean in Hopewell!" Edith was smiling faintly.

"Hopewell? Is that the hick town you're about to make famous?"

"The place is all right. I'm thinking about my father."

"Mind you, I'm not saying you can get by at Downing's. His program is pretty snappy and I've never heard you yodel."

"I don't think I'd have any trouble, really. And I'm not conceited, either."

"Well, it's something to think about."

"Henry Gilbert's daughter in a Broadway cabaret! That would make him squirm." Edith pondered briefly. She looked up finally and her eyes were glowing. "I think I'll try it."

"Oho! Spite work, eh?"

“N—no. Retribution. He—killed the dearest, sweetest, gentlest woman in the world. I told him so, and——”

“And just for that he asked you to leave home?” Pearl raised her brows incredulously. “Why, the dirty dog!”

Chapter Six

Youth's buoyant faith in itself is sometimes justified, and so it proved in Edith Gilbert's case. Good natural voices are common, but hers proved to be exceptional and, what is more, it had been pretty well trained—a rarity indeed in that unexacting amusement field to which Pearl Gates introduced her. A try-out sufficed to get her an engagement.

Downing's, so-called, was one of those West Side eating-places that widely advertised the quality of its entertainment but maintained a discreet silence regarding the quality of the food it served, and its program was under the direction of the orchestra leader, one Rosen, a real musician. Both he and Downing, the proprietor, were quite enthusiastic over the new applicant when they heard her sing, but they agreed that in her repertory there were few songs they could afford to have her use.

"Too high class," Downing declared. "Haven't you got any new stuff?"

Edith admitted that she had none, whereupon Rosen selected some of the latest offerings from Tin Pan Alley and had her run them over. For the most part they were commonplace songs; the music was tuneful and jingly, but the lyrics were either vapid or vulgar. It was cheap stuff. The words of one song in particular were quite suggestive, nevertheless Downing seemed to like it best of all.

"I wouldn't care to do that number," Edith told him.

Rosen, who had been playing her accompaniments, swung about upon the piano stool and inquired: "Why not? It's pretty good."

The girl flushed, smiled. "I never have sung anything like that and——"

"Oh, I see!" In a tone that was kindly Rosen said: "I don't blame you, Miss Gilbert; but this isn't Carnegie Hall and we have to give the customers what they want. Pearl has told me something about you and that's why I'm going to all this trouble. You've got to get a start and this is a pretty good place to begin."

Miss Gates, who had been a pleased and interested listener up to this point, added her voice. "He's right, dearie. The sword-swallowers who come here carry a pretty good brand of entertainment on their hips and you've got to give 'em up-to-date clamor or they'll walk out on you. I'm a decent, home-loving body, myself, but I dance barelegged and wind up my act with

a row of back handsprings. If Rosen tells you to round off the 'Maiden's Prayer' with a split, you go home, rip your nightie up the side, and practice it. This isn't an engagement; it's a job."

Downing chuckled and nodded. "Pearl said something. If you get over here you're always sure of work."

"What's more"—Rosen was speaking again—"I think you have the personality to put across this very kind of song without giving offense, and if you have you've got something—you'll be something different. That's what goes in New York; something new."

Edith yielded gracefully enough, although with some inner reluctance, and so it came about that she went on the bill at Downing's in her own rendition of the latest White Light hits.

She was nervous at first and somewhat amateurish, but by the end of a week she had her numbers pretty well "broken in" and had gained considerable confidence in herself. The easier she became, the better her songs got over. By the end of the third or fourth week she began to feel that she was acquiring a poise and a technique that were quite professional. She acknowledged, too, that Rosen had been right in the type of song he picked for her, and she allowed him to use his own judgment in selecting others.

This was, to be sure, a long way removed from the "career" which she and her mother had mapped out, but it was a beginning, and, although her pay was small, she was at least self-supporting. It thrilled her agreeably to realize that by some happy chance she had been spared the hardships, the discouragement, the heartbreaks common to so many beginners. She considered herself very lucky.

For the present, of course, she could not afford those high-priced lessons that she so badly needed, but this work was developing her voice in a way that ordinary practice would never do, and on the whole she experienced a feeling of triumph. She was free; she was the captain of her soul; she often had the comfortable feeling that her mother was at her side and that they walked hand in hand.

The time came when she felt justified in asking her employer for a raise. Mr. Downing, however, was anything but sympathetic to her request.

"What kick have you got?" he inquired. "You're making enough to dress well."

"To be sure, but I don't intend to remain a cabaret performer the rest of my life. I'm one of those horrid, tiresome persons with an ambition. Mine is

grand opera."

"Fair enough. But I can't boost your salary without boosting everybody's. I'm running an old-fashioned cabaret and cabarets are about played out. Use your head, sister."

"I've been trying to use it," Edith cheerfully confessed, "but it refuses to show me how I can subtract sixty-five from seventy and have more than five left. I have to buy my own costumes, you know. Perhaps you can tell me how to do it."

The proprietor grinned. "Why ask me to do your sums when there's a thousand chorus girls who can do harder ones? It's a problem in figures. You've got a good one. Make the most of it."

The girl shook her head; she was still smiling. "You're a terribly wicked man, aren't you?"

Downing nodded. "You'd be surprised!"

"At least you're frank: I detest the sneaky kind."

"Now see here, sister. You're sitting pretty. You've got ability; you can sing like the very devil; whether you've got it in you to be a big-time song-bird I don't know—never having been to a grand opera in my life. But I understand that it takes coin to put on the finishing touches. If you're not smart enough to get that coin I can't help you. Remember, though, that a lot of girls with half your looks and no part of your voice are wearing bracelets to the elbow and running big garage bills. Figure it out for yourself."

Edith applied to several booking agencies, but with no better success. She was advised that she could doubtless secure an engagement in musical comedy when the autumn season opened, but at the time there was little going on.

Her work at Downing's, meanwhile, kept her busy and she met almost nobody outside of the other performers on the program. These were a strange group, by the way. In addition to Pearl Gates, whose speciality was acrobatic and eccentric dancing, there was a Spanish dancer with beautiful legs in whom—or in which—the patrons were always profoundly interested. She went by the name of La Madrid. Then there was Amy Dupont, a blond contralto who sang "Mammy" ballads and, of course, the universal dancing chorus made up of eight shapely girls. In addition there was a cowboy rope-spinner and a team of acrobats, the Tumbling Turners, so-called.

These made up the steady acts; others came and went; such as Japanese equilibrists, marimba players, roller skaters, and the like. With Rosen's orchestra, which was featured outside in electric lights, this constituted a pretty heavy program. One evening each week Rosen and his jazz kings broadcast their after-theater dance program by radio—very good advertising for the place.

In time Edith conceived the idea of using this same medium to increase her income but she received little encouragement. At the broadcasting studios where she applied for an engagement she was told that practically all the artists used in the radio programs donated their services and were glad to get the publicity. The few outstanding favorites were employed by commercial concerns which had something to sell. If she cared to sing for nothing for a while and if the fans liked her, it might be possible, later, to make some arrangement about money. That would all depend on how she took to the air.

It was a chance; she accepted. But those suggestive songs she sang at Downing's were taboo; it was explained to her that the audience which tuned in on Station WKL was not the same as that which turned into Downing's eating station. It was also suggested that she sing under a different name than the one she used at the uptown palace of joy. This, likewise, she readily agreed to and on the occasion of her first appearance before the microphone she was amused to hear herself introduced as "Miss Lark Larkin, the famous lyric soprano."

Before she had sung many times she began to receive letters addressed in care of the station, and these letters increased rapidly in number. The announcers ceased calling her Lark Larkin and began referring to her as "Our favorite song-bird, 'The Lark.' " It was gratifying, but thus far it was not in the least profitable.

Edith rather fancied her new name, for life was beginning to be something of a lark, indeed, and she had the agreeable assurance that she was an undoubted favorite both at the sound-proof studios and at the clamorous cabaret. She enjoyed, likewise, the contradictory rôles she played. At Downing's she appeared in daring costumes and rendered songs that would have made her blush a few months before—songs that would scandalize the good people of Hopewell—but to the vast, invisible audience that she reached through the mysterious ether she was an artist as pure and as brilliant as a diamond. Her fan letters proved it. And to those people she sang only good music—the kind of music she loved. It seemed that she had a radio "personality," whatever that might be, and a great many women

wrote to her. Her children's songs, too, evoked scores of misspelled letters in immature handwriting. This dual personality that had been thrust upon her gave her an odd Jekyll-and-Hyde feeling.

Sometimes she wondered, wistfully, if the people at home could hear her and more than once she caught herself singing to her father. If ever he happened to "listen in" she felt certain he would recognize in the voice of "The Lark" the tones of his daughter's voice. But, of course, he was too serious and too busy to bother with such playthings as radio. There was nothing about it, as yet, which needed "reforming."

Not all her letters came from women and children: men wrote her also. One wrote in a manner that was entertaining; his first letter ran as follows:

> DEAR LARK:
>
> Who are you?
>
> Were you ever stirred by a voice? Ever hear a stranger speak and say to yourself, "I know that fellow. I've always known him"? Ever hear the echo of something that never was? Well, I have. You awoke just such an echo in me, although of course you didn't speak; you sang.
>
> I was tired. I had fished four miles of the best water and the salmon had scorned me. So I was in bad humor. Drank too much, as usual. (We get good stuff up here.) But the market reports justified that. Isn't it queer how reception is always good when there's bad news on the air? And vice versa. Today everything was as clear as a bell and I picked up WKL just as you were announced.
>
> I've heard better singers, but you left me with a queer ache. I'm aching now—to know you. No, not that; to know who you are.
>
> Maybe it's because there are no women up here. "Man cannot live by fish alone."
>
> You needn't tell me who you are; I'll find that out when I get back, so there's no use of signing this except as,
>
> ONE WHO LOVES YOUR VOICE.

The envelope bore a Nova Scotian postmark and when Edith read its contents to Pearl the latter exclaimed:

"If it isn't a mash note, I'll eat it! I call that singing, to put your high C's clear across the border. Why, you've knocked him dead, kid. He's some Wall Street bird, off on his vacation, and he'll meet you when he gets back."

"No chance of that. I've asked them at WKL not to give out my name. But listen to his second one:

"DEAR LARK:

I've been listening for you every day for a week. We had no published program, so of course I had to take all that WKL sent out. Most of it was terrible and the boys hate me.

I'm crazy about your singing; it haunts me. There's some witchery about it, really. Why it didn't affect the others that way, I don't know. Anyhow you have the power to weave spells over me.

This afternoon you sang a kid song and told a story that went with it. I liked your talking voice too even though you used that syrupy tone that is supposed to tickle children. I talk to kids as if they were my age and they love it. I'd like to hear you talk naturally.

Better still I'd like to hear you laugh. Laughter shows a person's soul; it lets you look in. Next time won't you please, please, laugh, just once for,

MAN-IN-LOVE-WITH-YOUR-VOICE."

"Are you going to give him a titter?" Pearl inquired.

"I've done it," Edith confessed.

"Snappy work! Say, wouldn't it be queer if you got to know this John, and he fell for you and you married right into the middle of some big bond house? Lord! I wish I could meet some millionaire who was mad about jig dancers and wanted a wife who could kick the back of her head! But I never have any luck. I've been wondering, lately, what becomes of all the old broken-down dancers. Only a few of them marry and none of them die. It's something for us girls with fallen arches to think about."

It was perhaps two weeks later that Pearl thought to ask, "Say, kid, have you heard anything more from your butter-and-egg man? That fellow who couldn't live until he heard you laugh?"

"Yes. He doesn't want to meet me now. He thanked me, but he says imaginary people are much nicer than real people and he'd rather hear me

than know me."

"Looks as if you'd laughed yourself out of a boy friend, doesn't it? You don't know who he is or what business he's in?"

"Nothing, except that he's now sword-fishing off Gloucester. He says he killed three on the way down from Nova Scotia."

"He's kidding you, dearie. He's false to the core. People don't use a sword to catch fish. He'll be telling you next that he's been lion shooting with a hatchet. Too bad you didn't just sing; he sounded rich."

"Today I got a letter from another man," Edith said, in a tone that caused her friend to regard her curiously. "My father. He has heard the incredible rumor that I am appearing as an entertainer in a public eating-place, but he can't believe it. He asks me to assure him that it isn't so."

"That ought to be easy. It never hurts to promise a man."

"I want him to know."

"Say! You never told me anything about that famous quarrel with your dad, since the morning I met you. You surely didn't mean what you said then."

"I meant every word," Edith declared. She had no intention of telling her friend the story of her mother's death, but before she realized it she had gone too far to stop. She made the recital as brief as possible and concluded by saying, "I went to her door twice while they were talking that night, and I couldn't help hearing something—enough to make me realize, afterward, that he was to blame for the terrible thing that happened. Whatever love I had for him died there and then, but—I doubt if I'd ever have had the courage to actually mention it to him or to accuse him to his face, only for something he did, later, after—it was all over. He brought a woman to the house to see me—one of his detestable reform women in whom he has been interested for a long while. She is the most objectionable person I ever met and I'm satisfied she'd marry father in a minute if he'd ask her. He actually proposed to have her come to our house to live and to—to look after my moral welfare. To take mother's place!

"That was too much. I told him then what I knew and what I suspected. I got the truth out of him finally, then I told him what I thought of him. I called him a—murderer. And he is!"

"Hm—m! That's some story," Pearl admitted. "And you've been brooding over it a lot, haven't you?"

“Every day, every hour, almost.”

“It’s time you forgot it. You’ve cut your old man off without a nickel, so try to quit thinking about him. If he comes to New York you can get even. Let him see the show at Downing’s. If your songs and Madrid’s legs don’t horrify him to death, I’ll put on the old duck blind and do my hula dance in front of his table. That ought to chase him back to the timber.”

“I wish I could forget, but—I wish, even more, that I could make him suffer. Isn’t it odd, by the way, that he should have forced me to do the very things he was afraid I’d do? I wonder if it isn’t usually like that when we cease living our own lives and begin to lead other people’s lives for them.”

Chapter Seven

Edith's request for a raise in salary bore fruit of a sort, for one evening Rosen, the orchestra leader, stopped at her dressing-room to say,

"Downing told me you had a talk with him a while ago about salary. How would you like to pick up fifty dollars?"

"It would thrill me speechless," Edith told him.

"Well, I've got a job to play for a party next week. I'll need some entertainers and I can use you and Amy Dupont."

"How lovely! What sort of a party?"

"Oh, it isn't a stag, if that's what you mean! It's all right."

"Perhaps you can give Pearl a chance?"

Rosen shook his head. "It's too Ritzie for her style of art. Big private house where the servants are pedigreed and the cat wears livery—one of those after-theater affairs with some languid dancing on the part of the guests. You're to be part of the paprika."

"Why—I'll have a chance to sing something good," Edith began, but the other halted her:

"You will not. These are the best people, so you'll have to sing your worst songs. That's why I'm taking Dupont. I'll get a couple of snappy numbers from some show—anything to rest the short-winded dancers. There won't be a waist line in the crowd, you know. Mind you, it'll be perfectly respectable and everybody will have a rotten time, so your stuff ought to go great."

Edith thanked the orchestra leader, and on the night of the engagement when the program at Downing's was over Rosen took her and Amy Dupont across town with him in a taxicab. His orchestra followed in other cabs. On the way Edith learned the name of the man who was giving the affair, Jesse Hermann, and although she fancied she had heard it or seen it somewhere, it meant nothing to her. From what Rosen said she gathered that he was a figure of importance in both the social and the financial world.

That much was made evident upon arrival at the Hermann home. Passing through its wide bronze doors, Edith found herself in an impressive Caen stone reception hall, expensively decorated with hothouse plants and

flowers; a magnificent sweeping stairway led to the floor above, and thence came the murmur of many voices.

Rosen conferred with a footman in uniform; the girls were shown to an electric elevator which ran them noiselessly to an upper floor, and there a maid led them into a handsome boudoir reserved for their use. When they were alone, Amy exclaimed:

"Gee! What a house. It's as big as a hotel and better furnished. I'm scared stiff."

"Why?"

"The idea of doing my stuff before people like this! Oh, Allah!"

"Don't be silly. People are all alike."

Amy eyed her companion curiously. "Say! You talk as if you'd been raised in a negligée, with a Pekinese in your lap. How did you ever get palace-broken? You ever been in a hut like this before? Hm—m! It's the movies, I suppose. They take all the kick out of life." The speaker stared resentfully at her surroundings, then continued, "Doesn't it run you wild to see this stuff going on and—and us working like dogs? God! I'd like to lay back and lose my figure."

"Who is this Mr. Hermann?"

"Don't ask me. I never read the papers. He's some kind of a banker, I think."

"Is he old or—?"

"Older than Yale. He must be. Ain't it queer, folks never get money until they're too old to enjoy it? When they get so they can afford yachts and art galleries and gold slop-jars nobody ever gets to see 'em except other people who have better stuff of their own. Yeah! He must be a million; college boys don't own cabins like this. That's the hell of it! Us girls never get a grip on the big bank rolls."

The party proved to be smaller than the girls had expected. There were not more than fifty guests, although the rooms in the Hermann mansion would have accommodated several times as many. Nor was it a very lively affair, due in part perhaps to the fact that among those present were a dozen or more foreigners, Spanish-looking men and women, who did not speak much English and who appeared to be thoroughly ill at ease.

In addition to Amy and Edith there were several other entertainers, professionals from some of the big revues whom Rosen had engaged to do one or two short numbers each. During the dancing these performers meandered aimlessly about, keeping as much to themselves as possible. All were more or less bored, a condition shared by not a few of the guests, as they proved by trying to scrape an acquaintance with the former.

One of these, a red-faced, white-haired old dandy, even asked Edith to dance with him, but she declined his invitation. The man reminded her strongly of her father and his attentions offended her. Evidently, however, her ideas of correct behaviour were countrified for Amy Dupont received a similar request from another guest and accepted.

Amy danced twice, once with each of two young men, then she introduced them to Edith. They were a Mr. Clark and a Mr. Van Pelt.

Clark was a bland, plump person with a pair of round, bulging, near-sighted eyes made more prominent by thick-lensed glasses. These gave him an owlish appearance. Van Pelt was a homely, sunburnt young man with an engaging smile. He was wide-shouldered, and, contrary to Rosen's prediction, he was hollow-waisted; when he took Edith's hand his palm was as hard and as calloused as that of an oarsman. He was disappointed when she would not dance with him and asked permission to sit down beside her.

"It's permissible with me if it is with your host," she told him with a smile. Then when he looked puzzled, "I'm not a guest, you know. I'm a hired hand."

"Oh, I see! Don't worry about that. It's Jesse Hermann's fault if his friends aren't as agreeable as his entertainers—and a compliment to you. Terrible party, isn't it?"

"You shouldn't ask me. I'm doing my modest best to make it a success."

"You are indeed," Van Pelt agreed. "And, by the way, you're tremendously clever. Really."

"What's more, I'm interested in the people and the house—especially the house. It must be quite wonderful. I'd like to see it."

"Come along. I'll show you around."

But again Edith shook her head. Van Pelt shrugged. "Shyness is a sign of ignoble birth and low breeding nowadays. I suppose you've noticed it's a homey place. So is the Pennsylvania Station. Our visiting potentates act as if they were here to lay a corner stone."

"Potentates? You mean those——?"

"I mean those Argentino heavies. Hermann has just underwritten a loan for their government. This is a part of the brokerage fee. I tried to explain the words of your last song to one of them, but—his señora was with him and I didn't succeed very well." The speaker grinned frankly and in spite of herself Edith colored. She felt embarrassed, a sensation she had not experienced since she had begun to look upon her singing as work—as a "performance." "You did it awfully well, however. Haven't I heard you on the stage somewhere?"

"I've never been on the stage."

"Funny! It seemed to me——"

"You may have heard me at Downing's. I'm a cabaret performer." Van Pelt shook his head. "I'd have remembered you, I'm sure. I have an uncanny and expensive memory for pretty girls. By the way, I didn't know there were any cabarets left. *Passé*, aren't they?"

"Yes; Downing's is about the last one."

"The supper clubs are getting the play now. Harder to get evidence on them, I suppose. No, there was something about your voice——"

"You understand, I'm sure, why I don't care to dance or to explore the house. Mr. Hermann might object."

"Hermann? He'd be flattered."

"Then Mrs. Hermann."

Van Pelt glanced sharply at his companion. "Jesse's a bachelor. Didn't you know? The courts gave him his liberty and now he's free, white and fifty-one—free to live a bigger, broader life. Those artists, you know!" The speaker was smiling queerly; Edith could not read the expression in his eyes.

"Artist?" she said, vaguely. "I thought he was a banker."

"By profession, merely. He's married to money but—he's an unfaithful husband. It's a Wall Street marriage and the bonds are tax exempt. In private life he is Beauty's lover; Art is his mistress."

"Which means—what?"

"That he worships the graceful muses: drama, in the form of young and lovely leading ladies; music, as personified by Ilsa Varetza——"

"Varetza? The grand-opera star?"

"None other. She is here tonight in her magnetic person and——"

"Varetza!" Edith clasped her hands, her face was shining. "She is my ideal. Oh, I hope she sings, for I've never heard her!"

Van Pelt watched the amazing change that had come over the girl at his side; now that reserve had fled, had given place to enthusiasm, she was very beautiful. In an altered voice he said:

"She's going to sing. I heard her promise that she would." Edith rose and he rose with her, followed her to a point where they could watch the dancers. "I don't see her. She's probably talking with some swarthy matador, in the drawing-room. Opera is one thing those people understand—opera and interest. Those are Hermann's hobbies, too, by the way. He adopted the one and invented the other. He's the heavy daddy of the Metropolitan and the man who devised six per cent."

Edith remained standing, watching the dancers, peering past them toward the huge drawing-room. She was conscious, meanwhile, that her companion was chatting along, but she did not heed what he said. So, she had sung in the same place, to the same people, as the great soprano. Varetza had heard her render her trashy, vulgar songs—those detestable travesties upon music. They must have been an insult to the diva. How different if it had been possible for her to sing something worth while, even if she had sung badly. What it would have meant to receive a word of encouragement, even a smile from Varetza. But to act the clown, to burlesque the art they both revered, yes, and to burlesque it coarsely——! Edith experienced a sick feeling of shame; she wanted to run away. What was it that she had become? Where were her fine aspirations? What had become of her dreams?

She saw Varetza finally. The music ended, there was a hasty exodus from the ballroom that could have but one meaning, and Edith followed in the wake of the dancers. She found Rosen, who had deserted his musicians, at her side and together they took a position where they could see and hear.

Varetza was standing beside a magnificent Louis XIV piano, smiling, serene, confident of her supreme ability. A sudden hush fell upon the guests; their immobility, their breathless silence, was a striking tribute to the artist.

Edith's heart was pounding in her throat, the thrill of a lifetime came with the prima donna's first note.

Varetza sang once only. She was magnificent, as always. Appreciation came in a sudden tidal wave of applause. Those Latin Americans forgot themselves: they stormed and shouted.

Edith clutched at Rosen's arm; she was shaking; her eyes were swimming with tears.

"God! What a voice!" the orchestra leader cried, hoarsely. "I'd give my right hand to play for her."

"I—never breathed," the girl told him. Slowly she filled her lungs, cleared her eyes. As she turned she met the intent, almost hypnotic gaze of a man who had been standing near by. He had a face abnormally long and deeply lined; she realized now that he had been staring fixedly at her all through Varetza's number. He smiled at her faintly and moved in her direction as if to speak with her, but somebody intervened, drew him away.

Edith overtook Rosen as he hurried back to his orchestra, and said, imploringly: "Don't ask me to sing again. I—couldn't."

"No?"

She shook her head. "Not after that. Not for all of Mr. Hermann's money. I just *couldn't*! Oh, how I hate myself! You—you must understand."

Rosen's brilliant brown eyes softened, his voice was kindly. "Sure I understand. I don't blame you, either. But, Miss Gilbert, remember she wasn't always a star. She had to make a beginning."

"Thank you. May I go home? Please?"

"All right. It can't make any great difference now. Tell Amy she can go, too."

Miss Dupont was still in the company of the plump and owlish Mr. Clark and they were getting along famously together, but when she had heard Rosen's message she expressed herself as quite willing to call it a day. Later, when she came upstairs for her wraps she informed Edith that her new boy friend had volunteered to take them home.

The latter, hat and stick in hand, was waiting belowstairs when the girls stepped out of the elevator, but there a footman accosted Edith, saying:

"Mr. Hermann wishes to speak to you, miss. Will you be so good as to come with me?"

"Mr. Hermann?" Edith was surprised.

"Yes, miss. In the library, if you'll be so kind."

"But— There is some mistake."

Amy nudged her friend and murmured: "Go on. Don't be a fool."

Mr. Clark nodded and rolled his bulging eyes. “A tribute to your art, Miss Gilbert. You mustn’t keep him waiting: kings can’t afford to do that. Toddle along and shake a shoulder at him; we’ll wait for you.”

The Dupont girl continued to buzz excitedly into Edith’s ear: “Are your legs asleep? Hurry up or you’ll sprout. He wants to know you, stupid. Don’t you get it? Do your stuff, and remember there *is* a Santa Claus.” Aloud she said: “Don’t be all night, dearie. Tempus fidgets and so does Mr. Clark.” She gave her companion a determined shove.

The Hermann library was a room calculated to make an impression upon a visitor far more experienced than Edith Gilbert, for it was large, it was magnificently furnished, and its contents were unusual. It was a high-vaulted, beautifully proportioned, windowless room lighted from a center dome. Around three sides of it ran a balcony of elaborately carved dark wood and these three sides were lined from floor to ceiling with volumes, most of which were in special bindings. There were thousands of them. The fourth wall of the room was hung with mellow paintings evidently of great age: glass cabinets and cases stood here and there and in them were illuminated manuscripts, faded missals, hand-bound volumes of great age, literary curiosities of various sorts gathered from all parts of the world.

It was a breath-taking room; evidently it was the heart of the Hermann house and the owner’s holy of holies. It was a museum of treasures and yet it had been kept homelike and almost informal by intimate use. It glowed now with a warm radiance shed by a multitude of hidden lights. There were no musty odors here; on the contrary, the air was faintly aromatic of tobacco and from the bowl of a bronze smoking-stand in front of an enormous mediæval stone mantelpiece, evidently a prize snatched bodily out of some château, a cigarette still smoldered, sending up a thin, blue streamer. Easy chairs had been drawn together; they seemed to be exchanging confidences. Somebody had been here but a few moments ago.

There was plenty to occupy Edith’s attention during her brief wait: yielding to a natural curiosity, she had begun an interested reconnaissance, and was bent over a cabinet when a voice sounded behind her. She turned to behold the man with the long face, the man into whose eyes she had looked when Ilsa Varetza had concluded her song.

He came forward with outstretched hand. “Good evening, Miss Gilbert. I was prevented, a while ago, from introducing myself.” He retained Edith’s hand in his own, gazing intently at her the while. He was smiling, but in his eyes there was a keen, cold light of appraisal that was vaguely disconcerting.

Those eyes of his were curious: they were light in color—a pale green; they were, in fact, like the jade eyes of some idol. They were brilliant, shiny, expressionless eyes: there was no depth to them. “It was nice of you to sing for us. I wished to thank you,” he was saying.

“But I— You hired me to sing,” Edith told him in some confusion.

“Did I, really?” Hermann shrugged. “Then let me thank you for singing so nicely. You see I am determined to thank you for something. I enjoyed it. I did. You have a quite extraordinary ability, let us say artistry. I was vastly entertained.”

His visitor murmured her appreciation of the compliment. She seated herself at Hermann’s invitation; there was little further to say. It was flattering to be treated thus as a guest, but the man’s insistent scrutiny brought a faint color to her cheeks. She voiced a word of admiration, finally, for the treasures surrounding her.

“You like my room?” Hermann inquired, suddenly. “I am glad. It represents the best in me; it is, in a way, the only tangible result of my life’s work. There are some interesting things here: some day perhaps you will permit me to show them to you. But now—tell me something about yourself.”

“Why—you know my name, you heard me sing, you probably know that I am a—a common cabaret performer. What more is there to tell?”

There ensued another disconcerting moment while the financier stared glassily at the speaker over his long white fingers, pressed tip to tip, then he said, briskly:

“Pardon me. I’m not rude. I have an active, curious mind, that’s all; it wanders away on trips of its own and I love to follow it. Let me ask you—is your real name Gilbert?”

“It is.”

“Are you married?”

“No.”

“Do you live here? I mean is New York your home?”

“No.”

“You have relatives—friends, with whom you live?”

Edith shook her head. “I live in a rented room for which I pay ten dollars a week.”

“Who looks out for you?”

By this time the object of Hermann’s cross-examination was sitting stiffly erect in her chair, into her voice had crept a resentful chill. “I look out for myself. It is a task of which I am quite capable, I assure you. Now, may I inquire——?”

“I believe you.” The man smiled sincerely and his elongated features, which in repose were cynical, somber, instantly changed; they were illuminated as if by magic. “Don’t take offence at an inquisitive old man. Humor his whim. I’m accustomed to my own way, spoiled; and you have an air, a charm, a freshness about you which—set me dreaming. It sent my mind wandering off into bright fields. The city has made me old and hard: it has made me forget my youth. Fields deep with daisies. . . . Spring! Sunshine! Wild flowers! Cool, clean leaves! You brought me a vision of such things. Isn’t that a tribute to your beauty or—better, to your personality? I ask you?”

“You, too, have a certain ‘freshness,’ if I may say so,” Edith told him, crisply. “And it isn’t in the least countrified.”

Hermann’s smile widened. “Good! You may say whatever you please, of course, only say it as the girl you are, not as the—the cabaret singer. I liked your voice, that’s why I sent for you. Now that I have met you, I am again surprised. Let me explain, as briefly as possible, for we haven’t much time. I am a slave to my ears. Sound, harmony, music are, to me, what food, drink, drugs are to some men. Voices have a peculiar effect upon me; they draw me or they repel me. I was challenged by yours; it would have impelled me to make your acquaintance even if you had been—well, unattractive. Inasmuch as you are lovely to behold, I was the more deeply intrigued. That is natural: I make no apology, for beauty, Miss Gilbert, is an impersonal thing and it exacts its own peculiar tribute. Nature’s law! I have an artistic reverence for it. Do I make myself plain? Very well, then, let me go further. I was prepared to find that your beauty was only skin deep: imagine my enchantment to discover here, now, that it goes deeper. That’s what I mean by saying I am again surprised.” The speaker bowed.

“You are complimentary. I suppose I should thank you,” Edith murmured with more composure.

“Tell me, why are you a—a ‘common cabaret performer’? Those numbers of yours were——” Hermann shrugged, “trashy, commonplace, rather vulgar. Nevertheless you invested them with a singular importance, almost with distinction, and most of all you remained sweet and charming. It was an anomaly. It was like hearing outrageous words from the lips of a child. Perhaps that is art. I don’t know. At any rate, it was an accomplishment.”

By this time Edith’s rigidity had lessened; she began to wonder if she were really chatting with this mythical giant on these friendly terms or if she were imagining this scene. Briefly she explained how she had come to sing the sort of songs to which he referred and Hermann was quick to comprehend.

“Of course. One has to eat. No doubt you chose wisely. Now then, I can’t boast that I know music, but I have a feeling for it and an appreciation of technique. Odd as it sounds, your singing of those common songs betrayed a technique akin to Varetza’s.”

“Oh, no!” Edith drew a quick breath. “Now I know you’re not sincere.”

“But I am. A wholly different technique, to be sure— By the way, her voice transported you, didn’t it? I was watching; you made a lovely picture, with your eyes shining, your lips parted. I thought of a dewy rose with its petals unfolding to the sun.”

“You are in a poetic mood. But Varetza—! She is divine. In her I saw all of my ambitions realized.”

“Oho! Then you have high ambitions?”

“Who hasn’t? I’ve studied hard——”

“Have you, indeed?”

“——and I expect to go a long way.”

“In what direction, may I ask?”

Edith hesitated, flushed. “You’ll think I’m crazy or terribly conceited; after hearing her I’m afraid I am, but—Varetza began at the bottom. She sang in a Budapesth music hall.”

“Grand opera? Am I to understand that you aim for opera?” Hermann looked incredulous.

The girl nodded silently, then after a moment, “It’s funny, I know—wildly extravagant——”

"Not at all. Grand opera! Why not?" Again Hermann studied the speaker out of his hard, bright, fathomless eyes. He ran them over her from head to foot, weighing her, searching her, appraising her. "No, not extravagant. You may have the voice, I don't know: but remember, that's only a part of the necessary equipment. Have you the determination? Is your ambition strong enough? Great accomplishments entail great sacrifices. You know, of course, that I'm a power at the Metropolitan?"

Edith shrugged. "Something like that was suggested to me, but frankly, Mr. Hermann, I don't know anything whatever about you, except what little I've heard tonight. That isn't uncomplimentary to you—it merely proves my ignorance. On the way here I was told that you are enormously rich, but that didn't greatly impress me for—I've been accustomed to well-to-do people all my life. In fact, I've learned all I know about the other kind since I came to New York. Your house impressed me, of course, but I got my first thrill, my first real idea of you from this room."

"Indeed? What was—what is that idea?"

"Why, I realized that you are more than a mighty banker—I believe that's what you are. There's magic, beauty, enchantment here in this room and it reflects your personality. You are a lord of things mightier than money."

"You're right, my dear," the words were spoken seriously. "A lord of great things. Yes. Here are the treasures of the world. Mine! Imperishable things, more precious than jewels. Things that can never die. All that is finest and most lasting since the birth of time. I own them. My dear girl, I have burned out my eyes in reading these books: all I can do now is browse, nip a bite here and there. You see I can't endure having others read to me—I grow to hate their voices. I told you that I exist through my ears; that sound is a living thing to me. Yes, this is my Castle of Enchantment."

Edith exclaimed with animation, "Exactly! That's the feeling I have. You are a magician in an enchanted castle and I am a poor, ragged child who has wandered in. It's a dream adventure—I've had loads of them—and when you discover me watching your incantations you'll probably wave your wand and utter some horrid mystic word that will change me into a white heifer or a slimy green frog or—something."

Once more that miraculous smile wiped the lines out of the stony face opposite, changed it from a sinister mask into a kindly, humorous countenance.

“Perhaps you are not far wrong. I have made magic of one sort or another. But aren’t there good as well as wicked magicians? Have you never dreamed of becoming a beautiful princess instead of a frog? A princess with a magic wand of her own which she needs only to wave in order to realize her lightest wish?”

“Oh, it’s never like that! I always wake up shivering and break the spell, before the good fortune comes along.”

“I’d like to hear you sing. Will you sing for me?”

“Yes. Gladly!”

“When?”

“Why—any time.”

“Day after tomorrow. Come at four.” The speaker rose, held out his hand. Again he retained the fingers that were laid in his. “Sorcery! Dream castles! Abracadabras! Why not? There is beauty and magic and imperishable youth in this room. Why not in the world outside? Imperishable youth! The knights and ladies who live on these shelves had their enchantments; perhaps we can learn something from them.” He laid his free hand over Edith’s and gave it a warm, friendly pressure. “Go home, dream your dreams and remember—there are good magicians.”

Chapter Eight

Neither Amy nor her escort was to be found when Edith looked for them, but young Van Pelt came forward and explained:

"The others romped along and asked me to bring you. My car is outside."

"You're very kind. I'm sorry I was so long."

As they left the house Van Pelt drew a breath of relief and said: "Thank Heaven *that* party is over! Outside of Varetza—and you, it was one long yawn."

Edith smiled at the speaker. "You are the soul of politeness. Not many people know how to be gallant though bored."

"No gallantry about it," he protested. "And what's more I wasn't bored: you saved me from that."

"Good! Then I've paid for my ride home."

Van Pelt frowned thoughtfully. "You're an odd kid. You're not a bit like your friend, are you? I got quite a shock when she introduced us—an agreeable shock."

"Meaning, I presume, that you expected me to talk the way I sing. I wonder if you know what it is to work, to earn a living, even by doing the thing you don't want to do."

"I know what it is to work: I'm as busy as a bumble bee. Not that I accomplish much—but I keep humming. And of course it's the thing I like to do but— Here we are." With these words the speaker opened the door of a car that stood alongside the curb. It was an open car, a sporty foreign roadster such as a young man of Van Pelt's type might be expected to drive. Edith was thrilled to note that it was identical with her own, that pet possession upon which she had prided herself before leaving Hopewell. When Van Pelt helped her in she yielded to a sudden impulse and slid herself over behind the steering wheel.

"Do you mind if I drive?" she inquired. The man showed by his expression that he did mind, but she reassured him by saying: "Don't worry; I know how."

"Cross your heart and hope to die?"

“Cross my heart and hope to live.”

“All right. Only—the last girl who knew how cost me a front axle and a flower shop. Ever pick orchids out of an automobile? We did. Later I had to tell the judge all about it. Charming man, socially, I believe, but judicially—oh, dear! You’d better let me drive; really. I’m drunk enough.”

“Drunk enough?”

Van Pelt nodded gravely. “Up to three drinks the traffic laws are in danger; after that I simply creep.” He watched his companion as she turned the switch, stepped on the starter and took the car smoothly away from the curb, down the street and into the Avenue, then he settled back in his seat. “Hm—m! I guess you’ll do. Perfectly at home in this bus, aren’t you?”

“I ought to be. I have its twin brother—or sister. Cars are feminine, aren’t they?” Again Edith felt that nonplused scrutiny with which Van Pelt had favored her more than once during the evening and she enjoyed it. “Aren’t they?”

“Oh, sure! Must be from the way you two girls get along together. I dare say you’re an air pilot, too, and fly back and forth from your country place.”

The girl shook her head. “Flying is too noisy. And it blows your hairpins out.”

“You’ve been up?” He was incredulous.

“A couple of times.”

At this hour of the night the streets were empty, except for an occasional cruising taxicab, and the asphalt surface of Fifth Avenue shone like a polished floor—it resembled a glassy, black stream of obsidian laid down between gloomy canyon walls. Over it the car ran smoothly, noiselessly; the night air, freed from its burden of burnt gases, was fresh and cool.

“By the way, Clark and your little pal have gone to the Club Nocturne. They expect us to join them.”

Again Edith shook her head. “I know a nicer place than that—at this time of night.”

“Atta pilot! Where is it?”

With a smile she gave the address of her rooming house. Van Pelt repeated it vaguely.

“Never heard of it,” he declared.

“Probably not. You can go on to the Club Nocturne, if you care to: it’s not far.”

The young man shrugged. “Not I. Choose your own landing-place, Cap. I’m with you.” After a moment he inquired: “So, you met Jesse Hermann? What do you think of him?”

“I—don’t know. He was quite charming, after we got acquainted.”

“He sent for you, didn’t he?”

“Yes. I suppose I should be flattered. Who is he? What is he?”

“Why—he’s anything, everything. He’s Hermann; he’s New York. Of course you know he’s disgustingly rich.”

Impatiently Edith exclaimed: “So I’ve been elaborately assured a half dozen times. That’s the first thing everybody tells me. What of it? Bootleggers are rich, too, but they’re not very nice. Most people with loads of money are enormously stupid and the ‘goody-goodies’ are even more stupid than the—the bootleg kind.”

Van Pelt laughed. He was amused at the airs, the assurance of this young thing. Well, sophistication was the vogue and she was not the first one of her kind he had met. But how fast these girls got on when the chance offered! More adaptable than chameleons! Millionaires bored her; flying blew out her hairpins! And her own French car—chassis eight thousand dollars, body by Brewster! No Follies favorite could beat that! And moneyed men were nothing new in her life! Oh, to be sure! Well, why not? She was smart and she had the looks.

“You can’t call Jesse stupid. He’s a man of extraordinary taste, too. You’re lucky if he liked you. He did, didn’t he?”

The fair head above the steering wheel was turned in Van Pelt’s direction for an instant. “Why, I presume so. Nobody ever *dis*liked me on such short acquaintance. My own first impressions aren’t always trustworthy so I’m going to wait until I know him better before I determine whether I like him or not.”

“You expect to get better acquainted? He doesn’t interest himself sufficiently in many people——”

“I do. He seemed to be interested in me, or at least in what I’m doing. At any rate, I’m going to— He asked me to come back day after tomorrow.”

Edith swung west into a side street: she and her companion were still talking when she drew in to the curb and stopped the car with the announcement:

"*Voilà!* We have arrived. Thank you for letting me drive. It seemed—wonderful."

Van Pelt opened the car door, then glanced up at the dark front of the old-fashioned, high-stooped house across the sidewalk. It was one of a row; all were dark except for the hall lights that shone dimly through the cheap stained glass of their front doors. The neighborhood was uninviting.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "You've made a mistake, haven't you?"

"No."

"What—kind of a place is this?"

"It's nothing to be proud of, but it's the best I can afford. Did you think I roomed at the Ambassador?"

"Oh—! You *live* here!" The tone was one of genuine surprise.

Edith's companion was on the side next the curb; while she waited for him to get out, she explained, "I don't care to go to the Club Nocturne or anywhere else. In fact, I don't go out at all."

"Say! I don't want to play this," Van Pelt declared as if aggrieved. "Let's go some place where we can get some good stuff and tread a few measures."

"Nonsense! You don't want to dance at this time of night and I certainly don't. It is way past my bedtime."

When the man spoke next it was with frank resentment: "You've got me all wrong, sister. I don't want to go to your room." The girl at his side drew a sharp breath, she straightened herself. He went on, doggedly: "I'll beau you around and kick up a lot of splinters, I'll stay out till all hours, but that's as far as I care to go."

For the first time since leaving Hermann's house the two faced each other, their eyes met.

"I didn't think you could be quite so—stupid," Edith told him, in a casual voice.

"Stupid? Why, I'm bright! I'm nice, too—but I'm good company for all that."

“Mistakes like this are more embarrassing to the man than to the girl, if he’s sober enough to understand.”

“Mistake? I say—don’t Ritz me. What’s more, I’m not even tight.”

“Don’t you think we’ve talked enough about it? I’ve had a nice little drive in your nice little car and now I’m waiting to get out.”

Van Pelt was perhaps less sober than he imagined; at any rate, he was slow of comprehension and he could see only the end of an evening which for him had scarcely begun, therefore he refused to budge. Meanwhile, he persisted, “You’re all wet, my dear. And you don’t have to ‘how dare’ me. Let’s tune in together, right now; the girls I take riding wear out their shoes dancing, not walking home. Nothing against you, understand—you’re a nice kid—but three is company and two is a failure. When the lights go out I go home. Take ’em out, treat ’em fine, and *put ’em back*, is my motto. I’m an A-1 investment for widows and working girls; absolute security and a high yield. Now then, let’s—*Hey!*”

Edith had opened the door on her side and was out on the running board before Van Pelt could do more than seize a fold of her wrap.

“Don’t be rude, please!” She eyed the fellow steadily; his fingers relaxed. A moment later she had run around back of the car and had mounted the steps. She hoped, some time, to have the privilege of telling this disagreeable young cad exactly what she thought of him.

As for Van Pelt, he was shaking his head and muttering as he drove away: “They’re all alike. One word from Hermann and they’d high-hat the Prince of Wales.”

Of all the people who knew Norman Van Pelt, few agreed in their estimate of him. In downtown financial circles, where he was more or less active, they called him a “society man.” The term is vague at best, nowadays; those who made use of it in his case did so out of resentment, but with no very clear idea of what it meant. Any young man who inherits an old name and a vast fortune and who proceeds gayly, without effort, to add to the credit of both must expect to arouse resentment in his less fortunate associates. Among the idler, uptown set—the aforesaid “society people”—he was regarded as an absurdly energetic young business man who was slaving his life away at the expense of the finer things of life. In his clubs, around the theaters, the cafés, and the midnight haunts of gayety-seekers he was known as a man about town, a first-nighter, and a spendthrift entertainer. Most of the golf pros treated him as an equal.

As a matter of fact, he was all and none of the above for he played at business and he made a business of play. Having a decided flair for both and an unflagging interest in every phase of his life, he made fun out of everything and his days were stretched to the bursting point. His mother often told her friends that Norman did more different things in twenty-four hours, did them well and enjoyed doing them, than any two young men in New York. She affected wonder at it, but her friends were not surprised, for Natalie herself was a woman of enormous nervous energy and they remembered when she, too, ran under forced draught with her safety valve lashed down. All polite New York, in fact, remembered Natalie Carewe, as she was, and her tempestuous career. Socially and domestically her life had been a succession of gusty squalls. Some people, like petrels, are born to fly through storm, and she was one. Any woman who has won and lost three husbands must indeed know stormy weather. To those friends, therefore, it did not seem strange that Natalie's chick should have inherited a pair of lusty wings.

The real secret of Norman Van Pelt's abundant vigor was his perfect health, but he had early realized that in order to retain that health he could not cheat—that he had to treat his body fairly. It had become an axiom of his that dissipation and perspiration went together, and inasmuch as he dissipated a great deal he forced himself to do a lot of sweating. Sleep he managed to economize upon, but exercise never.

This morning he was up as usual at eight o'clock, in spite of the fact that he had come in at four, and although the day was warm he slipped into a sweater and woolen trunks and went to work.

When his mother arrived, having driven into town early to escape the heat, she heard him punching the bag. The sound of his noisy occupation was plainly audible before she rang the apartment bell. As the butler took her wrap, she said:

"Evidently Mr. Norman was out late again last night, Hewlett."

"Yes, Mrs. Dubose. He's been working in a perfect fury this half hour."

"How is he looking?"

"Marvelous, Mrs. Dubose. His trip did him a world of good. Why, he's that brown you'd scarcely know him. And peppy——" Hewlett rolled his eyes.

Mrs. Dubose smiled. "Set a place for me; I'm famished." Having drawn off her gloves and removed her hat, she rearranged her hair, then scrutinized

herself carefully and with some pride. She was a regal woman, slender, long-limbed, exquisitely groomed—many people called her the best-dressed woman in the city—her face was small, imperious, and it retained more than a trace of that beauty which had made her famous. Having rendered this involuntary obeisance to the latter, she went in the direction of her son's suite.

She knocked on the door, then yodeled; instantly the furious drumming inside ceased, her name was shouted, and an instant later the door was flung open, wrenched back upon its hinges. She was seized in a bearlike embrace, a grinning, shining face was thrust into hers, and she was kissed by a pair of wet lips.

"Ugh! Perspiration! Why *will* you kiss me when you're like this?" she protested.

"Can't help it, Nat; you're the only woman I like to kiss. So! Early a.m. grouch, eh? Never mind, it'll wash off. The grouch, I mean. Gee! How stunning you look. Thinner, aren't you?"

"You flatterer! Hurry up and get dressed. I'm hungry. The idea of dragging an indolent old woman in from the country at this time of night. No, I'm not a pound, not an ounce, not an inch thinner."

"Then it's the gown. You're lucky I wasn't a daughter, Nat. I'd be jealous of your figure."

"If you'd diet, as I do, you wouldn't have to go through this hideous rigmarole. And if you'd only stop drinking——"

"But I won't stop. What goes in has to come out, you know. A man's most vital organs are his pores. See you as soon as I take a steam—and don't you dare start breakfast until I'm there." The door closed; Van Pelt dashed into his bathroom.

It was an elaborate bathroom, by the way, fitted up according to the owner's ideas with tub, needle shower, steam cabinet, and rubbing slab—an arrangement more in keeping with a training establishment than a Park Avenue bachelor's living quarters.

Mrs. Dubose meanwhile made a tour of inspection about the premises, looking for dust, exploring with inquisitive eye and finger for traces of neglect. To combat the smoke and the grime of a New York summer in an apartment of this size with only three servants was an undertaking.

It was a pretentious apartment, even for this section of the city where elaborate living quarters are the rule; it had been laid out when the building was erected and it represented the last word in modern convenience. It was of the duplex type and occupied two floors, the drawing-room being twice the height of ordinary apartment rooms and of majestic proportions. Few country houses could boast a larger room or more spacious owners' suites. It was, of course, delightfully furnished. Here, fourteen stories above the street, atop a fireproof steel and terra-cotta structure, served by a corps of liveried attendants, mother and son lived with a minimum of labor and responsibility and yet in a style that made possible entertainment on a lavish scale. Apartments in this structure were owned outright by the tenants and the prices were fabulous—one could buy a Fifth Avenue mansion for less—but in New York anything can be sold if the price is high enough and in consequence the building was full.

Natalie and Norman were at breakfast; they had discussed the matter which had brought the former away from her country place—a transaction involving the lease of some of her downtown property.

"Do what you think best," she told him, finally. "You have a good head. I wonder where you got it, by the way."

"From you, probably." The mother denied this with a gesture, but the son persisted. "Oh, you've let a lot of talents run wild, Nat. Of course it's possible I acquired it from one of my paternal parents—from Jesse Hermann. He's the smartest of the bunch."

"I wish you wouldn't——"

"Not many young fellows have had the advantages of three fathers." Norman grinned widely.

"No reproaches, please, at this hour. One's follies always loom largest at breakfast-time. Right now I'm not in a Christian mood, so I'll assume personal credit for all your virtues and blame your vices on those—those husbands of whom you speak so disrespectfully. Vices are acquired more often than they're inherited. And, Heaven knows, you *are* vicious. . . . Hm—m! Three husbands. That's not much of a record nowadays, is it? Not for a woman with my looks."

"Certainly not."

"I didn't do so badly either, all things considered. One good man out of three is a fair average, as husbands go. Let's see, is that three hundred per cent or only three? I'm so poor at figures."

“Never mind; you batted well at the altar. Babe Ruth can’t hit the ball every time up. Why don’t you try it again, Nat? You’re a peach.”

“Unnatural child!”

“You’d pass for thirty-five and you’ve got it on any girl I know. I mean it. That French surgeon took ten years away, around your eyes.”

“Heaven knows he charged enough—a thousand dollars a year at that rate. By the way, that’s more than most people *make* in a year.” The speaker sighed. “Any woman with money can have a young face, but you don’t know what it means to maintain a youthful figure. Lamb chops and pineapple! Spinach and buttermilk! Think of it: I feed thousands of dear little starving Armenians and go hungry myself. Lord! how I envy them! Sometimes I dream I’m a happy, care-free Near East orphan with no figure to worry about and nothing to do but eat starchy, fat-producing foods snatched out of the mouths of middle-aged matrons with bobbed hair and rubber girdles. Do you know the loveliest word in the English language, my dear? *Fats!* Um—m!” Mrs. Dubose moistened her lips, seemed to roll a tasty morsel upon her tongue. “Fats! There’s poetry in ‘butter’ and ‘eggs’ and ‘oil’ and ‘suet.’ ”

Norman was smiling widely. “Serves you right for being a tearing beauty. Being entirely without vanity, myself, you can’t expect me to sympathize.”

“I know. I never could understand why you torture yourself with these exercises. A man’s figure is his own, a woman’s figure is public. That sounds rather brazen. I must remember it.”

“It’s not a question of looks. When you’re hungry you don’t postpone eating, do you? Well, exercise is just as important. It can’t be put off till tomorrow, any more than a square meal. I keep fit so I can have fun.”

“Which reminds me—aren’t you overdoing the fun a bit?”

“Probably. But when I get so I can’t overdo I’ll taper off.”

“Watch the liquor, my dear. It was bad when it was good. It’s good that it’s so bad. I hope you get my meaning. I’ve practically cut it out, along with the fats. Blessed fats!”

In a tone of surprise Van Pelt exclaimed: “Why, Nat! You’re lecturing me. Have I lived to hear a curtain lecture from my doting mother? It *is* a lecture, isn’t it?”

The mother nodded. “As near as I can come to it. At any rate, I’m not a doting mother. I had one of those and—look at me. . . . I could have been stern with you, for everybody has a bossy streak, but I had confidence in you. If parents realized that their children are parts of themselves, new editions, all they’d have to guard against would be—well, typographical errors, if you know what I mean. The virtues would take care of themselves if we’d keep a curb on our vices. Being in my own person singularly free of vices, I didn’t worry much about yours,” Mrs. Dubose laughed. “Hear me talk. My ideas about children are as silly as yours about exercise. Let’s collaborate on a book. Now tell me about your trip.”

“We didn’t get much fishing. The water was too high, or else it was an off year. Salmon are temperamental, you know. But we stayed the full two weeks. I figured Clark would want to run out on me and would make the market an excuse, so I took in a radio and got the reports every night. He needed the rest—he won’t exercise. Loafers, like Clark, need lots of rest. Maddox, too. Lazy! We played around on the cruise home: tried the tuna and the swordfish and took quite a few. Golf and country-club capers between times; also a party aboard the yacht every other night. But nothing startling; we were usually through by three a.m., with not a thing to do till the next day.”

“So, that’s what you consider a vacation! That’s the call of the wild!” Mrs. Dubose exclaimed.

“Sure! They called on us everywhere we anchored. Wild women. Shy young creatures from the bosky depths of Italian gardens; fleet-limbed gazelles from the broad, open hotel piazzas. Oh, we made friends with them and got close to nature—in one-piece bathing suits. You should have seen us at New London—we laid over there for the State Championship. I got put out in the first round, by the way.”

“I read that. You deserved to be put out with an eighty-two.”

“The Jeffries girls were there with some friends. As harmless as a band of saber-toothed tigers, and they decided, the night we were leaving, to come home with us on the *Pierrette*. There were ten in the party.”

“Ten? Where in the world did you put them?”

“Oh, we danced all night! To moonshine. You know the kind I mean: three drinks and you begin to sing, ‘Uncle Tom, I’m going there!’ They got it from the head porter, having drunk all of mine during the tournament.”

“That’s pretty raw——”

"Stuff that's aged in fruit jars over the week end is never smooth," Van Pelt grimaced.

"I mean those Jeffries girls. Did they bring a chaperon?"

"Nat! How old-fashioned you are! What is a chaperon but a confession of weakness? And remember, there's no longer a weaker sex. Independence has dawned for us girls."

"Yes. And they blame it on the war. That poor, dear war! What a lot it has to stand for. But do I detect a hint of cynicism? You were pretty well taken with the younger Jeffries last season."

"Sure. I got a great thrill out of little Jeff. I like the blond, thyroidal type ——"

"*What?*"

"Oh, that's the latest! No more chatter about calories and vitamines; it's all glands. Pick out your wife according to her glandular predominance and know what you're getting. The thyroidal kind are nervous, impulsive, affectionate; they have good teeth and they seldom get fat. Great idea! Now you belong to that *very*——"

"Stop talking nonsense. I've been worried about you and that girl."

"Oh! They're impatient, irritable, and they worry themselves over nothing, too." Van Pelt threw back his head and laughed. "Nat dear, I love to talk nonsense with you. But don't concern yourself over Jeff. She's spoiled. And that's not cynicism. Money did it. I've decided it is safer to pick a poor girl."

"Not at all. There's no curse attached to money. On the contrary, those who have it are frequently much nicer than those who haven't. Take us, for example. It's quite the vogue, lately, for chaps like you to marry nobodies—throw themselves away on some pretty face or lovely figure. That's the worst of these barelegged revues—they're in a fair way to ruin our best families. On bended knees, Norman—on my smooth and shapely knees—I implore you, don't bring me a chorus girl to mother."

"Right-o! I promise. I have my own ideas about them, too. They're fun to play around with, but—I inherited from you an outrageous amount of self-respect. As a matter of fact, I'm off show girls and I've gone in for music."

"Indeed!" There was a pause while Mrs. Dubose lighted a cigarette. "Mind telling me her name?"

“That’s the trouble: I don’t know it and can’t find out. You’ll think I’m crazy, but—I heard a voice over that radio and ever since it is as if all other voices were dumb or discordant. She’s some opera singer, I presume, and no doubt she’s fat. You don’t mind my using the most delicious word in the language to describe the most fascinating creature in the world, do you? Yes, fat and ugly, I’ll bet. Probably that’s why she won’t answer my letters.”

“You’ve written to her? Oh, my dear! ‘Do right and fear no man: don’t write and fear no woman.’ That sounds like Solomon, but it came from the Winter Garden.”

“Yes, I wrote, but purely in a spirit of mirth, and I didn’t sign the letters. They call her ‘The Lark.’ I had an idea Jesse Hermann might know who she is, so——”

“Not if she’s fat or ugly.”

“Oh, she isn’t, really! Whoever heard of a fat lark or an ugly thrush? I went to a party of his, last night. He asked about you, by the way.”

Mrs. Dubose blew a smoke ring, then poked a slender finger through it. “Hm—m! I suppose it’s all right for you to go to his house, but somehow it shocks me. And I’m pretty hard to shock. If he were your real father instead of one of my matrimonial errors, it wouldn’t be so bad, but——there must be a certain number of people ready to comment.”

“Surely you’ve been talked about enough, so that you don’t mind a little gossip. And anybody whose opinion counts knows that no woman could stay married to him. Divorce creates all sorts of tangles nowadays: if everybody stopped going out for fear of meeting their ex’s we wouldn’t have any nice parties.”

Mrs. Dubose sighed. “I’m afraid I’m not as thick-skinned as I pretend. In fact, I never knew how thin mine was until—until I had my face lifted. Go on with Jesse’s party and your mysterious song-bird.”

“I went partly on business. He has pulled off a big South American deal and we may decide to underwrite some of the bonds, see? I asked him about The Lark, but he’d never heard of her. Anybody in the opera line whom he hasn’t heard of just—ain’t. So that’s that. It was a terrible party, by the way. Only for Varetza, who did a number to oblige Jesse, and a charming little pocket-miner with the face of an angel who sang some vulgar songs, I’d have died on a divan. Extraordinary girl, that last one, and she interested Jesse.”

“Um—m! Anything pretty and impure naturally would.” The mother nodded. “Beauty and vulgarity always were irresistible to him. What are you grinning at?”

“That—girl. She ‘how-dared’ me! She had a friend with her who made a hit with Clark. They went on to a dancing-place and I expected to follow with her. Instead she drove me home—a rooming house in the frightful forties. Naturally I assumed she wanted me to go in with her.”

“Did you?”

“I never do, and you know it, Nat. I dance with ’em, drink with ’em, cut up capers and spend money with ’em, but—I let George do the petting.”

“I’m glad. Keep yourself *to* yourself, my boy.”

“Jesse had made a date with her, so of course she couldn’t see me. A mistake all around. It was funny, the airs she put on.”

“Poor little fool!” the mother said. “Jesse is up to his old tricks. He laid the moon in her hands and of course she was blinded. I feel sorry for girls like that.”

Van Pelt shrugged carelessly. “Oh, save your sympathy, Nat. He pays ’em well.”

Chapter Nine

"You have a fine voice, Miss Gilbert, and it seems to be well placed and nicely trained. But—I'm not capable of telling how good it is. My musical education is superficial." Jesse Hermann rose and began a slow pacing of the room.

Edith had sung three songs for him: she stood now beside that piano with the romping cupids where Ilsa Varetza had stood. Rosen, who had played her accompaniments, eyed first one, then the other. Impulsively he took the girl's hand and said, "I had no idea you could sing as well as that."

Hermann glanced at him in surprise. "Haven't you played for her before?"

"Only when I tried her out for our program. And that wasn't a test."

The former speaker nodded. "She has an emotional quality—something that reaches in and gets you. You notice it, don't you? Tell me, is it a possible grand-opera voice?"

Rosen hesitated; when he spoke, Edith was surprised at the feeling in his voice. "I don't know any more about that than you do, Mr. Hermann, and—I'm prejudiced. So much depends upon the coaching: there is so much more to opera than the mere natural voice. One must have health, vitality, dramatic ability, training—to say nothing of opportunity. Then there's the long, slow grind; the slavery! It takes forever, and a girl needs a lot of determination. Character, I suppose, has as much to do with it as anything else. She has that—but, after all, my judgment is useless for I'm not an artist, you know, I'm merely a jazz thumper."

Edith declared, warmly: "That isn't true. He is a thorough musician, Mr. Hermann. Yes, and he's a very busy musician, by the way. It was sweet of him to come here and play for me. Now, about the work, the preparation—that doesn't frighten me in the least."

"Nevertheless, there's a lot in what Rosen says. Of course, mediocre voices can be built up and good ones can be spoiled—that depends upon the teacher—but operatic training is long and rigorous and you'd have time for nothing else. You couldn't carry on the work you're doing."

"I had begun to fear I'd never be able even to start," the girl confessed, with a smile. "Naturally, I don't propose to stay at Downing's any longer

than I have to."

"Her broadcasting has helped some," Rosen declared. "It has been good training, and a first-class teacher would——"

"Broadcasting?" Hermann raised his brows.

"She sings over the radio twice a week. There's no money in it, but her voice reproduces well and the fans love her."

"Indeed? How do you know?"

"Why, by their letters and——"

"Yes, and some of them know music; they're good critics," Edith declared.

"Really! I supposed the—listeners were mainly children."

"Not at all. Grown people, people of intelligence——"

"And people of feeling!" Rosen laughed in a manner that diverted his host's attention. "Some of them actually become romantic."

"You're joking."

"No, I'm not. Edith's voice has awakened at least one serious heart throb. A fellow heard her, away up in Canada, and that emotional quality we notice affected him so strongly that he declares he has found his ideal."

"How interesting!"

"He's no lumber-jack, either. He has a yacht! Nothing sounds so important to the average person as a yacht. It's a magic word."

The listener's curiosity was so patent that Rosen asked Edith to show him a letter she had read aloud on the way across town, and reluctantly she did so.

No sooner had Hermann glanced at it than his expression altered. He turned to the signature, then smiled queerly. "So? A *nom de plume*? By the way, why does he address you as 'Miss Larkin'?"

Edith explained how she came to sing under that name and how she had become known as "The Lark."

The smile persisted about Hermann's lips as he read, in a handwriting that was thoroughly familiar:

Dear Miss Larkin:

If you ever accept apologies, please accept mine. Flippancy is such a safe pose—but I meant no disrespect. Really!

I realize, now, that I should have signed my first letter, or at least the ones that followed, but men hate to be laughed at, and I had the uncomfortable feeling that I was doing something childish. It was my first "fan letter" and I didn't intend to write any more. But every time you sing your voice affects me more strongly—the reason for it, by the way, is still as much of a mystery as ever—and, now, writing you has become a miserable, weak habit; a sort of pernicious anæmia.

I thought I'd learn who you are, and see whether I wanted to meet you, or whether you might be expected to want to meet me, and I assumed all I'd have to do would be to present myself at WKL and be introduced. But—fatuous assumption! I called, and explained myself, whereupon a young man with a wart on his chin told me to get-the-hell-out-of-there. There was no mistaking his words; he enunciated beautifully. No doubt that's why he works in a broadcasting plant.

Since that time I have made an annoying discovery: there are eighty-seven Larkins in the city directory and thirty-three in the telephone book. Aren't figures thrilling?

Now, dear Lark, there are ways to find out who you are, but if you don't wish me to know that wouldn't be playing the game, would it? Nor would it help matters, in that event, to tell you who I am—I hate to be snubbed as badly as I hate to be laughed at. On the other hand, if there is no reason why we should not become acquainted or if you are curious, or bored, or lonesome, or even adventurous, leave word with that fellow at WKL and instantly I will tell him every important and interesting fact about myself. He has probably informed you that I am young, homely, and well dressed: I can furnish proof of good character and reputation; you will discover for yourself a thousand other agreeable traits which I am too modest to mention.

Oh, lady, relent!

MAN-IN-LOVE-WITH-YOUR-VOICE.

Hermann chuckled. "I remember now that somebody asked me if I had heard you over the radio, but of course 'The Lark' meant nothing. By the

way, do you intend to gratify the curiosity of this young smart-aleck?"

"No. I'm not lonesome, nor bored, nor adventurous."

"Good. You have selected a goal; learn to keep your eyes on it."

For a while longer the three talked, then the orchestra leader rose to go. He looked expectantly at Edith, but Hermann would not consent to her leaving. Some friends were coming in for tea at five, he explained, and he urged his visitors to stay and meet them. When Rosen could not do so, the host said:

"Then let me keep Miss Gilbert for another hour and send her home in my car. If we are going to plan a future for her let's begin at once, today. There's no better way than to interest the right people in her."

Rosen agreed to this arrangement, albeit reluctantly, and Hermann placed an arm about his shoulders, then strolled with him to the head of the stairs. The great man could be friendly, charmingly informal, when he chose, and today he was in a warm mood. As for Edith, she could not yet credit her good fortune: she could not bring herself to actually believe that her opportunity had apparently arrived and that her dreams were in the way of being realized. But so it seemed.

People called life difficult, she reflected. Her mother had warned her that New York was a terrible city. But how wrong! Luck had something to do with success, of course, but friends—good friends were more important. Rosen, for instance, had turned out to be a dear and who would have suspected it? Rosen, that queer, ugly little man, with his boyish face and his enormous, ardent brown eyes! She recalled a hundred little unobtrusive favors he had done her, and realized, now, that she had grown very fond of him.

When Hermann returned he said:

"Brilliant pianist, that fellow. Russian Jew, isn't he?"

"Yes. And he deserves great credit, for he had no advantages whatever, as a boy."

"A remarkable people. Adversity has made them; there's no stimulus like oppression, you know. Now let's go to the library. I serve tea there to my good friends."

"It is generous of you to interest yourself in my affairs and to offer to help me," Edith told him a few moments later. "I had begun to feel that I'd never have a chance to find out what I can do."

He took her hand, patted it. “Don’t begin by being over-optimistic. I’m not sure I can do a great deal; that depends so much upon yourself. But I can try. Now then, let’s get acquainted—we’re comparative strangers, you know. Who are you? How, why did you come alone to New York with such great ambitions? How did you get into the thing you’re doing? Tell me everything, for I am as curious as that ‘Man-Who’s-In-Love-With-Himself.’ ” The speaker turned his queer, jade eyes upon Edith and watched her intently.

Briefly, she told him what he wished to know. He had heard of her father, it seemed, and nodded comprehendingly when she tried to explain the sort of man he was and why she had left home. When she had finished he said:

“That clears up everything. I no longer wonder why you intrigued me or why you sang those off-color songs with such distinction. So! You want my help.”

“It was your offer. I would never presume to ask it.”

“No. But will you accept it?”

“Why, of course. How could I refuse?”

“Hm—m! I can get you an audition, at any time. That’s easy. But it would be folly to do so until you are thoroughly prepared and sure of yourself. Coaching is expensive. And it takes time. It will take all of yours. What’s more, you are doing yourself no good singing where you are. It isn’t even a smart place. One of the nice supper clubs would be better but—even they are nothing but cabarets.”

“I know at least one prima donna who began in a cabaret——”

“To be sure. She was a poor girl and——”

“I’m a poor girl.”

“You *were* a poor girl—yesterday. You must quit Downing’s at once. Find yourself a cheerful little apartment over here somewhere. Or, better, allow me to find one for you. I will also engage the best instructor in the city. Meanwhile, of course, you ‘haven’t a thing to wear.’ ” The speaker smiled widely. “Go ahead and get yourself a new wardrobe. That’s something I can’t select for you, but you need no assistance. Your taste is splendid. Nothing adds to one’s confidence like a good appearance.”

“I can’t believe you’re in earnest,” Edith stammered. “And of course I shan’t permit you to do anything of the sort.”

"No? Why not?"

"It's lovely. You take my breath. Didn't I say this is an enchanted palace and you are a magician?"

"That's not magic—merely commonsense."

"I'm afraid I'll have to earn my own way," Edith declared, feeling herself color as she spoke.

Hermann was reproachful and a bit impatient. "I hope you're not going to be prudish. Wait! You think I'm offering something big, something important, but—what are a few thousand dollars? You're not the first artist I've helped. My dear, if you knew what I've spent on others, men and women, here and abroad! When a fellow dabbles in art, when he amuses himself with things like the Metropolitan, when he acquires hobbies, the cost is never figured."

"Nevertheless——"

But the speaker ran on, "Let's entirely divorce this matter from sentiment and from anything personal. I'm not proposing to buy anything, and if I thought for a moment that you doubted my complete sincerity of purpose—— But I refuse to think that. It is too demeaning to both of us. No, my dear child, you have been given a talent, but it is yours only in part. If it turns out to be a real talent, then it belongs as much to the world as to you and you hold it only in trust. You owe it to yourself and to the rest of us to make any sacrifice necessary to bring that talent to its highest development."

"Who knows whether it's a real talent? There are millions of good voices. I may fail——"

"Exactly. And you certainly will fail without the help of some one like me."

"Your offer is too generous. I'll accept your aid, your encouragement—anything except actual money."

The man spoke with annoyance: "Money! Money! It is the cheapest thing I have to give you. My time, my interest, my encouragement is worth more than all the money you'll need. When you decline that and request something else you're asking even more than I offered to give you." There was a pause. "Do you seriously propose to rob me of this pleasure?"

"I must. It is splendid of you to put it as you have, and I'm neither ungrateful nor ungracious, but—you don't realize how a girl feels. To you, I suppose, money is only a symbol, a quick way to get things done. But it's

something more, to me. There's the obligation! I scarcely know you! No, Mr. Hermann."

"And yet," he persisted, "if I happened to be an uncle, or a distant cousin; if by some matrimonial mischance I had married into your family, you'd accept. You'd expect me to do all I could. How absurd! You ran away from an abominable father to escape his intolerance, and yet you brought his narrowmindedness with you."

"But you're *not* a relative. Fortunately, Fate spared you from marrying—well, from marrying Aunt Ella—" The speaker laughed unaffectedly at the thought, "so that's that. I have no reverence for money, Mr. Hermann, but I do have a deep respect for it and I insist upon earning my own way. If you can help me do that it's all I'll permit you to do. You're a wise magician; you must understand how I feel."

The man shrugged. "Have your own way, but mine is better and quicker. Frankly, I'm disappointed in you. What *will* you permit me to do?"

"I don't know. I'm trying to get a better position—something that will enable me to live and pay for a teacher, but I haven't succeeded. Perhaps ——"

Hermann pondered. "I can probably arrange that, even though it involves asking a favor—something I hate to do. A man in my position can't afford to ask favors, you know. They're too expensive. That's the advantage of money again: it would avoid any possibility of comment, gossip, misapprehension. You see, I'm jealous of your reputation. Suppose I ask some fellow like Lorelli to hear you sing? He's about the best there is. If he likes your voice he may offer to give you lessons for nothing. He'd do it for me."

"That would be wonderful," Edith cried.

"Then leave it that way. And now let's talk of pleasanter things."

Hermann's friends turned out to be four in number; an English major by the name of Carthwaite, his wife and niece and a Mrs. Alcott. The last named was a handsome, languid woman of youthful figure but indeterminate age. She was still faced and indolent of speech; she smoked innumerable silk-tipped cigarettes. She called Hermann by his first name and appeared as much at home in his house as if it had been her own; in fact, when tea was served she assumed the air of hostess with a readiness that proclaimed it her habit.

In Edith this Mrs. Alcott displayed an interest keener than appeared upon the surface, but she had little opportunity of gratifying it, for Major

Carthwaite had an eye for beauty and from the moment of his introduction he devoted himself assiduously to the girl. It was Carthwaite's first visit to the house and he was entranced with the treasures in Hermann's literary museum, so after a certain amount of small talk he asked his host's permission to make a journey of exploration. With him he took all of the women except Mrs. Alcott, who declared that Jesse had bored her for years with his hobby and she knew his books and his paintings backward.

"Now then," she began when the others were out of hearing, "give an accounting of yourself, Jesse. Who may be this charming little playmate of yours?"

The man shrugged. "Nobody."

Mrs. Alcott smiled. "That is evident. Meeting her here alone with you would argue as much." When Hermann said nothing she persevered, "If you won't tell me who she is—if anybody—then pray tell me what she is—if anything."

"A new discovery. She sings."

"Of course. They *have* to sing, for their suppers, when they know you. I can't remember hearing her——"

"You wouldn't. She sings in a cabaret."

"Oh—! . . . I see! And you've promised to put her in a show, or in opera perhaps." The speaker laughed softly.

"I have." Hermann watched Edith as she hung upon some remark of Carthwaite's; her uplifted face was flushed, her lips were parted eagerly. "And what's more, I think I will."

Mrs. Alcott's expression altered. "Then she really has a voice?"

"I believe so. But she's rather a disappointment so far. I offered to establish her in an apartment and engage a teacher at my expense, but she wouldn't have it. She's going to sing for Lorelli in the hope that he'll like her voice enough to take her as a protégée. Of course he will."

"Naturally; if you ask him." The speaker's eyes followed Hermann's and studied the stranger with even deeper interest than heretofore. At length she said: "Time is telling on you, my dear. They grow constantly younger and more unsophisticated. It's your only sign of—decay."

Hermann stirred; annoyance flickered across his face. "Don't try to be smart, Lois. So many beautiful women make that mistake. Of course I'm

growing old. So are you. That's why I knew you'd dislike her."

"I haven't made up my mind yet, whether——"

"Oh yes, you have! Now then, I can afford to gratify my likes, no matter how extravagant, whereas you can't afford to humor your dislikes, however reasonable. And so——. She's a country girl and full of provincial ideas; it will do her good to go about with you, therefore I shall expect you to take her around and even to make a third, now and then."

"Chaperon you and her?"

"Exactly. And entertain her."

Mrs. Alcott's smile stiffened; she lowered her lids; her voice hardened. "Really, you expect too much. You forget yourself."

Hermann turned his head and stared at the speaker, a jade-green stare that was menacing. It was a moment before he spoke: "I never forget myself. I forget others; enemies, friends, women—especially women—but never myself. Who knows that better than you? . . . I shall expect you to go out of your way to be nicer to this girl than you have ever been to anybody."

It was Mrs. Alcott's turn to pause; when she spoke it was in a strangling voice. "Very well! The sooner it will be over. But—why ask me to shed respectability upon an affair so commonplace? Inside of a week she'll be boasting about it to the contortionist, the sword-swallower, and the other freaks in that cabaret. What ails you? Is this—some senile whim?"

"Since when have you learned to ask questions? . . . Nicer than you've ever been to anybody, understand? And if you convey to her a suspicion of the truth about yourself, us—I'll discover it." There was a baleful light in those eyes which were ordinarily so expressionless. "Now, if you'll take Carthwaite and his women on your hands I'd like to talk to her. I get a great kick out of it."

Hermann rose; he and Mrs. Alcott joined the others.

Chapter Ten

Jesse Hermann made good his word. He arranged with Paul Lorelli to try Edith's voice, and to her great delight the latter pronounced it worthy of his attention. Accordingly, she at once began work under him. Meanwhile, Hermann's friendly interest continued, nay, more than that, it grew and there came a time, before long, when she began to feel a vague embarrassment at his attentions. She was too busy to see much of him, but sheaves of long-stemmed roses, enormous baskets of hothouse fruits and imported eatables like Egyptian quail, English heath grouse, and the like, were always coming to her and they were sufficiently out of place in a ten-dollar-a-week room to cause comment. Then, too, the use of any one of his cars was hers at any hour. How to avoid these attentions without giving offense she did not know; the man was so frank and so casual about what he did and he was so charming whenever she saw him. The more she protested, the more he laughed and the more he did for her. Always he made plain his pleasure in her company and his regret at seeing so little of her, but, after her first positive refusal to accept actual financial help from his hands, he never again referred to the subject.

He had a pleasant way of deferring to other people's wishes which was intensely flattering to a girl in Edith's modest position. She could never forget his importance, his power; to realize that such a man was concerned in her progress and that she exercised a real influence over him was indeed thrilling.

Occasionally they dined together, always in some public place and always in company with Mrs. Alcott or some of his other friends. These people, too, made it plain by the way they treated her that Jesse Hermann's friendship had invested her with an importance quite unique. It was an anomalous situation and it might have been extremely embarrassing had not Edith met it with complete frankness, nor is it likely that she could have carried it off except for her good breeding and simplicity.

Sometimes she went to Hermann's home and read to him. At such times they were alone, of course, but his peculiar sensitiveness to voices was not in the least put on and the satisfaction he derived from listening to hers was extraordinary. It was more than mere satisfaction, it was a soothing and a delight and it gave him an exotic pleasure akin to his enjoyment of harmonious music—it rested and refreshed him magically. His gratitude was

extravagant; he made her feel that she had done a gracious and a generous thing and that he was her lasting debtor.

On such occasions they would have tea together, and sometimes, when he was not too tired, he would talk. Then, indeed, the girl had a treat, for Hermann possessed the magic of words. To begin with, he was well read; he had an astonishing memory and a surprising familiarity with all that was best in his library. He could talk with authority and with grace upon a thousand intellectual subjects, or he could be the pithy, cynical man of affairs. He had traveled; the worlds of society, of finance, of opera, even the regions back stage, were familiar to him, and such a man could not fail to be interesting.

He told Edith stories which she knew very well had never been told before; he reposed confidences in her of which she could have taken advantage. While it was a real adventure to become acquainted with a man like this, she realized that that was precisely what he was doing with her. He was appraising her, weighing her, testing her, and the process fascinated him. It was his practice at table never to eat until his hunger was gone, nor to drink after the bouquet had lost its first keen delight; from their ripening acquaintance he appeared to derive much the same satisfaction.

Most girls would have been tempted to profit from a situation like this, but Edith did not; her sole reward came from a comfortable feeling of security in the present and a rosy optimism as to the future.

That satisfaction was somewhat lessened one day when, as the result of a summer cold, her voice failed her and Lorelli positively forbade her to use it for two weeks. She had been living up to her salary so closely that to exist even a fortnight without any income was a serious matter, but to Hermann her misfortune came as a piece of personal good luck.

“You need a rest and a complete change,” he declared, “and so do I. I talked with Lorelli and he recommends a couple of weeks of salt air, so I’ve ordered my yacht prepared for a cruise.”

Edith began an astonished protest, but he said, firmly: “No arguments, my dear. Remember those dreams about the wicked magician? Well, you’ve been changed into a croaking frog. I didn’t do it, but I can bring back your voice—*our* voice. Only the other night Lois Alcott was complaining that I had promised her a cruise. She shall have it.” The Hermann smile mysteriously illuminated his grim countenance. “I know you’re a prim young person, so I shan’t offer the yacht to you nor ask you to be my guest; I shall turn it over to Lois and she’ll get up a little party of four or five—just

enough so that it won't be monotonous. She'll invite you and I shall hint for an invitation myself."

"Really, Mr. Hermann, I must decline," Edith murmured.

"To be sure. You'd prefer to stay here and breathe smoke and motor gas, and try your voice every day just to see how it's getting along. But you shan't do it. I own a block of stock in that talent of yours and I propose to see that the minority interests are protected even if it means a receivership. You can't carry on any secret vocalizing aboard ship, and at the first scale you'll be put in irons. Seriously, you owe it to yourself. If you would feel easier, I won't go."

Naturally, Edith could admit no such feeling; again she protested, tried to refuse, offered excuses. Hermann was deaf to all. She said, finally:

"You—are an extraordinary man. Don't you see how hard I'm trying to keep down my debt to you?"

"Piffle! There isn't any. Don't you understand? I'm—let me use a hackneyed phrase—I'm old enough to be your father. Yes, and I'm lonely, jaded, bored to death. It's the penalty of unlimited gratification. You amuse and interest me. If you wonder at that interest, try to understand it's the voice I love, not the singer."

The matter was not quite so easily settled as this, but Hermann knew pretty well how to have his way when he tried, and already Edith was so deeply in his debt that she could not disregard the obligation; moreover, she had been made to believe that her talent was indeed a thing apart from herself, a precious thing put in her trust. As usual, the man had his way.

Later, when he phoned to Mrs. Alcott, his invitation took the form of a curt, business-like command. Evidently, she knew nothing whatever about the proposed cruise, for he laid out his plan in detail. "Those Carthwaite people are all the guests we'll need," he told her. "They're not well acquainted over here; he's stupid and the women will behave themselves. They'll do finely."

"It promises to be a dull party, doesn't it?" Mrs. Alcott said.

"For you, no doubt. But you'll enjoy escaping the heat."

"Indeed? . . . Where are we going?"

"I—— Frankly, I didn't think to ask her."

There was a moment of silence. When Mrs. Alcott's voice came over the wire it was shaking: "I refuse to humiliate myself much longer, Jesse. For Heaven's sake, do me a favor and—get this affair over with!"

"But when it *is* over with, what then? Begin another 'affair,' as you call it? Affairs like this aren't made to order. No, my dear, the end comes all too soon; after life there is only death. Existence is an unceasing struggle to defer, to postpone. Alas! the tragedy of accomplishment, the tasteless fruits of satiety! Joy is a fragile, flitting thing, Lois. We pursue it, grasp it, and, lo! it evaporates in the heat of our ecstasy. I'm becoming philosophical—and patient."

"Senile, you mean," snapped the woman.

"Um—m! Possibly. So much the more reason to be deliberate. Under the circumstances, Lois, I think you'd better jump into your car and call on her this afternoon. Use all your persuasiveness, your enthusiasm, your—— But why tell you what to do?" The listener uttered an unintelligible exclamation and Hermann chuckled wickedly; those derisive lines about his mouth deepened. "You're a dear girl. I put implicit confidence in your tact and, of course, I shall hold you responsible if she declines."

Pearl Gates was at all times an outspoken young person, and when Edith told her about the invitation which had come to her she voiced her disapproval with characteristic bluntness:

"Go ahead, if you feel like it. I'll have some dry clothes ready for you."

"Dry clothes?"

"Why, sure! You'll have to swim back. Yachts are built for girls who can't swim. Millionaires endow colleges and hospitals and the Girl Scouts, but you never knew one to support a ladies' swimming club, did you? It would ruin the yachting business."

"How perfectly absurd! As a matter of fact, I'm to be Mrs. Alcott's guest—one of several."

"But it's Hermann's boat and if it was going to be a Bible-study trip they wouldn't take you. When rich people are behaving pretty, they don't ask show girls along. And this Mrs. Whoozis? What is she?"

Edith confessed with a shrug: "I can't give you her pedigree. She goes everywhere, knows everybody——"

"A lotta coppers do that."

"She has been very kind to me and she's an old friend of Mr. Hermann's."

"I know this much; I wouldn't take a cruise on the *Mayflower*—not with just one Pilgrim Father."

"But I tell you again, there will be others. There's a Major Carthwaite, for one, and his wife and niece. Perhaps several more."

"All the same *I* wouldn't do it. I've got a good yelling voice, but what's the use to holler when you're out of sight of land?" In spite of herself, Edith laughed, but Pearl went on earnestly: "Take this fresh Ike, Van Pelt. Why does *he* keep a yacht? So's to get a lungful of ozone and a coat of tan? Not at all! So's to dodge the Mann Act. That's why."

"I didn't know he had a yacht or that you had met him."

"Well, I have. His best pal is Amy Dupont's new ace—fellow name' Clark. He and Van Pelt love go-to-hell parties and Amy dragged me in on one. One only! She's doing well out of Clark, by the way. I told her to buy bonds with her money, but she's salting it away in good, safe, tax-exempt facial massages and scalp treatments and glory-to-god underclothes. Her last investment"—the speaker snickered—"was a Sealyham terrier that stood her just this side of five hundred berries and eats liver. Amy's getting to be an awful miser; she won't buy anything over five hundred dollars, unless there's a sale."

"I didn't like Clark, and Van Pelt is a cad."

"That's just what I'm getting at, dearie! They're all alike. You should hear 'em tell about the parties they pull on *his* steamboat. That's where I got wise. Why, they stole a bunch of hothouse peaches from New London and danced with 'em all the way to New York—in *pajamas*! Clark induced a lot of laughter on the trip by dropping the girls' dresses overboard; he had screaming hysterics when he told about it. Say! I'd like to see some pranker drop *my* dress overboard! Take it from me, Captain Kidd had nothing on those two, except a plank. This Hermann probably loves practical jokes just like they do."

"Nonsense! In the first place, he's—well he's old enough to be my father and——"

Pearl interrupted with a harsh explosion of merriment. "Ask his doctor about that. Pardon my glove, but when they're too old to be lovers, they're too old to be fathers. If he's a thousand he isn't as old as that gag—or as false. If ever he pulls it on you, grab your hatpin and ring for a cop."

Edith flushed dully. It was hard sometimes not to resent Pearl. Rather stiffly, she said: “I’d hate to be as skeptical as you are. It must be dreadful to lose faith in all mankind. I’d rather keep my faith and be fooled; but you—you don’t seem to believe there’s a decent man in all New York.”

“Oh no! There’s quite a few. Ellis Island is full of decent men—all under fourteen.”

“But nowhere else?”

“Humph! I never met any.” Pearl pondered for a moment. “I suppose I’m hard boiled; I’ve been in hot water long enough. But to get back to this Nature’s nobleman of yours, d’you think he’d fall for your voice if you had a wart on your nose? D’you think he wants to *adopt* you, like those pirates in *Peter Pan*? Breathe deep, kid; it’ll clear your head. Rich old men never encourage genius in homely girls, and this promise of an ‘audition’ at the Metropolitan——”

“Well? What about that?”

“D’you know who are the highest class millionaires’ pets in New York?”

“No. How should I know?”

“The girls who have had ‘auditions’ and flopped. The corn-fed contraltos, the peachy Melbas who are just good enough not to get over. That opera thing is a trust and the ones on the inside don’t want any outsiders. Oh, Rosen put me wise! The lads who profit are the sugar papas who ‘arrange the audition’; the dodoes who pay for the singing lessons. ‘Don’t cry, dearie. Daddy believes in her. Her has a gooder voice than Tetrazzini and us will have better luck next time. If her will dry her eyes Daddalums will give her a nice string of pearls to play with.’ ”

Edith cried out in a choking voice, but the strident Pearl continued: “I’m telling you something, Pollyanna! What makes you think Hermann is different from the others? You say he’s never tried to lay a hand on you; well, that’s because he knows it’s cold and bony. He’s been just too sweet and fatherly. Sure! He couldn’t be a burning juvenile if he tried. But the young ones don’t act like blood relatives. Van Pelt doesn’t frame phony ‘auditions’ to land his dames. By the way, he’s Hermann’s stepson, you know.”

“What?”

“Sure! Van’s mother has had so many trips to the altar that he calls her a commuter. She caught him—Hermann—red-handed at something—I never

heard what it was—so she hopped to Paris and got her freedom under the French law of self-defense—claimed he couldn't support so many women in the style they had become accustomed to. Before the decree had time to cool she married a Frog dancing teacher, or maybe he was a bullfighter; anyhow, she scarcely knew his first name. It wasn't long before she caught him punching another flat bell and gave him the air. That was her third trip up the aisle, but she's r'aring to go again. Now then, I've told you all the gossip I know about this gray-bearded Bedouin of yours and his pals, and if you take this trip on his croup-kettle I've got just one piece of advice."

"I hope it's better than the rest. What is it?"

"When you step out of your step-ins, step high. If you're going to fall don't blame it on your French heels."

Natalie Dubose was a woman of poise, both mental and physical; experience had made her philosophical, and as a consequence she was not easily upset. It took a good deal to worry her. Nevertheless, she was worried over Norman. His health appeared to be as good as ever, but he showed signs of being seriously irked by something. He was irritable and querulous —something so unusual that it awakened the mother's deep concern. The change had made itself manifest shortly after his return from his Canadian fishing trip. She had noticed it first one time when he ran out to spend a week end with her. He had arrived on Friday, full of his usual resistless enthusiasm. He had played polo that afternoon and had topped off with a salt-water swim. They had dined with friends and, later in the evening, they had danced at the club, returning late. Norman was glad to be home; it had been just the sort of a day he liked; he had arranged to play tennis the next morning and golf during the afternoon. Accordingly, his mother had asked some friends to drop in for tea.

He had arisen early, had kept his tennis engagement, and had left early to play his golf match, but he did not return for tea. When Mrs. Dubose phoned the club she learned that he had cut his game and had gone to town about three o'clock. He was back in time for dinner, to be sure, but with nothing more than a vague excuse that business had called him to the city.

One Wednesday, soon thereafter, Mrs. Dubose happened to be in town and she and Norman lunched together. He was delighted to have her and ordinarily he would have urged her to play around with him during the afternoon, perhaps to attend a matinée. What was her surprise to sense an unmistakable annoyance on his part when she did not leave promptly. More than once, while they sat late over their luncheon, she caught him consulting

his watch, and finally he begged her to excuse him, then dashed away. This in spite of the fact that he had told her that the day was his own!

In view of the complete frankness that had always existed between them, the mother was perplexed—she was too philosophical to feel offense. Thereafter she watched him; tactfully she set about learning what it was that had come over him. One thing she soon discovered—that confidence of theirs was not so complete as she had supposed: Norman had at least one secret chamber of his mind that was locked against her. She learned, too, that she need never depend upon him for Wednesday or Saturday afternoons; those hours were his own. If he happened to be in the country at such times he always went to town.

To a woman of Natalie's experience this very much resembled the signs of a liaison and she began to look about her at the people Norman knew. Especially at the young married women. It must be an affair with a married woman, she reasoned, for there was nothing clandestine about the goings-on of the unmarried girls Norman went with.

When this scrutiny yielded nothing, Mrs. Dubose decided the woman was not of their set and then indeed she felt alarm; so one day she decided to consult Hewlett, the butler of their apartment in town. Hewlett adored Norman; they were almost confidants, for the old man was really less a butler than a valet to his employer's son. If anybody could be expected to know what was going on, Hewlett was the man.

One Wednesday afternoon, therefore, Natalie drove to town, but when she arrived she was astonished to learn that Norman was in the apartment ahead of her. Hewlett explained that he always came home on Wednesday afternoons.

"So? He's expecting a caller. I won't intrude," the mother declared.

But Hewlett shook his head. "No, ma'am! No, indeed. It's the one time he never sees anybody. He won't even answer the phone. Every Wednesday and every Saturday he studies his radio."

"Is—is *this* where he's—what he's been doing?" Mrs. Dubose sat down suddenly. "Hewlett, how long has this been going on?"

"Why, a long time. Ever since he got back from his trip. He's a smart man, ma'am; it wouldn't surprise me if he invented something bran' new in wireless."

"I see! He's—experimenting?"

"Yes'm! And on the verge of a great discovery, so he says."

Mrs. Dubose smiled queerly. "I supposed, of course, he'd made that discovery long ago. I think I'll interrupt him."

Poor Norman! No wonder he was ashamed of himself. Had the boy lost his mind, to allow a mere voice to get on his nerves? What queer, unsuspected streak of sentimentality was this?

Norman was in consternation at sight of his mother; he flushed, stammered, murmured something about coming right out.

"Nothing of the sort. You'll let me right in," Natalie said. "I want to hear that girl sing." She pushed past him, removed her hat and gloves, then crossed Van Pelt's sitting-room and stared curiously at a mahogany cabinet similar to those she had seen in shop windows.

"What brings you to town, Nat?"

"You!" The speaker smiled, fetched a deep breath of relief. "Norman, I'm a wicked, evil-minded, suspicious old woman. I'm ashamed of myself and I apologize. I've been trying to find out what you do with yourself every Wednesday and Saturday afternoon. If I weren't so darned curious I'd go right back home now, but—let's 'fess up and be good pals."

Van Pelt grinned, looked foolish. "Gee, Nat, you're a peach! I feel about ten years old."

"Then you're still interested in that voice? It's really serious?"

" 'Serious'? It's fatal. I don't know what ails me, but I'm a sick man. And yet I don't dare see a doctor for fear he'll cure me. Ever hear of a perfectly normal, sane young man falling in love with a—a mere *voice*? I never did. I actually believe I'm off my nut."

"Haven't you met your Lark yet? I supposed you'd have her all tamed—maybe in a pie—by this time."

"No. And it looks as if I'd never meet her. She ignores me. That's probably what accounts for it. I tell myself to forget it, the whole thing; laugh it off: and I do, for a day or so. But it's worse than the drug habit; it grows. Sounds foolish when you talk about it, but it's—it's real. And it's awful!" Norman looked at his watch nervously. "She'll be on now in a minute or two. They're usually late."

He crossed to the instrument and began to tune in. A pair of Hawaiian guitarists were on the air; he explained over his shoulder, "She follows this

number. You'll have to stand by."

Mrs. Dubose listened for a few moments, then above the throbbing of the steel strings she exclaimed:

"That's wonderful, boy! It's as if they were right in this room. I thought it would be more like a telephone or a scratchy record. I'm going to get a set."

"It's unusually good today, but sometimes it's terrible. Of course you may not see anything in her voice—I'm not sure it's so wonderful as voices go—but it gets me. I wonder if our emotional natures are tuned so that they respond to certain peculiar vibrations—certain vocal qualities. Fiddles are like that and sometimes—— Wait. Here she comes!"

But disappointment was in store for the listeners. Following the conclusion of the duet there came a stentorian man's voice announcing that the next feature on the program would be a fifteen-minute talk by Mrs. Naomi Glass, president of the Domestic Science League, entitled "Seven Ways to Prepare Sweetbreads."

Van Pelt uttered a bleat of dismay, his mother laughed. He snatched at a newspaper, ran his eye down the "What's-on-the-Air-Today" column, then cried, "Who let *her* in? She's not on the bill."

Out of the amplifier came a female voice which began, "My dear friends, in the preparation of sweetbreads I have made a number of important, nay revolutionary, discoveries which I feel it my duty to pass on."

Mrs. Dubose was robbed of the fruits of her sister's epoch-making discoveries, for Norman gave the dials a vicious twist, then rushed into his bedroom and called a number on the telephone. His mother shook silently. From sentiment to sweetbreads. Poor boy!

Norman returned in a moment to say: "She's sick! She isn't going to sing for a couple of weeks."

"I had no idea you were so hard hit, especially as you haven't seen her and don't know whether she's even attractive."

"I do know. I've discovered that she's young and lovely. I—I hired a detective."

"Norman!"

"Then I got ashamed of myself and called him off. There are some things a fellow can't do, and spying on a nice girl is one."

“Then she *is* nice?”

“Yes. I learned that much.”

“Well, what are you going to do about it? Spend the rest of your life in front of that mahogany thing?”

“I’m going to forget her and forget hard. I’m going away for a while.”

“Good! This isn’t a bit like you. It’s—unhealthy. You’re beginning to look a bit ‘liverish.’ ”

“Maybe it is my liver; it can’t be my heart. Liver—and sweetbreads! I’m through, Nat. She’s a nasty little snob, anyhow, or she’d have answered my letters. I’ve been off my game all season. I think I’ll play some of the seaside courses. A couple of weeks of golf will put me back on my feet.”

Chapter Eleven

A bad heart, a torpid liver, gallstones, bankruptcy—almost any ill, any misfortune—can be endured with some degree of resignation, but when a man's iron clubs go back on him it is time to drop all else and devote himself to a cure.

Norman Van Pelt spent a restless week on first one then another of the Sound courses; he took treatment from several pros. Gradually he began to respond and to hit the ball as the Scotch intended golf balls to be hit, and with his improvement in form came an improvement in spirits—life began to assume more cheerful colors. By the time he had arrived at Comfort Harbor he was less concerned with singers and voices than with a lurking, treacherous slice.

Comfort Harbor was quite lively, for a dozen or more yachts were anchored there, and so Van Pelt decided to stay until he had overcome this last fault in his game.

He was out on the practise field early the next morning, but a girl was ahead of him. She was practising short shots and executing them very well. Her back was to Van Pelt but he liked her swing and approved of her figure. Soon he forgot all about her and began to talk imploringly to his midiron. A warm glow of satisfaction suffused him when he finally waved his boy in. He had the secret now. No reason for ever missing a shot with that club. Sweet middie! He loved it.

The girl, he noted, had shifted to her driver and was no longer doing so well. Her caddy was running. Van Pelt could see what the trouble was, readily enough—right elbow too close to her side. Too bad! She had a lovely figure and nice fair hair. A charming neck, too, but her club face was closed. No doubt she was pretty. There it went again, another pull. Any girl with nice fair hair and a neck like that shouldn't hook her tee shots. He could correct her trouble, but so many girls resented advice. Why didn't she turn around so— Ha! A temper!

Van Pelt grinned, for the girl had topped her ball and then sent the club flying after. He ran out and retrieved the club. She had turned to her bag, as if to select another, but really to hide her anger. He spoke pleasantly:

"You can't always get as much distance out of a club as you can get out of a ball, but you can keep 'em straighter and— *Hello!*" Van Pelt paused in

surprise. The girl had raised a flushed face; a pair of resentful eyes met his. "Why, it's the terrible-tempered Miss Gilbert, as I live! What are *you* doing here?"

"If I knew what it is I'm doing I wouldn't be here," Edith exclaimed, thickly. "Dropping my shoulder, or getting my hands in too late, I suppose—I don't know! That's the worst of this unspeakable game—one never knows. Between spells of hating myself I've been hating you."

"Hating me?" She was bewitchingly pretty in this temper, Van Pelt noted. "What for?"

"For the way you hit your shots."

"They did go off well, didn't they? Why didn't you say hello?"

"I thought, under the circumstances, that you might not remember me."

"Sounds like a dirty dig," he said, with a suspicious glance.

"It was meant for one."

"Oh, come now! You thought I was drunk that night but I wasn't."

"Which makes it all the worse. Thanks for the club."

"Cross, aren't you?"

"Furious. And when I get mad at clubs or at people, I stay mad."

"I can cure that hook of yours."

"What hook?"

"Don't you *want* to be cured?"

"Not by you."

"I *was* drunk that night. I apologize. Now won't you let me tell you what's wrong?"

"No." Edith teed up a ball and waggled her club. "You'll excuse me, won't you, but—I don't like a gallery. Perhaps I'll see you again."

Van Pelt did not budge. "You'll hook, sure," he said, warningly, "if you hold your right elbow like that."

"Like what?"

"It's too close in, too tight. Let it slip around your ribs. You're all tied up."

“I was taught to keep——”

“Try it my way. Take a practise swing. . . . That’s better. Take another. . . . Now hit the ball like that.”

Edith did as she had been told; the ball sailed out straight and true. Van Pelt crowed.

“You’re smart, aren’t you?” the pupil said, in dark, resentment.

“Not very. It took me two years to learn that little trick.”

“I hate people who know everything. Anyhow, that shot was an accident.”

“All right. Try another.”

Edith did try another; she tried several. She confessed, finally: “It’s magic! It’s a cure, Mr. Van Pelt!”

“Don’t call me Mister; call me Doc. Anything else the matter with your game?”

“Oh, plenty! But nothing that practice won’t help.”

Van Pelt eyed the speaker gravely; then he shook his head. “I’ve spent a fortune studying this golf disease; I’m a qualified practitioner. You don’t look well, Miss Gilbert. You look like a person who needs to play about eighteen holes—with me.”

“I don’t know—” There was a pucker between Edith’s brows. “I’d like to play, but—I’ve been dying for a chance to be nasty to you.”

“What better chance could you want? Come on.”

“I—can’t be as horrid as I’d like, on a morning like this, and especially after that tip you gave me.”

“You never can tell until you try. I’ll expect you to be as unpleasant as possible. I dare say I ought to give you about twelve bisques.”

“My, but you’re conceited!”

“So everybody assures me. But I figure you must be out of practice.” Together the two left the field and went toward the first tee. “Let’s see, I asked how you happened to be here, didn’t I?”

“You did, with your eyes protruding. But don’t be alarmed; nobody knows me.”

"Hm—m! Get it out of your system as soon as possible. It'll do you good."

"I came up with some friends. The doctor told me to stay out in the air every minute. They don't play golf or swim or anything, so I'm having a glorious time all by myself."

"Been sick?"

"A little throat trouble. I suppose you have to bet on your game to get any kick out of it. I'm a poor working-girl, but how much does it take to interest a *blasé* young millionaire?"

"We might play for ten cents a hole."

"Make it a dollar, with five more on the match. Remember, it's a grudge match."

Van Pelt shrugged. "All right. I hope it doesn't break up in a row."

Norman decided, during the course of that round, that his liver must be all right again, for he enjoyed himself immensely. And this, in spite of the fact that his treacherous irons betrayed him occasionally. For one thing he liked the way this girl played—no vacuous chatter, no simpering despair over her bad shots. When she made one she was furious, and when she hit the ball truly she beamed; and at all times she showed that she intended to beat him if she possibly could.

As they went along, his notion of her changed very considerably and the memory of his behavior on the occasion of their first meeting arose to make him uncomfortable. Who was she? Where had she learned to play golf? How could a mere cabaret singer afford a vacation at Comfort Harbor? By the time they had played nine holes he admitted ruefully that she could probably afford a winter in Palm Beach if enough people were so foolish as to give her twelve bisques.

He inquired guardedly about her friends, but learned little except that they were not staying at the hotel. From this he inferred that they were cottagers, there being a number of modest summer residences for rent in Comfort Harbor.

They were held up at the short sixteenth. It is a hill hole and the view from the tee is lovely, for the harbor lies right below and in the foreground is the Casino with its bathing beach and the gun club. At the latter place a squad was trap shooting, a number of people were bathing.

Van Pelt, with the eye of a yachtsman, studied the pleasure craft at anchor, and he said:

"Hello! Yonder's a boat that looks like Jesse Hermann's *Swan*."

"It is," Edith told him. "She has been here for several days."

"Have you seen Jesse—Mr. Hermann?"

"Yes."

"By the way, did you know that he's an ex-stepfather of mine?"

"Yes."

There was a pause. "Some people think it's queer that I go to his house, but—he and mother parted politely enough. No longer any hard feeling on either side and I'm rather fond of him."

Edith made no comment. She was staring down at the trap shooters and watching the tiny explosions of black as the birds broke. She said something about the dissimilarity between golf and other sports, as, for instance, shooting. Shooting was something one never forgot. It was like swimming.

"Say, how many things do you know?" Van Pelt inquired.

Edith turned upon him a bit irritably. "Why do I continue to astonish you? You must know lots of girls who golf and shoot and swim and drive a car and ride a horse and play tennis. Did you think I was born in a Broadway café? What a snob you are."

"I'm not a snob," he hotly denied.

"You know you are. I could prove it in five minutes if I cared to. But you needn't be snobbish with me; my family is just as nice as yours and my father is terribly rich."

"Honestly?"

"You can look him up. He's well known. He's awfully strict, too, and he'd perish if he knew I was performing in a restaurant. For that matter, he'd object to you—he abhors young men with bad habits. I have had the same advantages you've had and there's a lovely home waiting for me."

"Then for Heaven's sake why don't you go back to it?" Van Pelt earnestly inquired.

"Do you think I should?" Edith turned wide, clear eyes upon the speaker; they were shadowed now with trouble, with indecision. "I've

followed my own judgment, but—I do so need advice."

"My dear Miss Gilbert, of course you should——"

"There! Didn't I say I'd prove you're a snob?" The girl laughed scornfully.

"What have you proved? How?"

"Nothing. *You* proved it—by your voice, your expression, your sudden respect for that magic word 'money.' The mere fact that I can hit a golf ball made a change in you. Oh, I saw it! People are all alike! It's sickening. Come along: they've left the green. I'll take a bisque here, so it's my honor."

Edith made a good shot; Norman's was bad. On their way down the hill he said:

"I wonder if I am a snob."

"Certainly. But it's not your fault and you're a nicer snob than I expected."

He made a fine recovery and halved the hole. "Am I a nice enough snob for you to lunch with?" he asked.

Edith told him that he was not; that, as a matter of fact, she was lunching with her friends and that later they were motoring somewhere. Nor could he arrange to see her that evening. Her mornings, it seemed, were her own, but she was not free to dispose of the rest of her time. He had to content himself, therefore, with an indefinite and rather indifferent appointment for golf on the following forenoon.

That turned out to be the first of several meetings, each more interesting to Van Pelt than the one before. For one thing, he admired capable, self-reliant girls with no "foolishness" about them, and in Edith Gilbert he found just such a one; for another, he discovered that she had a spirit of sportsmanship as true as his own and that phenomenon in itself removed her from the category of girls. He was, of course, a misogynist, no young man of his means and his position could be anything else; having been always on the defensive it was quite a tribute to his character—or perhaps to the character of his mother—that he felt for the pursuing sex a sort of good-natured distrust rather than actual contempt. Here, however, was a girl wholly indifferent to his position and resentful of his millions and one who liked him only when he was his natural self.

At first he doubted the complete sincerity of this pose, but not for long; in place of suspicion there sprang up an extraordinary sense of security and

contentment. Deer probably feel something like this when the hunting season closes. Norman told himself it would be great if all the other Dianas would discard their quivers and carry golf bags. How the timid, wide-eyed stags would frolic. Then, too, it was flattering to be able to overcome an initial prejudice as deep as hers. That was a triumph of pure personality.

One morning they shot clay birds, and his pride in her skill became overbearing. So, too, when they went swimming. There was a smart crowd on the beach, but no girl was half so stunning in her bathing suit nor more at home in the water than Edith.

Van Pelt was used to being stared at, but his companion did not enjoy it. That was the worst of being seen with a young man of his prominence, she said—no doubt these people mistook her for some society girl. She suggested that they get out of the crowd, and accordingly they found a secluded spot and spent an hour sunning themselves.

Two young men, browned to a saddle color, were amusing themselves with a swift yacht tender and an aquaplane. Van Pelt knew them and called them in. After some urging he induced Edith to try the sport.

It turned out to be much easier than it looked and soon they were balanced side by side on the wide board and skimming over the placid surface of the harbor in the wake of the speeding launch. There is a thrill to aquaplaning; it combines some of the exhilaration of tobogganing or ski-riding with the fun of an occasional ducking, and Edith was entranced with it. But when Van Pelt suggested that they ride out among the yachts she shook her head.

"Come on," he urged. "I want to see if Jesse Hermann's aboard." To the fellows in the launch, he shouted: "Take us out yonder past the *Swan*. I want to show off!"

Abruptly Edith released her clutch of him and upset the board; together they were catapulted into the water. The tender slowed down, swung back, but Edith waved her thanks to the owners and swam toward the shore.

"I hate showing off," she told Van Pelt. "And, anyhow, I'm getting cold."

For the first time they lunched together, on the Casino balcony which overlooked the beach. That delightful lassitude which follows a long swim in warm salt water had come over them and with it a certain grateful feeling of intimacy. In a distant corner a small but tuneful orchestra was playing

soft, confidential dance music and they joined the other couples on the floor. But when Van Pelt rose for a second dance Edith shook her head.

"Don't let's risk spoiling things," said she. Then in answer to his question she told him: "These people are beginning to wonder who I am. Don't make it necessary to explain. I'd hate to be explained. I know what it's like, for I had to explain you, last night."

"Me?"

She nodded. "I got to talking about you and mentioned that we were swimming this morning. Such a look as I got!"

"Dirty?"

"Um—m, no! Incredulous! Pained! I was led to understand that you could mean no good by me or by any young girl. That's the expression, I believe. It seems that you can't possibly 'mean any good' to a young working-girl."

Van Pelt colored. "Say! Who are these knocking friends of yours? Anybody I know?"

"What's the difference? Don't hold them responsible for your evil reputation."

"I'd like to meet 'em, take 'em to dinner, show 'em how wrong they are."

"That won't be possible. We're leaving tomorrow, if it's a nice day."

Van Pelt showed his disappointment; he protested; he almost sulked. "I never had such a bully week and I hate girls, as a rule. They're such grafters. But we've become real friends, pals."

"Yes. And I wanted awfully to hate you."

"I'd love to go on being friends with you," he said, earnestly. "Just friends—you know."

The girl laughed merrily. "I know. You're terribly conceited, but——"

"I'm not! I'm not a snob, either."

"——it's not your fault. It's your name, your number on Park Avenue, your disgusting bank account. You've been run after until you're spoiled. You ought to be taken down a peg. You should fall in love with some girl and have her scorn you."

“I have. I did. I am,” Van Pelt declared, with his wide, infectious grin. “Fact! I’m crazy about a girl who has taken me down—several pegs. That’s why I’m up here playing golf—to get her out of my system, off my mind. And you’ve helped a lot.”

“Who is she?”

“I don’t know. But I’ll describe her, if you like. She’s nice-looking, in fact quite stunning, and rather blond—anyhow not dark. I detest brunettes. She’s young and talented and her mother is an invalid, bedridden with asthma or hip disease or something. The kid has to wait on her hand and—er—hip, and her father is a drunkard. He may be dead, for all I know; anyhow, they’re poor and every cent goes to pay doctors’ bills and buy hot-water bags and such things. The point is she’s having a hard time; never gets to play golf or see a good four-dollar show or go to a party. It’s quite possible her father isn’t dead at all but is a singing teacher.”

Edith stared at the speaker in perplexity. “Is it possible that I kept you out too long in the hot sun?” she asked.

“That’s how I picture her. But it’s this way: I’ve never seen her; I’ve only heard her sing. I’m in love with her voice.”

Into the listener’s face there came a curious alertness. “What are you trying to tell me?” she demanded.

“I heard her sing, over the radio, and—flop! She makes me choke up, hurt, want to cry. Maybe she isn’t poor at all. She’s a marvel and I’d give ____”

“What is her name?”

“Larkin. They call her ‘The Lark.’ Ever listen in on WKL?”

Edith shook her head. Her lips were parted, her eyes were shining. Van Pelt realized that he had never seen her look so fetching as at this moment. “You’d give— What were you going to say?”

“I’d—well, I’d give up golf to meet her. But she won’t answer my letters.”

“What makes you think you’d want to know her? She may be horrid.” The words came breathlessly; a rosy flush of excitement had colored the speaker’s cheeks.

Van Pelt frowned. “You wouldn’t understand. I don’t understand, myself, for that matter. It’s her voice. Imagine falling for a voice—but you couldn’t

imagine it. Do I sound conceited now?"

"Of course it's nothing but a whim on your part and you're merely peeved because she ignores you. You don't really care——"

"Don't I?"

"Next week you'll have another whim. Poor 'Lark.' She's lucky to escape a broken heart. You'd love to satisfy your curiosity, then throw her over, leave her to sob out her grief on her mother's breast—hip, I mean."

"Women are about as sentimental as wet mops," Van Pelt said, sourly. "She's been nasty to me, but I think I behaved rather decently, for a snob. I could have forced an acquaintance, found out all I wanted to know about her. I hired a detective and——"

"You did—*what*?"

"Hired a detective, then fired him."

"You had her *followed*?"

"N—no! He barely had time to get started when I got ashamed of myself. I realized that it wasn't a very pretty thing to do. It was like teeing up in a bunker. All this doesn't mean much, but it shows I'm not exactly the sort of fellow your friends tried to make you believe."

Edith nodded. "Nor the sort of fellow I took you to be. I had no idea you were such a good sport, Mr. Van Pelt. I'm not at all clairvoyant, but something tells me you'll hear from 'The Lark' when—the time comes. When her poor mother's hip disease is better. Perhaps she's trying to find out something about you."

Chapter Twelve

Residents of Hopewell, certain of them, agreed that Henry Gilbert had become a changed man. The death of his wife—that deplorable accident resulting from a defective gas log—had been a terrible shock to him, and the heartless desertion of his daughter at the very time when he most needed the support of her love and her sympathy had crushed him to the dust. He always referred to Edith's departure as her "desertion," and to his wife's taking off as "that accident" or "that unhappy mischance." It was not often that he mentioned either subject—the pain was too poignant—but when they did come up, his voice broke, his lips quivered, he waved his hands in feeble distress.

He was very sweet and gentle in speaking of Edith. He would explain with a wan, pathetic smile, that she had gone to New York to study voice. With his permission, of course! She had inherited her mother's talent and how could he permit his selfish love to stand in her way? Alas! this New Freedom! Ambitious Youth! The Tragedy of Parenthood! No sooner were the chicks feathered out than they fluttered away from the home nest. Then he would sigh.

But he was a wretched liar, and the people who knew him best considered it noble and unselfish of him to put such a deceitful construction upon his daughter's action. Such loyalty, such patience in adversity invested him with new dignity in their eyes. Some of the women wept, Belle Galloway among the others, for they well knew that Edith had been a wild, wilful daughter and a problem to her father. God's noblemen are so often the targets of grief. Gilbert's friends, as has been said, were mainly women, but there were a number of zealous men whom he called by that name, and most of these occupied pulpits or were paid employees of sundry welfare organizations. These, too, sympathized with their stricken fellow worker.

Gilbert took great comfort from this sympathy; it warmed him to know that in the eyes of those people who really mattered he was a martyr.

There were other people in Hopewell, of course, who did not subscribe to this opinion, but inasmuch as he seldom came in contact with them he was unaware of their views. There were times, however, when he awoke late at night in the grip of a hideous phantasm and heard in his ears the echo of angry voices shouting that he had killed his wife. Then in the dark he choked with the fumes of gas and fought for his breath. Lying there in his

bed, he would wonder how much Edith had let drop among her friends during that frightful period following the catastrophe and preceding their clash.

The family physician must know the truth. And sometimes doctors betray professional secrets to one another. Gilbert would feel his pores open at thought of this.

More than all this, Belle Galloway must have a pretty clear idea of what had happened, for Edith had gone perfectly wild that day when he brought the elder woman to call with the proposal to install her here as a sort of housekeeper and companion for Edith. That was what had caused the breach between him and his daughter—she had left home the very next day. But the things she had said at that time! In front of Belle!

It had been sweet of Belle to attribute those shocking accusations to hysteria; and loyal of her to seal her lips. She still called him her "plumed knight, *sans peur et sans reproche*," and it was plain that she still believed in him; nevertheless, it was unfortunate that she knew the truth. Why, she had it in her power to utterly ruin him in the community.

After a night such as this Gilbert almost feared to go out on the street and when he did go he walked with dread. For days thereafter he would catch himself furtively watching people for some sign that they suspected or knew. Nor did it greatly comfort him to argue that legally no guilt could attach to him. Spiteful people would need no more than the mere fact that he had quarreled with his wife, threatened her, locked her in her room.

He wished he could be entirely certain of Belle or that he had some way of insuring her silence, but—she could hold this secret over him as long as she lived. It was an unfortunate situation. Meanwhile, there seemed to be but one thing to do—*viz.*, to wrap himself in this garment of martyrdom until it fitted him, until he really believed in his own innocence so strongly that nothing could shake it.

This pose, by the way, was made somewhat easier by reason of the fact that he was actually quite miserable in his new life. For one thing, he missed the comforts of a well-ordered household, and for another he lacked the opportunity of exercising a husband's and father's will.

Now, in spite of the man's hollowness, it would be an injustice to say that he was totally indifferent to Edith's welfare. He was too honest in his convictions for that, and his convictions of right and wrong were firmly grounded; he was really sincere in them. He would have been honestly glad

to assist her and to bring her home, for her salvation concerned him deeply. He would have made almost any sacrifice to further that salvation.

The knowledge that she was performing in a cabaret had horrified him, arguing as it did that she was headed forthwith for perdition, and now one day came further evidence that she was treading the brink of the abyss, if indeed she had not already fallen. This evidence arrived in the form of a letter from one of her friends, a low associate, but one in whom, evidently, there still flickered a spark of decency. It was that lingering spark, that thousand-to-one chance of redemption, by the way, that encouraged him always in his crusade against evil.

The letter ran as follows:

> Dear Mr. Gilbert:
>
> I met your daughter Edith the day she arrived in New York and I helped her to get a position. We're good friends and she has told me about you.
>
> I suppose there are two sides to every story, but anyhow you're her father and I assume you don't want to see anything happen to her.
>
> She tells me you're a rich man, but you don't know how rich some men can get in this town, nor the favors they're willing to do for a good-looking girl like Edith. I've kept an eye on her, but I don't like the way things look. When I give her a lot of priceless advice she thinks I'm a cheap knocker.
>
> There's a man here named Jesse Hermann. Take your Bradstreet's and turn to the H's. She's off on a yachting trip with him and some of his friends. Of course it's perfectly respectable, as such things go, but no girl can be herself alongside of fifty or a hundred million dollars. Do a little heavy thinking, Mr. Gilbert.
>
> Having gone this far, I'll favor *you* with some of my advice: bury the old family hatchet and let bygones be ditto. Come on over and make up. Give her a good, fatherly kiss and take her home. Make it snappy, for she still believes in fairies and she's not the kind who will ever learn how to go yachting though single.
>
> Sincerely yours,
> Pearl Gates.

Gilbert had no need to look up Jesse Hermann, the name was quite familiar and it filled him with dismay. Edith, the favorite of such a man! The father paled; he laid the letter down with trembling hand. It was that sex quality in her; that very thing about which he had warned the mother. He knew too well how men like Hermann proceeded. No doubt Edith had already fallen a victim to his base desires, otherwise she would not have gone away with him. At best, it was merely a matter of time until she was lost. Here was retribution! Like mother, like daughter. But—his own flesh and blood! Well, Alice had stripped off the girl's armor of ignorance and once young people are allowed to open the book of knowledge Satan turns its pages for them. Sex knowledge must be shrouded in mystery, kept dark; the safety of the race depends upon it. The less said about such things, the better. Flesh is weak and knowledge is evil. The mere possession of wisdom rubs the bloom of innocence off of any girl.

Jesse Hermann! One of the giants! Henry Gilbert's daughter the mistress of such a man! In a panic he asked himself what to do, and after a while he took his problem to Miss Galloway. He needed a woman's advice and she was the only one in whom he could confide; then, too, this would give him the chance to discover whether she put any credence in what Edith had said.

Miss Galloway read the letter and voiced her dismay. This was terrible. What was to be done? Did he intend to act upon the suggestion and bring the strayed lamb home?

"I don't know," he confessed. "I'm not sure it would be the right thing to do. Perhaps I should ignore her. 'If thine eye offend thee—' God, in His wisdom, has visited me with this affliction. Perhaps He will give me the strength to bear it." Gilbert let his lids fall to hide the misery in his eyes.

Miss Galloway laid her hand upon his arm. "Poor man! You have indeed passed through the fiery furnace."

"Yes. After what I have endured, to be—disgraced! Such things can't be concealed, for Hermann is one of the great financial figures. It is possible that she might not consent to return. After all, I have myself to consider and —this would ruin me!"

"True! We must think of that." Miss Galloway's eyes were glowing. "You infer, then, that it has gone—that it is even worse than the letter says?"

The father shrugged. "She is stubborn; she has a wicked streak. She might have had it in mind to humiliate me. You heard what she said that day ____"

“Please! Let’s never refer to that. The child was not herself and I’ve forgotten every word.” Miss Galloway pondered, her mind working actively. “I appreciate the compliment you have done me in coming here at this time. Will you let me help?”

In a sudden access of relief and gratitude the caller said: “Yes, yes, of course! That’s why I’m here. You’re a noble woman, Belle—the noblest I ever knew. Your generosity to her, your faith in me——”

“You must fetch her home, if she’ll come.”

“You think so? In spite of any possible scandal——?”

“If there is a scandal it must be concealed. Yes, you must bring her home, but not to the home she left.”

“What do you mean?”

“I—hope you won’t misunderstand me. And I don’t want to hurt your feelings. But, dear Mr. Gilbert, it is not Edith’s fault that she has gone wrong. It was her environment, her associates, the life she led, the example __”

“I did my best.”

“I know, but your temperaments clashed. Now if she could return to an atmosphere of love and sympathy and understanding; to a calm well-ordered home—” Gilbert’s bewilderment caused the speaker to trip and to stammer. “Of course I mustn’t order your life. Your love for poor Mrs. Gilbert is a sacred thing; we all revere you for it. But Edith’s future is at stake. . . . If she could return to a blessed sanctuary and learn to look back upon her misfortune as no more than a hideous dream that had ended. . . . You are still a young man!”

There was a pause.

“You mean I—ought to get married again?”

Miss Galloway had paled. “She is your daughter. You are not a man to shirk his duty. Surely no man of your years and your position— Y-you must have considered remarrying?”

“Why, not—seriously.”

“If she returns to that empty house, to her former associates—especially after what has happened in New York—”

“I’m too old to marry.”

"*Old?*"

"To marry without love is a profanation."

"Is love, so called, without respect or companionship, any more sacred than respect, true companionship, a community of interests and ideals, without love?"

"Who would marry an old graybeard like me?"

"Almost any good, high-principled woman who knows you—"

"Name one." After a moment Gilbert laughed, in a tone pitched a bit higher than usual. "There, you flatterer! Just to prove how absurd you are, would—would *you* marry me?"

"*I?*" Belle turned a pained, reproachful face upon him. "You're making a jest of it. If I had dreamed you'd misconstrue——"

"You see?"

"You have hurt me, terribly, Mr. Gilbert. You know very well I am not the marrying kind. Marriage! . . . Men!" There was tragic dismay in the look, the tone, and to the hearer they signified a virginal purity, a shrinking of mind and body, that was quite exciting. Here was a woman that any man could admire; a Vestal with generous breadth of hips and rounded bosom, and with sooty smudges beneath her lids; a woman of great emotional fervor, but one whose passion was for Christ. A noble creature, truly—a nun whose war was ever with the flesh.

Gilbert felt a great ease and security in Belle's presence, and although he thanked her sincerely for her interest and her advice he assured her that, for him, marriage was quite out of the question. If Edith was to be rescued, some other way than that would have to be devised.

Norman Van Pelt had a perfectly rotten time on the day after Edith's departure. He would have left Comfort Harbor, himself, the very next morning if he had dreamed how dull the place would seem and how the time would drag. He played a morning round with some friends, but a high wind was blowing and his shots were erratic. Nor could he concentrate. What a bore it was to play with people one cared nothing about. Golf is a friendly, sociable game. That doesn't mean a lot of chatter, but freedom to talk when you feel like it or be surly if you want to. Golf is sociability.

It had been great fun to play with that Gilbert kid; she went in for it with such complete absorption and she was such a bully little sport. Didn't bother her to be beaten if she got her own shots off well, and she took an interest in

your game. She applauded your good shots and she didn't put on a deceitful mask every time you made a bad one, just to hide her satisfaction. A fellow didn't make many bad shots playing with a girl like that.

Funny how a kid could go on singing naughty songs in a hashery and still be a clean, wholesome, regular fellow like that. Of course, that job wouldn't last long, she was too clever. Musical comedy for hers. Van Pelt knew that theatrical gang; he could help her. For that matter, he could *make* an opportunity for her; it wouldn't break him to back a production if necessary. What if it did flop? She'd be established. . . . She was a wonder, all right! Good family, breeding, poise! He wished that Nat could meet her. And what a peachy dancer! Yes, and she could swim some! He recalled, with a thrill, that half hour on the aquaplane when he had her in his arms.

In thinking about that experience he trapped himself and took four shots to get out. When he emerged from the pit, spitting sand, his partner pretended a great surprise and said he had supposed Van Pelt was working there. It was an old joke and it went as well as usual.

He remembered Edith as she had come up the hill on the eighteenth that last day they had played together. It had been a hot morning; she was tired. Her dress was open at the throat, wisps of hair clung to her wet temples, there was a dewy moisture upon her upper lip, her face was flushed. She had taken off her hat and was swinging it at her side as she toiled up the slope. Head back, and rolling slightly at each stride, lips apart, shoulders sagging with weariness. But her eyes were shining and she had laughed breathlessly when he joked her.

Dog-gone!

Van Pelt played in another foursome that afternoon and confessed ruefully that he must be over-golfed, something his partner glumly conceded. Later when he dragged himself into the hotel he saw Jesse Hermann and waved carelessly to him, but Hermann stopped him, shook hands.

"I noticed the *Swan* in the harbor," Norman told him. "I've been expecting to see you around the hotel before this."

"I've been loafing mornings and motoring afternoons. Doctor's orders."

"You don't look sick."

"I'm not. I've outlived my ailments. His orders were for one of my guests, and they suited me perfectly. We were leaving today but it blew too hard."

“Beastly place,” Van Pelt grumbled. “I’m fed up on it.”

“You’re young; you haven’t learned the futility of trying to amuse yourself. Make others do it for you. Only wise people and defectives can amuse themselves. That explains marriage. Man is a woefully incomplete animal. I could have created something much better.”

“Better than marriage? A lot of smart fellows have tried and failed.”

Hermann’s long face shortened. “No, *better than man*. Not that I couldn’t improve on marriage, too, if I tried.”

“You did try, Jesse, and I don’t see that you succeeded very brilliantly.”

“At least I find both amusement and entertainment. There’s a vast difference, you know.”

“Now that we’re on the subject, why don’t you ask about Natalie? She’s well, thanks! Never better.”

“My dear boy, your mother is the most charming, the most complete woman I have ever known. In our case that peculiarly delicate relation we call matrimony sickened, faded, died, not by reason of any shortcoming on her part, but because of my so-many faults. Of all incomplete men I am the most incomplete; the companionship of one woman was never sufficient.”

“Something new to hear you boast.”

“Heavens, that’s no boast! It’s a compliment, a dirge, a lament to my vanished dreams. It is the melancholy confession of a disillusioned man. Please convey to Natalie an expression of my sincere regard and admiration.” The speaker bowed. “By the way, you asked me once about some enchanting singer you heard over the radio. How did she turn out?”

“I never met her.”

“Your interest lagged, eh?”

“N—not exactly.” Van Pelt realized of a sudden that his interest had lagged; that for a week now he had scarcely thought of “The Lark.” With a grin he declared: “Anyhow, she isn’t fat. She’s an awfully pretty, awfully nice girl.”

“Yes. And happily married.”

“What?”

“Married! Didn’t you know?”

"Another idol busted. Tonight I take to drink."

"Permit me to speed you on your way to forgetfulness. Wine's nepenthe for the aching soul is better than love's fragrance in the empty bowl. Or is it the other way round? Anyhow, you know that Private Cuvee of mine? Dine with me aboard the *Swan* tonight."

"Sorry! I ruined a good foursome this afternoon, and to make amends I invited the men to dine with me and bring their wives."

"Very well, then; come aboard in time for a cocktail and bring them with you. The launch will be waiting for you at seven thirty."

A few moments later Hermann joined his party at the open-air dancing pavilion. They were just finishing tea. As they strolled down to the landing he dropped behind with Mrs. Alcott.

The latter was in no pleasant frame of mind. She had spent nearly two weeks now in a round of the New England seaside resorts, and she hated resorts; she had endured an interminable succession of motor trips, and she detested motoring; and all the while she had been forced to play a part in a drama which was, alas! all too familiar. She was in a mood now where she scorned herself, was jealous of Edith, and nursed a murderous rage at Hermann. He understood her feelings and derived a sardonic amusement therefrom; he took a malicious pleasure, it seemed, in making it plain that however much or however little his guests were enjoying themselves, he was having a wonderful time.

"Lois, my dear," he said now, "you have placed me under a deep obligation. Such poise, such patience, such breeding! You have been an example to Edith, an education."

The woman relieved her emotions with a gusty explosion of passion. "I could kill you for what you've put me through. Breeding! What breed of man are you to do a thing like this? Wolf? No—jackal. Wolves run in and pull down their prey; jackals wait for the weak ones, the calves, to drop out."

"Like all women, you're inaccurate. Your natural history is weak. So is mine, for that matter, but it seems to me I've heard of wolves and perhaps jackals that hunt for the love of hunting. But, I repeat, you have been perfectly corking and I have only one more favor, one more tiny sacrifice to ask."

"What now?" Mrs. Alcott's still face was whiter than usual, her eyes were stormy.

"Simply this: I've invited some friends aboard for cocktails. When they arrive do me the service to give Edith the center of the stage. I'm sure that in your gracious, unobtrusive manner you can lead them to infer that she is the real hostess aboard the *Swan*. I have an object."

"You always have an object. What may it be, this time?"

"It will flatter the child."

"Jesse! Am I as stupid as that? Is there—anything else?"

"No. If there were I would count upon your joyful co-operation."

Mrs. Alcott drew a deep breath. In a dry, rustling voice she said, "Thank God, the farce ends tomorrow!"

In accepting his ex-stepfather's invitation Van Pelt had no very fixed idea of acting upon it, for it was his careless custom to promise almost anything to people he did not care much about, and at the last moment to suit his own convenience about keeping those promises, but when he mentioned to his dinner guests that Jesse Hermann had asked them all aboard the *Swan* for cocktails, the women were delighted. Nothing could be lovelier, one of them declared, for the yacht had a reputation for—well, piracy that was positively thrilling and she was dying to meet the owner. Everybody had heard stories of Hermann's lavish entertainments and how certain Metropolitan song-birds and famous stage beauties had enjoyed long cruises with him. Of course, the *Swan* was no place for any woman with a reputation—as a matter of fact, it had blasted more reputations than any yacht around New York—but it was all right, of course, to go aboard with one's husband. This one's husband nudged her and she glided gracefully off the subject. It was so hard to remember that Natalie Dubose was Van Pelt's mother.

The launch was waiting at the landing stage, it was but a few moments' run out to the *Swan*. She was a palatial, cruising houseboat and in the soft afterglow of evening she loomed enormous.

Van Pelt's guests were first on deck and preceded him to the main cabin. When he entered he paused in surprise, for almost the first person he saw was Edith Gilbert. His smile became strained, he experienced a bewilderment that did not clear even while he was being presented to a Major and Mrs. Carthwaite and a meaningless girl and while he was shaking hands with Mrs. Alcott, whom he knew and detested.

Edith's surprise at seeing him equaled his at seeing her. When he took her hand it was cold and there was a startled inquiry in her eyes. Hermann

was beaming benevolently upon them and he was saying: “Edith tells me you’re a marvelous golf teacher, Norman. She says you’re better than any pro. Whatever you did for her, it was a miracle and it made life a lot easier for the rest of us.”

“What’s this?” one of the callers inquired. “I played with Van this afternoon and he needs a lesson with every club.”

“I don’t know anything about the game,” Hermann was saying, “and I asked Carthwaite along because he does. He’s English and all Englishmen are golfers. But he claims to have a piece of shrapnel in his stance or his jigger or something. Anyhow, it turned out to be pretty stupid for her, I’m afraid, until you came along.”

Van Pelt heard himself saying to the girl, “I thought you were leaving for New York this morning?” He was unable even yet to get the idea of that summer cottage out of his mind; it seemed to him that she had told him she was staying with friends in some cottage.

“We intended to go, but it was so stormy——”

Mrs. Alcott added her voice: “Edith is *such* a poor sailor. The trip is hers, you know, and her word is law. We all take her orders.” Playfully she pinched the girl’s ear. “The sea air has done wonders for you, dear. You can’t imagine how you’ve improved.” She turned away then; the conversation became general.

Stewards entered with a massive silver cocktail service and with trays of hors-d’œuvre and they were welcomed with rhapsodic exclamations, with the extravagant persiflage which nowadays accompanies the serving of alcoholic beverages. These people were not thirsty, nor were they dipsomaniacs; they were merely polite men and women who had learned the joys of hypocrisy and had tasted the illicit pleasures of insincerity for the first time since prohibition had broken down their prejudice against such things.

Something told Edith that this meeting between her and Van Pelt was not accidental, but that it had been deliberately planned for the purpose of humiliating her, and that suspicion grew as the moments passed. Bitterly she repented her frank announcement of their first, and her enthusiastic accounts of their subsequent, meetings. Even more bitterly she regretted her lack of complete frankness with Van Pelt himself. If only she had been straightforward and told him everything. But she had never been able to quite shake off the uncomfortable feeling of impropriety which Pearl Gates

had implanted in her mind. Evidently he believed the worst. Well, if he knew her no better than that he could believe whatever he chose. She held her head high and carried the situation off as best she could.

There followed a garrulous, if not a witty, half hour, during which a good many cocktails were served. Now that America has become a nation of lawbreakers, people are no longer temperate, and even the women drank until they felt a pronounced effect.

Jesse Hermann had never been more genial. He displayed a pardonable pride in his yacht and in his guests; more by his manner than by any word or look or action he implied that he took particular pride in Miss Gilbert.

Van Pelt drank with gusto. Beads of perspiration appeared upon his upper lip, his eyes assumed a certain starey wildness. He would have left without a word to Edith, but that, of course, was impossible. He bowed over her hand and said with a smile that was not at all pleasant:

"I must compliment you, Miss Gilbert. You're wonderful! You've got everything and you've been a liberal education to me."

"Thank you," she said. "I must cultivate your knack of being disagreeable. It seems to be the proper thing."

"Don't! There's no money in it, and never cultivate any talent that isn't profitable." He glanced toward Hermann.

"You have a remarkable talent, too. The talent for making unpardonable mistakes. It's almost a genius, in your case."

"Right! I'm invariably wrong. That's because I'm singularly stupid for a chap with my opportunities to acquire wisdom. I'll never be a wise guy! but you—you're great, really!" He burst out laughing. "I've been how-dared by hundreds of girls, but you're the first one who ever kidded me into apologizing. My hat's off and I salaam in the Oriental fashion. I bump my frontal sinus on the floor."

"I tried to be nice to you for a week," Edith told him in a low voice. "That ought to pay for one golf lesson. Now I can tell you what I wanted to the first time we met; I've been burning to let it out——"

"Please don't! No word of praise from you could add to my enjoyment of this perfect hour." He turned away, chuckling.

Hermann saw his callers over the side and returned to find that Edith had gone to her stateroom. Later, when dinner was announced and she did not

appear, he strolled out on deck, looking for her. The captain met him, handed him a note which read:

> Dear Mr. Hermann:
>
> I am taking the next train back to New York and will ask you to kindly send my belongings to my address. Under the circumstances, you'll agree, no explanation is necessary.
>
> Truly yours,
> Edith Gilbert.

In answer to a startled question, the skipper told him, "She was waiting for the tender when it got back. We've always taken her orders, sir."

The owner of the *Swan* slowly tore the note into bits and dropped it overboard, then for several moments he stood frowning out over the dusky harbor.

On his way back to the hotel Van Pelt's friends bantered him noisily about the Gilbert girl in whose company he had been seen so often during the past week: those cocktails had been potent, and even the women joined in teasing him. For once, he failed to defend himself and, later, during dinner, he drank heavily. By bedtime he was quite drunk.

Chapter Thirteen

When Edith notified Professor Lorelli that she had returned home and was ready to resume her studies, she was surprised to have him say that he was exceedingly busy and to suggest that another fortnight's rest would no doubt benefit her voice. This was a disappointment, but, under the circumstances, she could not do otherwise than await his convenience. Meanwhile, she went back to work at Downing's.

Of course Jesse Hermann communicated with her promptly. She expected nothing less and admitted to him, readily enough, that he had offended her, in fact that he had given her such deep offense that she did not feel it was possible to continue their friendship. He expressed profound surprise and he apologised; in the course of their conversation he made a better case for himself than she did for herself, nevertheless she maintained her position and he was forced to accept it. This he did gracefully enough after telling her that she was hopelessly provincial and that he was quite out of patience with her silly misinterpretation of his behavior.

Edith was content to let the episode end in that way.

When, for the second time, she reported to Lorelli, he informed her with voluble regret that his engagements had multiplied so that it would be quite a while before he could find time for her. He was apologetic, but indefinite, and while he professed every confidence in her operatic success, he suggested that it might be well for her to look about for another teacher.

Edith left him, sick with dismay. Another teacher, indeed! How could she find another? He was the best in the city and his recommendation alone was a guaranty of a rôle. He had been so enthusiastic, he had held her so closely to her work! Could this be Hermann's doings? Surely he was neither so small nor so vindictive.

By this time that first fiery indignation which had sent her home from Comfort Harbor with her head in the air had burned itself out and had been succeeded by a feeling of discouragement all the bleaker by comparison with the fine hopes she had lately cherished. She realized keenly what the influence of a man like Jesse Hermann meant, and the difficulties she had put in the way of her success if indeed it turned out that he was lastingly offended.

When she looked back on that two weeks aboard the *Swan* and remembered his unfailing courtesy, his respect, it seemed incredible that he could have meant to embarrass her so cruelly. Why should he wish to do so? She had never given him cause to assume for one moment that he could—that she could ever consider him anything except what he pretended to be. And yet there were the facts.

It was something she hated to think about, nevertheless she could not banish it from her mind.

Nor could she get over her resentment against Van Pelt. Of him she thought even more bitterly than of the elder man, but here again her mind stubbornly refused to obey her will. Of all the events during that crowded two weeks, those which stood out most clearly were the ones in which Van Pelt figured. It seemed as if she could remember every word they had said to each other. Yes, and the thrill when she had learned that he was the persistent writer of those letters! The fun she had anticipated in disclosing the identity of "The Lark." She had begun to plan a way of doing it as soon as she had fully recovered her voice. But all that was over. She hated Van Pelt. She hated him so fiercely that she cried more than once. Of course they were tears of mortification. He was a contemptible cad.

On the Saturday following her return Downing gave her notice that he was changing his bill in a week and would not need her services thereafter. It was a shock even more paralyzing than Lorelli's ultimatum. Bad luck seemed to run in cycles. She at once began a hurried, apprehensive round of the booking agencies, but reaped no encouragement.

Pearl Gates was not so sympathetic as usual when she heard the news.

"You would have your way, dearie. I tried to gas you off that guy Hermann, but you had to have a convincer."

It was a remark bound to arouse resentment in anybody in Edith's mood.

"What has he to do with it?"

"Oh, try and fit that head of yours with something except a hat! Get an idea, for a change. I suppose it's a mere coincidence that your Ginney shout-promoter has a sudden rush of business to the throat and that Downing gives you the gate all at one time? You met a black cat or you saw a cross-eyed woman and forgot to spit. Turn over, jelly bean, your ear is folded. . . . Do you read the society papers?"

"Certainly not. Why should I?"

"Humph! Now that you're so thick and sticky with the *Newport riche*, as we say in the old country, I supposed you'd thumb all the high-toned scandal sheets! Probably you haven't seen this." Pearl produced a clipping and handed it to her companion.

It had been cut from one of those gossipy publications of small but select circulation and it said that one of New York's richest men had been seen much of late in the company of a pretty little Broadway cabaret singer. Innocent amusement (Ha! Ha!) was all very well, but polite society resented having one of its members parade a common conquest like this through the fashionable watering-places. There was reference to the man's yacht, to his predilection for very young women of very good looks; to former cruises not so decorous as this one. The paper shook a finger at him and chided him for his lack of delicacy.

Edith paled as she read the wretched thing. "This is abominable!" she cried, furiously.

"Yeah! Rosen gave it to me. You may not know it, but he's crazy about you. He's singing, 'Eili, Eili', and throwing ashes in his beard. Try to make *him* believe you walked home."

"What do I care what he thinks?" Edith stormed.

"He's the one who slipped me the low-down on your tonsil-trainer. He says that gargler never *gave* a lesson to anybody. Hermann hired him. Hired him and fired him."

"How fantastic! No doubt Mr. Hermann hired Downing to fire *me* and is paying the agencies to keep me out of work." Edith laughed scornfully.

"That's how the Japs took Port Arthur. Starved 'em out. You never know what men will do. Another one jumped off Brooklyn Bridge yesterday. It's all a matter of taste, as the sword-swallower said. I've been slowly filling up with advice for you, and, now that you're in tough luck——"

Edith interrupted defiantly: "You needn't think for a minute that I'm discouraged. I'm going to succeed. I'll succeed if I have to—if I——"

"Go ahead, pull the old wheeze—you'll succeed if you have to sell body and soul. Bodies, my dear, are a drug on the market, and you couldn't get a nickel for your soul. Billy Sunday's in the second-hand soul business and he can't afford to hire a hall—he has to work in a tent. Your heart is set on opera. Art, spelled with a capital A is so much greater, so much more important than the mere individual! It's worth any sacrifice! A lot of nice kids like you believe that hokum and they'd sell themselves for a chance to

eat spaghetti with the high-priced Metropolitan humming-birds. But it's no cinch they'll get what they sell themselves for. There's a lot of cheaters among the body-and-soul buyers. Why don't you make up with your dad and either go home or get him to stake you?"

"Indeed! You don't know him."

"No. But I know his address and I took it on myself to drop him a line."

"You—*what*?"

There was a moment of silence, then in an icy tone, "What, may I ask, did you write him?"

"I wrote him a letter. About you. I wrote him in words of one syllable to come, get, fetch and carry you back to the sticks. For a prod I mentioned Hermann——"

"You had the effrontery to do—*that*?" Edith gasped.

"Oh, snap out of it! You look as if I'd cut your throat."

"No doubt you meant well. Meddlers always mean well, but you don't know him. You've made it impossible for me *ever* to go back, even if I wanted to. You've given him texts for a hundred sermons. You spoke of selling myself. Well, that's what it would mean if I went home. I'd have to bow to his bigotries, live a lie, just for my bed and board. I'd rather make that sort of a deal with—with Hermann——"

"You don't mean that."

"I do! I do! You've made a fool of me. I wish you'd mind your own business."

Pearl rose in a huff. "Thanks, kiddo! That's one thing I'll devote myself to—nothing else but. Have your own sweet way, and the night you open in 'Madame Butterfly' I'll be around to apologize. But until then, as we say in the upper set, best of luck, precious old sprout, and—go to hell!" She flounced out of the room.

Edith was surprised one morning soon after to be told that a caller was awaiting her in Mrs. Mullaney's parlor. She had been more than half expecting Hermann to make another effort to see her and she assumed that it was he. She was astonished when she went downstairs to find her father awaiting her. And with him Miss Galloway!

It was a stiff meeting, for Gilbert was self-conscious and took refuge behind an exaggerated unction that was wholly artificial. When Edith had

seated herself he began by inquiring about her health and her general welfare. She answered him politely. There was an exchange of desultory remarks. Then, much as a bather steels himself for a plunge into cold water, Mr. Gilbert worked himself up to say:

"In view of our painful parting, you are probably wondering why I'm here. Time is a healer. A father's love cannot be put aside. I hope your regrets have been as deep as mine."

"I've had my regrets, of course, but I'm not wondering why you came. Miss Gates told me about writing you."

"Ah!"

"It was a piece of unwarranted interference, on her part."

Gilbert sighed. "It was a dreadful shock to me."

"It was a shock to both of us," Miss Galloway agreed.

Edith eyed the last speaker coldly. "I can guess what was in the letter. I'm surprised that father showed it to you."

"I was unable to meet the situation alone," Gilbert explained. "In my grief and bewilderment I sought counsel."

"Was that necessary? Even if you believed what it implied—and of course you *would* believe—was it considerate of you to consult a stranger?"

"Belle is not a stranger. I have an announcement to make: Belle and I were married, day before yesterday."

"*Married!*" Edith stared incredulously at the pair.

Her father nodded, his bride smiled, one might almost say that she simpered when she added her voice: "It was a private wedding—just a few of our oldest friends. We were so sorry you couldn't be there."

The daughter's face whitened; it assumed an expression of reproach, horror—the look of one pierced by a wound. "Married! Why, it's scarcely six months since——"

Gilbert broke in hurriedly: "I know. But circumstances demanded it."

"What circumstances?"

"My dear child! Yours, of course. I was prostrated to learn of your—ah—misfortune, and I didn't know what to do—which way to turn. I was in

despair; my resources had fled. Then I was shown the way, my prayers were answered. I felt a hand in mine——"

"God's hand? Or Miss Galloway's?"

"Don't be irreverent. Belle's charity will shame you as it shamed me. She has come to take you home."

The elder woman broke in breathlessly: "That's it. I told him you should have a real home to come to, a house of refuge where you could forget all the—everything that has befallen you."

"Fortunately for all of us, nobody in Hopewell knows anything about what has happened." It was the father speaking again. "Edith, my child, my poor broken bird, Belle will be a real mother to you and she'll teach you the true meaning of home. Alas! if you had been blessed with——"

Edith cried out in sudden anguish: "Wait! A 'real mother'! Oh, my God!" She hid her face in her hands and there was an awkward moment of silence. "If you couldn't spare me this you might, at least, have prepared me. But you mustn't talk about Mims—not like this. I shan't let you. Her memory is too sacred. I—I wonder if there's another man like you. I wonder if a man who reveres nothing which is sacred to others and holds sacred nothing except his own desires is really good or just monumentally selfish and conceited."

"Edith!"

"She's upset, naturally," Mrs. Gilbert exclaimed. "I understand, and it might be better if I withdrew while——"

"No! Don't! I want to talk to both of you. Let me have a moment. . . . I don't propose to criticize you for what you've done. You are independent human beings with your own lives to live; our viewpoints are different, that's all. When you talk to me about 'a real mother' it shows you understand me as little as I'm able to understand you. . . . I suppose your marriage was inevitable. You should have been married long ago. Mims realized that."

"You have no right to say such a thing," the wife indignantly exclaimed. "I shan't listen to you. I can make allowances for hysteria, but——"

"I don't mean to be malicious and I don't accuse you of any offense, except against good taste and common decency. But I do resent it when you put the responsibility on me. Father implies that he remarried to save me—or rather to salvage what's left of me. I'm his 'broken bird'! He did it to

make a new home for me." The speaker's tone became frankly scornful. "What a pity to snatch away that crown of martyrdom just as it begins to prick agreeably! But I must. Bear with me, please, if I assure you both that I'm not what you so fondly anticipated, a fallen woman. I'm broke, but not broken."

"Let us hope you are truthful," the other woman said, frigidly.

Gilbert had begun to perspire freely; his face was red; he spoke in irritation:

"Your attempt at mockery is weak and offensive. I expected gratitude. I hope Belle is broad enough to make allowances——"

"Not half so offensive as your suspicions of me! Or the suggestion that you remarried for my sake. But you needn't worry; I won't go home with you."

"You must. I have myself to consider. I can't permit myself to be discredited by your actions, not after spending my life in an effort to avert the very evils that have befallen you. It would make me ridiculous."

"You must remember that Henry has enemies and they're vindictive," the stepmother added, more calmly. "They'd welcome an excuse to talk—in fact, there are rumors about, already. Thank goodness, they're only rumors and your return would allay them. Leaving me entirely aside, you owe it to him to come back long enough for that. Rest assured no one shall ever learn from us that you have—er—I hardly know how to express myself without risking offense."

"Don't try."

"Of course, if you'd consent to remain there under my care and guidance I'd——"

"You overwhelm me! Now let's be honest. I've done nothing to cause a wagging of tongues, and if there is any I'll warrant it isn't among father's enemies, but among his, and your, 'friends.' "

"Will you please drop this injured-innocence pose?" Gilbert angrily demanded. "Or at least save it for Hopewell? We were at your place of employment last night and heard you sing, saw the whole wretched program. It was disgraceful!"

"I'm not proud of the work, but it's better than nothing."

"You call it 'work.' For shame! I have had you investigated——"

"Investigated?"

"By a detective!"

Edith flamed into sudden fury. "That's like you. No doubt it's the same one you hired to 'investigate' Mims."

"Silence! I have a report on your associates, your affair with this man Hermann, everything. But I saw enough last night with my own eyes, heard enough with my own ears, to convince me that you're not the innocent girl you were. It is your mother's story all over again. I saved her from herself. I propose to save you."

"Save me from what? For what? To live the sort of a life she lived? No, no!"

"If you won't come willingly, there are ways to compel you——"

"What ways?"

"There are laws and courts to enforce a parent's rights."

"What about *my* rights? There's no law that can make me a slave to your narrow prejudice or send me into this woman's house. If there were, I wouldn't stay. I'm not a child."

"Quite so." Gilbert was shaking; his face was purple. "You're a wicked, untruthful, irreligious young woman."

"Religion has nothing to do with this. Religion is freedom, truth, tolerance; it's merely an attitude toward life. I'm ten times more religious than you. And wickedness! You did the wickedest thing any man ever did when you killed the sweetest woman——"

"We won't discuss that."

"And I'm untruthful? What about this marriage? You're untruthful about that; you're trying to blame it on me because you were ashamed to acknowledge that you wanted to get married. Yes, and it wasn't even for my sake that you came on here to snatch me out of my sinful life, but to save your own good name. Oh, what hypocrisy! If I'm wicked and deceitful and irreligious, I inherited those traits. Thank Heaven, you can't accuse me of hypocrisy!"

Gilbert rose. His eyes were bloodshot, his face was apoplectic. "We're getting nowhere with this argument, but you'll obey me," he chattered. "I don't propose to let you ruin me. You'll do as I say."

His wife took his arm in hers and spoke soothingly to him. She drew him toward the door. He was still muttering when he went out.

However distressing this interview had been to the father, it did not upset him so completely as it upset the daughter. It took her a long while to regain control of herself, and then her anger, her resentment, was succeeded by a great unhappiness and a vague fear. She asked herself if indeed she could be compelled to go home and if her father really meant his threat. It seemed absurd; she knew of no steps he could take, nevertheless the uncertainty was alarming. A man in his temper was likely to try anything, and above all things she dreaded another clash with him. Under the circumstances, she wondered if it would not be the course of wisdom to avoid him, disappear for a day or so—until he returned to Hopewell. It seemed a cowardly thing to do, but certain issues are better evaded than met. She decided, finally, to trust her intuitions, and inasmuch as she and Pearl were not on good terms, she phoned to Amy Dupont. When the latter had been made aware of Edith's dilemma she was prompt in offering assistance. She and another girl were sharing an apartment and they had an extra room. Edith was welcome to come there for the time being. If she liked the place, she could stay—her share of the rent wouldn't amount to much.

This invitation was eagerly accepted and Edith got her belongings together. But it was impossible to move at once, for it was her afternoon to sing at WKL. When she left to keep that engagement, however, her trunks were packed and her arrangements were made to leave early the following morning.

It was a very sad, a very spiritless "Lark" who faced the microphone that afternoon. Tears were close to the surface, and there was a sob in her voice. That emotional quality which people remarked had never been more pronounced; she had never sung better.

So at least some of her unseen auditors thought. Van Pelt had been scanning the radio programs and, noting the name of "The Lark" once more, he had asked his mother to listen in with him.

Natalie sat in silence until the last note of the last song had died away, then she said: "Now I can understand why that voice moves you. I wonder who she can be."

Van Pelt was holding his head in his hands; when he looked up there was a queer light in his eyes. "She never sang like that before. She must have known I was listening or—that you were here. It was like a—a swan song."

“You may have enjoyed it, but I feel terribly depressed.” The mother stirred uncomfortably.

“Same here. I wonder if she’s in trouble. I’ve heard her so often that I imagine I can tell how she’s feeling. Sometimes she’s happy, joyful, again she’s blue and discouraged. . . . There’s no use stalling, Nat. I thought I was cured, but I’ve got it worse than ever.”

“Hm—m! I hoped your trip had cured all those notions. I’ve never seen you like this.”

Norman spoke gravely, and with more feeling than his mother was accustomed to hear: “A queer thing happened to me while I was gone. I had a kind of an affair—one of those stilly-night things that sneaks up and takes you unawares. I got all worked up over a girl, and the peculiar part was that I had much the same sort of feeling for her that I have when I hear this one. I didn’t realize it at the time but—I dare say it was something about her voice. Same quality. Remember my telling you about a charming little gold-digger I met one night at a party of Hermann’s?”

“The one who sang naughty songs, with an angel’s face?”

“That’s the identical party. I ran across her on the golf course at Comfort and—she had everything the ads boast about: the smile that wins, the skin you love to touch, luxurious lingerie that lingers, and teeth that know no film. You’d be surprised. Refinement, culture! And what a wallop! She broke ninety right along. Well, we nestled together like waffles and honey and I didn’t know how cuckoo I was until—I found she was the star boarder on Jesse’s yacht. They were off on a cruise together; she was his guest of ‘honor’! Believe me, I felt like a trained ape.”

“No wonder. But how could you let her put it over you? Why, you told me yourself that Jesse had fancied her.”

“I didn’t know how far it had gone or else she put the ether cone to me. She’s the kind who makes you believe in Santa Claus; one look and you know the customer is always right, if you get what I mean. I’ve been bluer than a black eye.”

“And now you’re back on this one. I’m afraid you’re a fickle boy.”

“That’s the extraordinary part: I am and—I’m not. I—don’t know how to explain it except that I fell for the stuff in that girl that I’ve imagined this girl to have. I don’t pretend to understand it myself. But one thing sure—she kicked my last scruple right in the face and I’m going to meet this singer if I have to hire ten detectives.”

“But why? You say she’s married.”

“You were married when you met Dubose. Six days God labored and then he made Reno. There’s a gypsies’ curse on me and I’m going to break it somehow. Of course, this one may cure me, the way the other one did, but I’ve got a queer hunch that she won’t.”

“Assuming that she doesn’t, what then?”

Norman stared at his mother almost defiantly. “I don’t know. Trouble, perhaps. I’m not fooling. You caused trouble, in your time; then you faced it and paid the bill. That sort of thing seems to run in our blood.”

It was a moment before Mrs. Dubose spoke. “I can’t preach, for my life offers a poor text. I’m pretty cynical about marriage as an institution. But I’m sure of this much—it’s better for one person to be dissatisfied than for two, and if we’d keep that in mind we’d have fewer divorces. It’s possible, on the other hand, that we’d have more. I don’t know. At any rate, have the courage to play your hunches and merely remember that you’re a gentleman and not a cad. Now then,” the speaker’s tone became matter-of-fact, “if I’d been in your place I’d have met this ‘Lark’ long ago. But I’m sort of a buccaneer where my heart is concerned.”

Chapter Fourteen

Fortune had not dealt kindly with Belle Galloway; nothing but stark necessity had bred in her those economies, those inhibitions, those stern powers of self-repression which Henry Gilbert so admired. To realize, alone and unaided, the desire of a lifetime, to raise herself from nothingness into a position of power as wife of the richest man in Hopewell, was an accomplishment; it was still too new to be thought of without a fluttering of the pulse, a quickening of breath, and an odd, intoxicating sense of unreality. Her interview with Edith was the first thing that had occurred to mar her complete satisfaction; in fact, the first reminder that life from now on could be anything but pleasant.

She came away from that interview feeling deeply aggrieved, sorely offended, but extremely well pleased with the way it had gone.

She had always been aware of Edith's dislike and she had returned it with interest, for not only were their temperaments antagonistic, but also the elder woman had been passionately envious. In spite of the fact that she had talked much, before her marriage, about offering the girl a mother's sympathy, a mother's love, she had never felt in the least motherly toward her, nor had she believed for a moment that Edith would tolerate any such make-believe. That proposal of hers was the result of careful thought and the first step in a well considered plan. It had appealed to Henry Gilbert quite as strongly as she had expected. He had considered it an exalted idea, no doubt because it promised relief from his genuine feeling of responsibility for his daughter, and Belle was a noble woman to think of it. But as to actually marrying again—the suggestion had awakened in him all the opposition of a suspicious nature. Gilbert's trust in his fellow beings, as a matter of fact, was so weak that he might never have married in the first place had he been as rich and as important then as now, and, following his wife's death, he was too keenly aware of his position and his personal qualities to trust in the sincerity of any woman. He had even been suspicious of Belle for a while.

It had been a task to allay that suspicion, but she was a deeper woman than he suspected and she had gone about it in exactly the right way, stressing always her abhorrence of men, marriage, "sex," and at the same time employing her physical appeal with a virginal boldness and cunning. She had fluttered like a frightened bird when he began to show his

preference for her and it had required great gentleness on his part to soothe her.

Of course she had succeeded in her design, and why not? She had pondered it for years; she had studied the man himself until his very habits of thought were familiar.

And now this scene with Edith! Just when she, Belle, was feeling most triumphant! It had angered her terribly and yet she realized that it could not have turned out more fortunately for her if she had arranged it in advance. The girl was even more bitter and more unrelenting than she had expected. Small chance of her coming back to spoil things.

Gilbert, on the other hand, seemed to be genuinely possessed with the idea of forcing her to do so—that picture Belle had painted in his mind still persisted—and on their way back to the hotel he gabbled of what he proposed to do and spoke resentfully of enforcing obedience to his will. It seemed to be his idea that it would serve Edith right to be saved.

The wife agreed, tactfully, but at the same time she wondered, with a deep sigh, if it were possible to coerce the child. Or if Edith would stay at home once they got her there. This meeting had been a shock, a heart-break to the speaker. It was terrible to have their hopes crumble into ruins like this, but—repentance cannot be forced.

Devils could be exorcised, the husband fumed. He proposed to lay hands upon this evil and wrench it out. Evil he seemed to consider a solid, material thing which could be pulled, like a bad tooth. Edith would pay for her insults, through the nose; she would live under Belle's eye and obey her slightest wish.

The wife felt like smiling at this. Aloud she confessed that she was sorely wounded at the things Edith had said; they had destroyed all her innocent joy in marriage, they had horrified her. To be so misjudged! To go with open, aching arms, with love and tenderness in her heart, and to be spurned, to be mocked! It was dreadful. She might forgive, but she could never forget. Those accusations, those vile imputations, would live forever in her mind—hideous things to torture her in her dreams. The girl must be possessed, indeed. It was Satan's work. But the child's welfare was more important by far than any question of personal pride, insults were wasted upon the truly humble of heart, and if she refused the love and the care which they yearned to lavish upon her they could at least remove her from her unhealthy surroundings and perhaps get her under some good religious influence.

Gilbert didn't know about that. He clung to the idea of wholesome discipline.

But early the following afternoon his detective reported that Edith had fled from her lodging house and had sought refuge with one of the cabaret employees, a girl named Dupont. The operative had followed her and he had made some inquiries about the character of the place and the reputation of the Dupont woman. Neither was very good. Naturally, the father was angered and he was for immediately taking such steps as he could to enforce his authority as a parent. But here his wife intervened. Welfare work had familiarized her with certain disciplinary measures of which Gilbert knew little, and after questioning the operative closely she began to outline a course of procedure which intrigued her husband more and more as it was unfolded. He was in exactly the mood to listen.

There was a long and earnest conversation among the three of them, and when it was finished the detective left to get in touch with certain officers on the vice squad with whom he had a personal acquaintance.

It did not take Edith long to decide that she was not going to like her new home. For one thing, she did not fancy Amy's friend, a Miss Billee Gonzales by name. Miss Gonzales affected the Castilian in manner and in dress, but aside from a head of black hair and a pair of bold black eyes she showed no indications of Spanish origin. She spoke with a dialect, to be sure, but it was the kind that comes from across Brooklyn Bridge. Her r's had a way of disappearing when most needed and reappearing when least necessary—as on the ends of perfectly simple words terminating in certain vowel sounds. When Edith first arrived she was just leaving to keep an "oily" date with the hair-dresser for an "erl" shampoo. She spoke of her stage work, but later, when Edith questioned Amy about this, the latter declared, vaguely:

"Billee's done 'most everything. She's kind of a free lance now. I teamed up with her because we don't clash. Always pal around with a brunette, dearie. Since I quit gadding, she's been on her own a good deal, and she'll be glad of you."

Recalling the gossip at Downing's, Edith inferred that this reference to gadding was aimed at the speaker's friendship with Clark, and in fact there was ample evidence in Amy's room that he was a frequent caller.

All in all, Edith would have at once moved elsewhere had it not been for the fact that she had paid her share of the week's rent in advance.

That night, on her way home from work, as she turned into the apartment house a stranger accosted her. Edith hurried past him and into the building. It was not her first experience of the sort, for at this time of night young men in quest of amusement were common.

Miss Gonzales, in negligée, was reading when Edith let herself into the apartment; she had been to a movie earlier in the evening with a gentleman friend. He had just left—nice fella and he lived in Mount Voinon. Or was it Katoner? Amy was having supper with Mr. Clark and they wouldn't be in till all hours. He appeared to be wild about Amy and he peeled money the way a snake sheds its skin. He had a lot of rich friends, too.

Edith inquired curiously if the speaker had met Clark's chum, Norman Van Pelt.

Miss Gonzales ceased chewing gum. "Do *you* know that rowdy? Sure I've met him. Him and Clark gave a coupla parties here, but it's hard enough to find an apartment with privileges without having a Thoisday-nighter like him crash in and bust your lease."

Edith did not know what a "Thursday-nighter" might be, and her companion explained cryptically that Van Pelt was always either two days late or a whole lot previous; he was all wet; he fizzed a lot but he never exploded. He was loose when he was tight, and tight when he was loose. His idea of a big time was to smash a stack of plates and his college yell was "Quick and Snappy!"

Later, while Edith was getting ready for bed, she heard the apartment bell ring and then a man's voice in the living-room. She assumed that Clark and Amy had returned, but by and by there came a knock at her door. She opened it to find Billee Gonzales, still in negligée, outside; the latter urged her to slip something on and come out. She had a caller and he could get a friend in a few minutes.

When Edith declined in mingled anger and surprise, she heard another voice:

"Come on! Be a good fellow."

Edith recognized in Billee's caller the man who had spoken to her down stairs. Without a word she slammed the door and locked it. She was shaking with indignation. What a fool she had been to come here! These girls were welcome to her week's rent; she'd move out in the morning. But first she would tell Amy Dupont exactly what she thought of her.

She had completed her uneasy preparations and was about to creep into bed when she heard something that brought her again to the door, this time with her ears strained. From the direction of Billee's room there came a stir, angry voices, a cry, then what sounded like a scuffle. Edith flung open her door in time to behold Billee flying down the hall toward her and to receive her into her arms. Miss Gonzales was gasping, her face was ashen. Behind her strode the stranger. He was no longer smiling; he was grim and purposeful. He said something, but Edith could not understand what it was, for Billee was abusing him hysterically.

For the second time Edith slammed her door in the fellow's face and turned the key. She flung her weight against it. But the man made no attempt to force it open; she heard him pass on and open the outside door. He spoke to some one; another voice answered.

"What is it? Who are they?" Edith demanded, hoarsely.

"It's no use! They've got us!" The Gonzales girl broke into a shrill cursing of the men outside, of herself, of her luck.

The knob under Edith's hand turned, the door was rattled; the stranger called, in a voice of authority:

"Open up, girls. No use getting excited and making a racket."

Edith flung a cloak about her shoulders; she opened the door.

"What do you want? Who are you?" she fiercely demanded.

The man brushed back his coat lapel and showed a badge. It resembled a large harness buckle: a white enameled S formed the greater part of it.

"I'm sorry, sister, but we're officers. Just a pair of boys from the Vice Squad. Don't make it any harder for us than you have to." He pushed into the room and looked about. "Got a man in here? We'll have to take his name —" He flung open the closet door, stepped to the window and peered out. He saw the owner's affrighted eyes fixed upon him and said, "It isn't exactly a nice job, but somebody has to do it."

"Looka here, you!" Miss Gonzales calmed herself sufficiently to speak intelligibly. "There ain't a soul in the flat but us, so let's not be foolish. There's no harm done. You ain't going to be hard on a coupla woiking-goils ——"

"I guess she's right, Ed." The speaker addressed his companion. "I didn't see anybody. You better phone for a uniformed man."

“Be a coupla gentlemen! There’s easy ways to fix up these little frays. Don’t be too cruel on us, that’s all; we haven’t got a million dollars——”

“Ever square yourself like this, before?” the officer inquired, curiously.

“Never mind.”

“Who ever shook you down?”

“Now don’t let’s start in calling names. Just you be good boys and say how much.”

In a strangling voice Edith spoke: “Have you— Are you going to— arrest her?”

“She *is* arrested. So are you.”

“*I?* What for?”

Billee Gonzales came to her friend’s defense; furiously she cried: “Lay offa her! What’s she done? She just came here today and she don’t know anything. She’s a good kid.”

“Yeah? Tell that to the judge. Her name’s Gilbert, isn’t it? I thought so. Now, then, into your clothes—the pair of you. We’ve got to take a ride.” The speaker turned to his companion. “Do your stuff, Ed, and let’s push off.”

The second officer left the room; they heard the outer door close behind him.

“Why do you arrest—*me*?” Edith asked. She could not believe it was her own voice she heard, but, for that matter, it did not seem possible that this scene was real—that she was here in the flesh. It was a nightmare. “What have *I* done? What do you accuse me of?”

“I suppose you’ll be booked as an inmate.”

“Inmate?”

“Frequenting a house of ill-fame.”

The girl cried out, she swayed dizzily. Billee Gonzales again turned her wrath upon the intruder, but Edith was too ill, too dazed to understand much. She was, nevertheless, grateful for the latter’s championship.

The man listened patiently, then broke in: “All right! All right! You’re both good girls and we’ll let it go at that, but my pal’s coming back with a uniformed man to look after your flat while you’re away, so hop into your clothes, unless you want to go like you are.”

“How can she dress, with you here?” Billee demanded. “Beat it, you big bum!”

“If she can take ’em off, I guess she can put ’em on——” the policeman began, but Edith implored him:

“Please! I won’t—run away.”

The man shrugged and stepped into the hall.

“We gotta go,” Billee told her in a low tone. “But they can’t hold you.”

“Will it—be in the papers?”

“Soitenly not. Who d’you think you are? This goes on all the time. It’s a doity frame, but we’ll beat it. He asked for you, and I thought you knew him. Ain’t that luck? There oughta be a lawr to make these bulls wear harness. Now, now! Be yourself! They won’t kill you. We’re lucky they weren’t stick-up men.”

To Edith the events of the next few hours were both terrifying and humiliating, but fortunately that first feeling of unreality persisted. She was desperately frightened, of course, and at the same time she felt like an onlooker rather than an actor in the drama and kept asking herself when the performance would end. The machinery of the law is so fashioned as to awaken trepidation in the layman and to fill him with a feeling of utter impotence. Once it is set in motion it grinds on and on and there appears to be no way of stopping it. It is vast, slow-moving, unfeeling; it is a thing to shriek at and to beat one’s fist upon. Edith felt like some poor wretch in a deep pit the walls of which were slowly closing together.

To be arrested, and on such a charge, was worse than disgraceful, it was low and revolting, she felt herself befouled by the very accusation, and yet indignation she seemed to lack; she could not fan her sense of injustice into a blaze. All she could feel was shame and a sick paralysis of mind and body that made coherent thought or speech impossible. Involuntarily she clung to the Gonzales girl, to whom her plight was chargeable. Billee at least seemed to understand and to be prepared for what was coming.

After the ride to the precinct station house, a horrid experience, there followed the ritual of booking. An emotionless man behind a desk asked numerous questions and entered the answers. In the background hovered a horde of professional bondsmen—nocturnal birds of prey poised ready for a swoop.

Edith tried to make herself heard, and so did her companion, but their efforts availed nothing. They were under the wheels, they pleaded no longer with men, but with pieces of machinery. Here all was grooved, the bearings were oiled, the machine itself was propelled by something vaster than any one or all of them.

Bail was set at five hundred dollars and the prisoners were given an opportunity to communicate with friends or relatives. Then the bondsmen flapped down upon them. In Edith they inspired a new terror; she could understand only vaguely what it was they proposed. Her companion drew her aside and explained that here was the chance to avoid a night in jail; the cost would be one hundred dollars each. But Edith did not have one hundred dollars.

"You'd better get it, somehow. Hit the phone." When her listener looked helpless, Billee exclaimed, impatiently, "My Gawd! you must have at least *one* friend with a hundred!"

"Amy is the only——"

"That's out! That uniformed cop's liable to grab her when she comes in. Her and Clark!"

"Mr. Clark would help us if he were here."

"But he won't be here. They don't pinch the men. Only the goils. The man gives a phony name and walks out, and the goil takes a ride. It isn't against the lawr for a man to get caught. Wasn't you off yachting with some Wall Street fella? How about him?"

"Oh, no, no! I'd die first!" Edith exclaimed. "My father's in the city somewhere, but—I wouldn't let him know, either. That's what I'm so afraid of."

"Well, if you don't mind putting in the night, it's a good way to save a C. I've got enough to spring myself, but that's all. If I was you, I'd stand for it. They can't do a thing to you if you tell the judge how it happened. Chances are the officer'll tell the truth. I wish I had half your chance, but I've beaten this thing twice a'ready and your luck runs out in time."

"Suppose I should be fined? I can't pay——"

"Gee! but you've got the heebie-jeebies! They don't fine you on this charge. You go in or you go out. The officer's gotta swear you took his money and exposed yourself and offered to—Y'understand! How's he gonna hook that on you? Why, you're as clean as a robin. Anyhow, it's a

joke, the foist time. Don't you worry. They'll put you up at the Crittenden Home and you'll be back in the flat by noon."

Whatever could be said of Billie Gonzales's moral character, she was at least sincere in her effort to cheer, and her concern was genuine. Edith felt a reluctant glow of gratitude. She was calm enough now to think of Pearl Gates, of Rosen, and of Downing, but it was too late to reach either of the men and it was doubtful if Pearl could, or would, help her. In view of Billee's assurances, it seemed infinitely better to endure the ignominy of a night behind bars, rather than to advertise her disgrace by a possibly futile effort to communicate with any one of those three.

When Miss Gonzales had arranged her own bail she made a final plea to the officer on the desk, saying: "It's an outrage to hold my little friend here and you oughta let her go. I'll see she comes to court. Be decent, for once in your life, sargent. Why, she thinks you're going to hang her! Can't you fix it?"

"Don't be foolish. How can I fix anything?"

"But she don't know what it's all about. Honest! She's a small-town goil and as nice as your own daughter. She's got a job and she don't have to go wrong——"

"I know. I know. But she's booked. There's a charge against her. If she can't get bail I'll have to send her down to Jefferson Market."

"Why not the Florence Crittenden Home? She's no bob-haired bandit. I tell you it's the foist time she ever sawr a policeman. You can't send her down there."

The sergeant was good-natured enough to explain: "There's no room at the Home. They're remodeling, or something. They'll treat her right at the Market and she should worry which place she goes."

From importunate Billee became indignant, her black eyes flashed. The idea of holding a decent, refined, hard-working girl all night in Jefferson Market prison! On what? Nothing! What had she done? Not a thing! How could any decent girl get bail at three o'clock in the morning? Arrested! So a cop could hold his job. This was worse than Russia! It was enough to "make a poison's blood berl."

But nothing came of this appeal. Edith, in company with several other prisoners, some white, some black, some drunk, some evidently under the influence of drugs, was driven to Jefferson Market Prison. She rode in a patrol wagon and she went under guard.

Edith had never heard of this latter place until tonight; she found it more drab, more dreary, more terrifying than her imagination had pictured it. The van drew up beside a huge smoky red building; the arrivals were herded through a door and into a bare room. The door clanked heavily to behind them. It was barred. So, too, were the windows.

Again names and pedigrees were taken and entered in a huge volume; then the prisoners were turned over to a massive matron. They filed out through a second iron door and into an elevator, the gate of which was closed and locked behind them. The elevator itself was typical of the place, of the law—it ran slowly, heavily, but smoothly.

More turning of keys and slow pushing of metal doors, then a naked room fitted with a long table and a few chairs. Here the women were searched. Hatpins, nail-files, cosmetics were taken away from them. On one woman was found a vial of drugs.

Edith did as the others did; she heard words, but they left no impress upon her numbed brain; she merely obeyed orders. She was beyond protest. The night seemed interminably long; she felt as if weeks had passed since calamity fell.

More corridors, more steel doors set in brick jambs, more locks, more jingling keys. Locks! Locks! Everything was locked. The women wore bunches of keys at their belts. They were ponderous, middle-aged women and they moved slowly, like that elevator, like the doors. Everything was massive, leaden, heavy-gaited to keep step with the law.

The place was clean but sordid. There was a sudsy, antiseptic smell to it almost as offensive as the odor of filth. It was a smell suggestive of unspeakable foulness. Edith's nostrils sickened, her soul was nauseated, she shrank from contact with the very walls.

Followed another deliberate journey, this time up a flight of iron stairs, through still another grated door to the cell block. The cells were brick, their doors were secured on the outside by enormous folding locks massive enough to defy a crowbar. One of them closed, slid into place, behind Edith; she found herself in a ten-foot, sound-proof crypt against one wall of which was slung by chains a narrow folding canvas bunk. There was a pillow on it and two folded blankets. Opposite was a little wooden bench, and in the corner was a stationary washstand and toilet. She was alone.

Chapter Fifteen

There are times when sleep is not a sweet restorer—when it serves merely to drive away that merciful numbness which succeeds a paralyzing shock and is followed by a keener sensibility to pain. So it proved in Edith's case. She dozed fitfully during those early morning hours; complete nervous and physical exhaustion was responsible for that, but she awoke to a more cruel appreciation of her plight. The monstrous injustice of it was only beginning to make itself felt. She was still bewildered, overpowered by shame, and depressed by that feeling of utter helplessness, that formless dread inspired by locks and bars and cold, thick walls.

It was all so unbelievable, so hideous! Everything about this catastrophe offended everything in her and she was so completely out of place here that her mind stupidly refused to function. The very nature of Billee Gonzales's offense and of the crime with which she herself was charged were but vaguely comprehended, for she had only a sketchy, second-hand acquaintance with them. Such things were seldom referred to. To hear them openly discussed by strangers, to hear words spoken such as she had heard the night before, had left her tongue-tied.

No, this thing had happened to somebody else. The suddenness of it! But calamities came that way. Who can foresee a thunderbolt?

Nevertheless, is was grotesque. Why, only yesterday she had been the pampered guest of luxury, the intimate friend of Jesse Hermann. Hermann the mighty! That room of hers on the *Swan*, with its gay, splashy chintzes, its easy, overstuffed chairs, its thick carpet and warm lights! It wasn't a stateroom at all, but a boudoir in some magnificent home. Men to wait on her; yacht tenders, gleaming with mahogany and brass and swifter than sea birds, at her beck and call. Automobiles! Music! Laughter! Sunshine! Freedom! Yes and—those mornings with Van Pelt! Today—painted brick, a concrete floor, a bunk hung on chains, and a steel door with an outside lock which her white hands could scarcely have turned had they been allowed to try! Beyond those walls bedraggled women of the night; thieves, drug fiends, and—worse!

Oh, it was too fantastic to credit! And yet it was true. Edith felt a sudden panicky urge to beat upon her bars and scream the name of Jesse Hermann. He could free her.

At six o'clock a matron called her and ordered her to get up, make herself presentable, and prepare for breakfast. In the gallery outside her door she saw that a number of white enameled tables were being set with dishes. Through the barred windows beyond filtered a pale yellow sunshine.

Breakfast was simple but hot. Edith ate a little, but tasted nothing, for her attention was riveted upon her fellow prisoners and that mental nausea of the night before had recurred. They were more drab, more repulsive now than then. Some were sullen, some apprehensive, others were defiant. All were deeply depressed.

One of them inquired of the matron what judge was sitting. The name Edith heard meant nothing to her.

"Is he an easy judge? Or is he hard-boiled?"

The matron smiled. "I never appeared before him, so I can't tell you." It was evidently her stock answer.

Later she told Edith, "No use of taking things too hard, miss. You've got till ten o'clock. Isn't there anybody you want to get in touch with?"

"No! Nobody! What will we have to do? Is there another—patrol wagon?"

"Bless you, no. The court's right in this building. You've never been here before, have you?"

Edith shook her head; her eyes were strained. "I don't know in the least what I'm expected to do. You'll tell me——?"

"Sure! Sure! You just take it easy."

"What have these women done?"

"Why, if you'd ask them they'd tell you they hadn't done a thing. And you'd believe them. On the books they're charged with all sorts of things—petty crimes, you know. That colored girl who came in with you is a shoplifter. The woman by the window yonder is a drug addict. She's been here before and you can see what ails her. Most of the others are just prostitutes."

Edith gasped. Before she realized what she was doing she had clutched the speaker's sleeve and was explaining incoherently how she came to be here, imploring her help.

"There, now! It's no use to tell me. You'll have a chance to tell the judge, and he's easy on first offenders."

"But I'm not an offender. I've done nothing. I didn't even know——"

"If that's the case, don't act like one. You just get hold of yourself. You can either walk around here in the corridor or go back and lie down. Everything will come out all right."

Ten o'clock was forever in coming, but at last the prisoners were taken downstairs—again that monotonous unlocking and locking of doors—and there turned over to still another matron. From a room they passed on the way issued that penetrating hospital smell Edith had noticed the night before, and through the open door could be seen cases of instruments and what looked like an operating table. She wondered dully what purpose they served in a place like this. She was to learn later.

Across a covered bridge they were led. The new matron again catechized them and again wrote down their answers. Then they were locked into waiting-rooms. There were two of these, bare rooms supplied only with benches and running water; in one the thieves were confined, in the other were held the prostitutes. Edith was placed with the latter.

More waiting while the women, one after another, were taken out to the complaint window. When Edith's turn came she was led to a tiny aperture which looked out into a room peopled with men. They were the officers who had made the arrests. A document was thrust through the window and she was told to sign it. She obeyed. Then she was returned to the waiting-room. Her knees were trembling under her when she sank to a seat. When would all this end? When could she make known her innocence and flee this place of horrors?

It seemed hours before she was finally called and found herself given in charge, this time of a woman court attendant in a blue uniform. Her ordeal had come! Thank God the end must be near! The woman took her arm, guided her stumbling out into the courtroom, then halted her just inside the door.

It was an enormous room, lighted from opposite ends by smoke-grimed windows of stained glass which were doubtless intended to afford it an ecclesiastic dignity, but which somehow failed. Rows of half-filled benches occupied the rear; a railing separated them from the ample inclosure in front of the judicial dais.

The judge was a slender, white-haired man: he had the face of a student and the black robe he wore heightened his scholarly appearance. With a mortar-board upon his head he would have resembled a regent of some

university. Behind him was a huge, gloomy, black-walnut partition shaped not unlike a sounding board; below him sat a court stenographer and a uniformed clerk.

He was talking with a man who Edith later discovered was the assistant district attorney and with the bondsman who had gone Billee Gonzales's bail. The latter was excited and unhappy. Edith looked for the Gonzales girl, but did not see her, and the reason was made plain when the woman at her side said:

"That girl who was arrested with you last night isn't here and her bondsman thinks she has jumped her bail."

Edith stared uncomprehendingly at the speaker. "Isn't she—coming?"

The other shrugged. "Sometimes they run away, but they're usually caught. Then it goes hard with them. We'll wait here."

It was impossible to hear what was being said at the judge's desk, for the voices were low pitched and there was a constant rustle and movement of people coming and going.

Standing there at the door which led to the prison, Edith Gilbert felt like some frightened captive exposed upon the slave block; she was certain that every eye in the room was fixed upon her and was a witness to her shame. The faces dissolved, began slowly to gyrate; she felt deathly faint.

Her name was called, she moved, or was propelled, forward. Over and over she whispered: "I must be calm. I must tell how it happened. I must tell everything."

By and by somebody placed a chair for her and she sat down upon it. The judge was saying something to her, asking her something. The district attorney came over to her and repeated it. He asked if she had counsel. She shook her head. Didn't she wish to have an attorney? She would be allowed time in which to get one. Again she declined and at last found voice enough to say that all she wished was to tell her story to the judge.

The officer who had made the arrest was called, took the stand, and was sworn. It did not take him long to make his case.

He had received information that the apartment at such-and-such an address was being run as a disorderly house and that the prisoner was an inmate. He had gone there about two a.m. the night before and asked to see her. Another woman, the Gonzales girl, had admitted him and had called the prisoner, but she had refused to do more than partly open the door to her

bedroom. He had assumed from this that some one was in the room with her. The Gonzales woman had offered to commit an act of prostitution—the details of this he recited boldly, unemotionally—and he had arrested both her and the prisoner.

There was some questioning by both the district attorney and the judge. Edith was asked if she cared to cross-question the officer. She did not. Then she was called to the stand and sworn.

Through white lips she answered the first routine questions, then gave her version of the affair. The judge listened attentively, but she could not divine whether or not he put credence in her words.

The prosecutor interrogated her. When had she moved into the apartment? On the day before—on the morning of the day of her arrest. It was her first night there.

How long had she known the Gonzales woman? Edith answered frankly.

Did she know for what purpose the apartment was used? Certainly not.

How had she come to move there? Who was Amy Dupont? Had she heard nothing, seen nothing to make her think the apartment was not a decent place in which to live? Where had Edith resided before? Why had she changed her address?

In answering the last question, Edith managed to evade mention of her real reason; she could not bring herself to drag her father into this even by speaking his name. She had been dissatisfied where she was living, so she explained. If she had dreamed that the new place was not respectable she would have shunned it.

So it went. The district attorney was, of course, skeptical of her innocence. When the judge took his turn at quizzing her she replied with a sincerity and candor that had its effect.

A stranger had come up from the body of the courtroom, had drawn the district attorney aside, and was whispering to him, but Edith's eyes were fixed imploringly upon the ascetic face above the black robe.

The judge made a pronouncement finally that brought unspeakable relief to the girl:

"It seems to me that this is a pretty weak case. The charge is frequenting a disorderly house, but the prisoner maintains that she was totally ignorant of the nature of the place, and there is no evidence to the contrary. She testifies that she came there innocently enough, only a few hours before her

arrest. There has been nothing to prove that she knew the kind of place it was or that she herself committed or offered to commit a misdemeanor. It is quite conceivable that any innocent girl, under similar circumstances, might stray into such a place. This girl has a position which enables her to support herself decently. All this, coupled with the fact that the officer beheld no direct evidence of wrong-doing on her part, inclines me to believe her story. Unless further evidence is offered, I can do no less than discharge her."

Edith felt her spine give way, a sudden desire to cry came over her, and she had to bite her lips, hang on to herself. Here was no place for a scene. But the tears would rise; the judge's face, the courtroom became indistinct.

The prosecutor was saying something—something about a witness who wished to be heard. . . . Into Edith's blurry field of vision came a familiar figure—her father's!

She choked down a wild, glad impulse to call his name and to stretch out her arms to him as she had done when she was a little girl. Here was deliverance, here was sanctuary. Here was an end to all her terrors! Her father! He had heard, somehow, and he had come to her.

There was no use longer trying to hold in; a retching sob shook her; she bowed her head and let the tears flow.

She was back in her chair; her father had taken her place. How stern, how impressive he was; and how magnificent in comparison with these people! What a handsome man he was; and how clean, how meticulous! At heart he was a good man, too; faults he had, but they were petty and at a crisis he was as dependable as Gibraltar. Edith felt wretchedly ashamed of herself for having forced this supreme humiliation upon him. Of course she'd go home with him now, and mold her life to suit his wishes. After this she could do no less.

Henry Gilbert was indeed bitterly humiliated; this was the most painful hour of his life, and, as he told himself, the cruelest test of his character. That he could rise to it was due to Belle, his wife, whose grief matched his, but whose vision was clearer and whose wisdom was far greater.

He began by giving his name, residence, and business, together with some of the high positions he held in the important reform and welfare organizations at home. The judge, the district attorney, all within hearing of his voice listened attentively.

Edith realized that her father had not once looked at her; not even when he passed her on his way to the stand. He was facing the judge now and she

had difficulty in making out his words. Doubtless that accounted for her misunderstanding him; he didn't seem to be testifying in her behalf at all. She strained forward and the tears dried on her cheeks.

Briefly, what Henry Gilbert told the court was this; his daughter was, and always had been, a "difficult" girl and a grave "responsibility." She was rebellious to discipline and her conduct and her choice of associates had ever been a cause for extreme apprehension on his part. She had run away from home, or at least she had left against his pleadings, and had come to New York, where she had fallen under influences that threatened to bring ruin upon herself and disgrace upon him. Worried to distraction, he had come on to protest, and in all sincerity to reason with her; above all, to urge her lovingly, kindly, to return home. He had found her working in a cabaret, so called, a public resort where drinking went on more or less openly and where the entertainment was vulgar if not actually indecent. Her "work" consisted of singing lewd and suggestive songs. Aside from this, a confidential investigation of her private life had verified his worst fears; he had learned that her associates were common and that she was in grave danger of moral destruction, if indeed his efforts to save her had not already been too long delayed.

It grieved him to make these wretched disclosures. The judge could perhaps imagine with what painful reluctance he made this harrowing confession.

The court interrupted him to inquire:

"Do you mean to charge that your daughter is not a virtuous girl?"

Edith felt that she must scream. Who was that monster made up like Henry Gilbert—her father? Here was a nightmare, indeed. Had she gone wholly mad?

Mr. Gilbert flushed, paled, stammered; there was abject suffering in his eyes. He hoped that Edith had not gone that far. He had prayed— But she was on terms of questionable intimacy with an enormously rich man, much older than herself, and he had showered her with benefactions. They had gone away together on the latter's yacht. The speaker preferred to withhold the man's name, unless the court insisted——

Edith broke out in a strangling voice, but the woman at her side checked her.

The point Gilbert wished to make was that no good girl could remain good in the environment his daughter had chosen. So he had told her. But

she refused to listen, she had defied him when he threatened to compel her to return home. This it was which accounted for her presence in that evil-odored apartment—she had fled there to avoid him. He it was who had made complaint of the place and inspired the arrests. Prompt action, under the circumstances, he had deemed imperative.

"She has explained her presence there reasonably enough," the judge declared, "and you have told me nothing to indicate that she knew what sort of place it was. On the contrary, you have satisfactorily accounted for it. What is more, I'm inclined to believe her statement that she would have left at once if she had known. About her position, I know Downing's restaurant, and the place is respectable enough. I'm sure you don't mean to charge that it is a dive or that all the entertainers on the program are immoral. Their surroundings I assume to be much the same as they would encounter in other public places of entertainment, and I dare say the performers themselves are no better or no worse than the average.

"The fact remains, however, that your daughter was, for the time being, an inmate of a disorderly house and therefore in moral jeopardy. I am forced to consider, also, the other things you have told me. This isn't the first time parents have come to the court for aid, and I can't ignore your appeal. Do you wish me to send the girl home? Parole her in your custody?"

"I fear that would be useless," Gilbert told him. "She declares that nothing would induce her to stay there."

"Is that true?" The judge directed his question at Edith. "What have you to say?"

The girl rose; her face was blanched, stricken; she felt as if iron fingers were at her throat. "I left home because we couldn't—get along. What he told you is true only on the surface; the rest is a lie. There's no truth in any of it. I've kept myself clean. He's a—a filthy-minded man. Mother told him so, and she knew."

"Did you refuse to go home? Threaten to run away if be compelled you to go back?"

"Yes."

"Do you still refuse?"

"You—don't understand. He has married again. I couldn't—not after this."

Gilbert spoke. “My wife joined in our appeal. She is heart-broken. She has had a wide experience in welfare work, Your Honor, and she is actively associated with some of our most important charities and reforms. It is our wish that Edith shall be removed from her present environment and her moral welfare placed in stronger, more capable hands than ours.”

The judge pondered: “My powers are clearly limited and well defined,” said he. “Under the State Charities law any female between the ages of ten and thirty years, upon conviction of being a common prostitute or frequenting a disorderly house, and who is not mentally or physically incapable of being substantially benefited by the discipline of such an institution, may be sentenced and committed to the State Reformatory for Women at Bedford. Do you and your wife feel that she is capable of being substantially benefited by such a commitment?”

Gilbert hesitated, he rolled his eyes, as was his habit when in great mental distress. It was a moment before he managed to say:

“I—we do.”

Edith uttered a cry of anguish, a wave of blackness rolled over her, she all but collapsed. The attendant was supporting her, holding a glass of water to her lips when the blackness went away; the judge was talking, but his voice was indistinct and his words were jumbled.

Then Henry Gilbert, pale, stern, deeply shaken, left the stand; he did not turn his eyes in Edith’s direction as he passed her.

The prisoner was informed that she would be held for a period of forty-eight hours, pending a thorough investigation. Until that time the judge reserved his decision. Was there anything further that she wished to say? For the moment there was nothing. What could she say, except to repeat her story, to plead, to implore?

Somehow she got to her feet and was led out of the courtroom, back across the bridge of sighs and into the prison wing. One after another the iron doors opened and swallowed her—they were like jaws. Her cell door shut behind her, that enormous lock slid into place again.

More endless hours of physical inaction and acute mental torture. Too late she regretted her refusal to send out a call for help, for when, in desperation, she decided to appeal to Jesse Hermann, she was denied permission. From now on she was incommunicado. She could neither ask aid nor could anybody see her.

On the following morning she was put through an ordeal more repugnant, more shocking to a girl of tender sensibilities than anything she had so far undergone. She was taken down to that room with the surgeon's table, the instrument cases, and the hospital smell, and there forced to undergo a thorough medical examination. The memory of it was horrifying; she came away hysterical. She had never dreamed that such things could be. The law had seized her, torn away her clothing, mauled her body, handled her like some brood animal.

When it was over she was returned to her cell for another twenty-four hours pending a report upon her Wasserman test.

Solitary confinement, the creeping terror of this place of iron and brick and cement, the resistless onward movement of the grooved machine, had its effect. Shame, indignation, disappeared and were succeeded by a sickening apprehension, a grinning skeleton sat on the hard bench at her side and lay down with her on her bunk. Her sense of wrong became apathetic, died; terror took its place; and finally despair. She could realize clearly but one thing—her own flesh and blood had brought this on her. This was her father's doing.

In the back of her mind she retained the fragment of a line she had read somewhere, something about "remorseless hands clutching at the white throat of innocence." That expressed it. Her father's hands were at her throat; they were soft, pink-nailed, flabby hands, but they were remorseless indeed, and their strength was the strength of bigotry. Their sinews were tough, their bones were made of steel.

He a "good" man! She laughed mirthlessly and felt within herself the slow turning over of all her ideas of goodness and virtue, a futile rage against all the Henry Gilberts and that social system which permitted such people to impose their wills, wreak their "goodness," upon others. And their faith in themselves! She remembered seeing the letterhead of some organization, some fellowship of zealots, to which he belonged, upon which was proudly emblazoned the astonishing motto or challenge, "We who are right with God." The smug satisfaction of that! The amazing conceit! Why, men like her father were defeating God. Witch-burning still went on, and the law abetted it. What use to fight the tyranny of virtue? What strength was in her white hands to spread the jaws that had closed upon her? The law had even gagged her so that she could not cry for help.

It was a haggard, hopeless creature, a frail, drooping girl with chalky cheeks and tragic shadows under her eyes, who was arraigned before the

magistrate on the third morning after her arrest. With an indifference almost fatalistic she heard herself committed to Bedford Reformatory for an indefinite term, “but in no event for longer than three years.”

The judge made it plain that he imposed this sentence not as punishment for the crime charged against her, but by reason of her father’s earnest representation that she was in grave moral jeopardy and that she would be “substantially benefited by the discipline” of the institution. It was the court’s duty to heed the plea of any parent and the prayer of one of such proven integrity and high character as Henry Gilbert could not be ignored.

As Edith left the courtroom she saw for the first time that her father had been present to see virtue crowned and evil put to death. He and Belle were just passing down the aisle. Mr. Gilbert was wiping his eyes and blowing his nose; his wife was comforting him.

Chapter Sixteen

On the way back to their hotel, Henry Gilbert confessed to his wife that he was exhausted. This had been a harrowing ordeal; his efforts to see and to do the right thing, although prayerful, had left him low in mind and body. He was ready now to go home.

Belle acceded, but without enthusiasm. What a cruel disappointment they had endured! To have set their hearts upon taking Edith back with them and to meet—this! It was discouraging. She knew how he had suffered, but he had handled a difficult situation with the utmost delicacy. It had been a true test of character. He had been splendid.

Nevertheless, it was a pity to cut short their honeymoon. She wondered if it was considerate of her to allow Henry to go right back to Hopewell, where everything would so cruelly remind him of Edith—Belle was thinking aloud. He had the sensitive heart of a woman, and he would permit it to bleed. She proposed to be more than a mere wife in name, and her first duty was to stanch his wounds. In all ordinary things his wish was her law, but—it was her wifely duty to help him forget what had happened. So ran her reasoning. She made a decision for both of them—they would not go home just yet.

They had closed a painful chapter in their lives, but it was closed. And life isn't all sentiment; it is largely common sense. She had a lot of shopping to do; there were many points of interest in New York which they owed it to themselves to visit—the Aquarium, the Museum of Natural History, Grant's Tomb. They should see some of the more thought-provoking plays, too. They had seen nothing, as yet. What they needed was some healthful, helpful, thought-inspiring recreation. After she had had time in which to make herself presentable—remember, she was no longer Belle Galloway, but Mrs. Henry Gilbert—they could run down to Atlantic City and Washington. They could then stop off at Niagara Falls, on the way home. Travel is so broadening.

For the first time in their brief married life Gilbert showed impatience—petulance, in fact. There was no enjoyment in gallivanting about to cheap places of amusement, so he declared. And there were splendid shops in Hopewell. He was in no mood to be entertained; he was a grief-stricken father. What would people say if—? No! They would leave that night.

But they did not leave that night, for shortly after they had arrived at their hotel the telephone rang. One of the metropolitan newspapers was calling Mr. Gilbert about a story from the Woman's Court in which he was concerned.

Gilbert could act promptly and with force when occasion demanded. He promised to come down at once, but first he called that detective agency and enlisted its aid.

He was gone all that afternoon and most of the evening. When he returned he was indeed exhausted, but he announced, triumphantly:

"I think I've managed to keep it out of the papers."

"I'm so glad. I hope it didn't cost much."

He shrugged. "I'm afraid it will cost plenty before we're through with it. I couldn't offer money, myself, of course—the agency will attend to that; but I went directly to the more important editors and made a personal appeal. I told them who I am. I brought to bear all the local influence I could summon at such short notice. If I were at home, I could handle it easily, but—" He frowned. "What I fear most is that it will get into our Hopewell papers. That would ruin me. They don't like me, anyhow. These fellows didn't seem to care much what it meant to me, but they did pay some attention when I showed what it would mean to Edith. I had to throw myself entirely upon their mercy and appeal on her behalf. After all, she's merely undergoing corrective discipline. I made them see how gravely it would affect her future to be branded as an inmate of a penal institution, so there's some good in them, after all. It's fortunate that I possess ability as an actor. Not that my tears were counterfeit, you understand"—he added this hastily—"but in dealing with these newspaper men, any artifice is pardonable."

"Do you think you can continue to cover up a thing of this sort?" Belle inquired.

Gilbert looked up, startled. "Heavens, yes! Otherwise I'd never have lent myself to it. If it ever becomes known at home we'll be the sufferers, not she."

It is not impossible to smother stories of small importance even in a city with as many newspapers and news agencies as New York, but it is no easy task nor one which can be accomplished in a few hours. For a couple of days Henry Gilbert came and went, used his best powers of persuasion and brought outside influences to bear. He spent money, too; or at least that agency made disagreeable demands upon him which he dared not protest

and for which he never received an accounting. And meanwhile he experienced sensations which made him feel a good deal like the driver of a dynamite wagon. The time came, however, when he could breathe easily.

He saw little of Belle during this interval, for she was either shopping or being fitted or having scalp and facial treatments or what not. She, too, was worn to the bone, but she confessed, with a candor which deeply touched him, that it was a truly wonderful experience and she proposed to be a credit to him, no matter what it cost her in time and effort. This rather took the sting out of her bills, which were very much larger than he had anticipated. He wondered if Belle would prove to be an extravagant wife.

Justifiable pride, real dignity, and sincere concern for her personal appearance befits any woman; extravagance is a sin. Gently he remonstrated; he questioned the advisability of buying quite so many gowns —he called them dresses, but she corrected him sweetly. Styles so quickly change.

It did seem a shame, she agreed. But remember she was not buying for herself alone. Not only was it her duty to look well in her own person, but for his sake it was likewise necessary for her family to be a credit to the Gilbert name and prestige. Her mother was the simplest, sweetest, most economical person in the world, but he couldn't afford to have her make a bad impression upon his friends.

Gilbert remembered now that Belle had a mother; something about his wife's words, or tone, impelled him to inquire:

"Is she—ah—planning to visit us?"

He received a startled glance, then Belle smiled.

"You poor man! You have indeed been distracted, but no wonder! How could I expect you to remember, or to think of my family, when your own was the cause of such concern? Of course she's coming to see us. Right away. Don't you recall—? . . . I suppose my letters are to blame; my accounts of you were so glowing that she's all aquiver. She writes the loveliest things about 'her son.' Oh, you have a reputation to live up to! But I didn't exaggerate." The speaker stooped over Gilbert's chair and pressed a hurried, tightly-puckered kiss upon his silver hair. Belle had never thoroughly thawed out. She had softened somewhat in the heat of his occasional ardor; nevertheless she refused to become pliant, she still remained the spinster, and this caress of hers was little more than a furtive,

guilty peck. “I couldn’t begin to make them know how—wonderful you are.”

“ ‘Them’?” Gilbert echoed the pronoun vacantly.

“Momma and sister Blanche.”

“Really? I’d forgotten you have a sister.”

“Why, *Henry*! How queer!” A moment of silence, then: “But there! You haven’t hurt my feelings in the least. Only—I had no idea you were so upset. But you mustn’t let them know you forgot they are coming. That would be terrible! I’ve been hoping Blanche could take Edith’s place— Don’t you remember what I said? Or didn’t you hear me at all?” Another patient smile. “She’s younger than I—about Edith’s age, but of course nothing like her. I do hope you’ll learn to know and to love her. You’re sure to get along with brother—Sonny, everybody calls him. He makes friends so fast; he’s so ‘hail-fellow-well-met.’ Sonny is such a good mixer that I tell him he ought to be a politician.”

With a look of bewilderment in his eyes Gilbert murmured an apology for his absorption in his own personal affairs. Belle readily accepted it. Really, they were only just beginning to get acquainted with each other; she was reticent and he was absentminded. It was all her fault. Sometime she wanted to hear all about his relatives. Having never met hers, how could she expect them to have a place in his thoughts? But they had occupied a place in hers, never fear. She had for years been the family provider—a poor one, to be sure, by reason of her position, but she had done her best. And she loved them. She said little, but she felt deeply. That was her way. Why burden others with one’s private worries and personal obligations? Not that her family had given her occasion for any such worry as—well, as Edith had given—or that it was not a blessed obligation to care for them. No! They were dears. . . . Momma was not in good health, but her little visit would doubtless benefit her. Blanche had to wait on her, hand and foot, and of course they couldn’t leave Sonny behind. . . . Belle was eager for Sonny to know Henry: the latter would prove such an inspiration to the boy, such a character-builder. And who could tell? Perhaps Blanche would make a good marriage. Anyhow, they must all look their best when they arrived, and Belle, for the sake of her loved ones, had deprived herself of much that she actually needed. . . . She wondered if Henry would like to inspect some of her purchases. To get just the right things in which to look elegant, and at the same time not to violate her fondness for the conservative, had been rather a task. The matter of negligées, for instance, those informal little “things”

intended for his eyes alone, had given her particular concern. She did so want to be attractive to him, but most of the creations were positively immodest and apparently designed to provoke— Well, she didn't see how decent women could wear some of them. Nevertheless, they did. In fact, there wasn't much else to be bought. She had ordered a few of the simpler models to be sent up for his approval, and if he'd wait while she tried them on— Really, she was a woman in years, but at heart and in actual experience she was just a shy little girl. Didn't it sound simply horrid to talk about trying on negligées for—a man? Marriage was still so new. A delight and an —embarrassment! He must be patient with her.

That breathless flutter which overtook the speaker whenever the fact, rather than the idea, of marriage came home to her had agreeably aroused Gilbert, and he told her by all means to try on the new negligées. What a girl she was!

Funny he couldn't remember any mention of that brother and sister. He supposed he was in for a visit from all three of her relatives, but most wives have relatives. He had no doubt they were proper people.

Belle's negligées evoked a gasp. They were indeed "creations," but there was no denying the fact that they enhanced her robust physical charms. Women should make the most of their looks. Yes, and that timid concern of hers over his verdict was intensely flattering. He pulled her down upon his lap and kissed her.

Soon he had forgotten all about her family and was assuring her warmly that it would exactly suit him to go to Atlantic City and Washington and to stop off at Niagara Falls on the way home. What was this but a honeymoon?

The visit of the three Galloways was not long delayed. Belle's glowing accounts of her groom, it seemed, had kindled such a consuming motherly, brotherly, and sisterly affection that they timed their arrival to very nearly coincide with her and Henry's return to Hopewell. They came, in fact, the next morning.

This, Gilbert felt, was cutting matters a bit thin. Suppose he and his wife had been delayed? However—the sooner they came, the sooner they'd go.

When they did arrive, when he had met them and helped to get them comfortably settled in the house and had taken time to weigh his first impressions, he confessed to a vague disappointment. Reluctantly he admitted that they were not at all what he had expected. Belle's description, her advance work, had been too enthusiastic. In her mother, for instance, he

had been prepared to meet a fragile, flower-faced invalid; instead, Mrs. Galloway turned out to be a globular, dropsical woman who suffered from chronic gastritis and whose color taste was aboriginal, savage. Gilbert was put in possession of all the symptoms of the dread affliction—the stomach, not the color weakness—on their way home from the station, for gastritis proved to be his mother-in-law's favorite topic of conversation. She was painfully agitated at meeting her new son—Belle had warned him that the poor dear was nearly frightened to death at the prospect—but he had a way with elderly women and he soon put her at ease. Once her premonitory fears had been soothed, she surrendered to his charm. She became his abject slave. He was lovely. Much nicer, even, than Belle had said. Such a manner! Such benevolence! And wasn't he *handsome*! Mrs. Galloway voiced her admiration audibly. Belle was the luckiest girl. The speaker was so thankful she could cry. She did.

Nor were Blanche and Sonny exactly what Gilbert had pictured. The sister was perhaps twenty-four or five years old, rather indefinitely pretty, but with a bad complexion. Belle's olive cast ran in the family, but, whereas her skin was smooth and brown, Blanche's was coarse and muddy. It showed plainest on her neck, below the powder. Her neck did not look very clean, the result of train travel no doubt. Gilbert was more than meticulous in his own person, his habits were cleanly; dirt and disorder he classified as minor sins. Women he loved to think of as immaculate, fragrant, pure as snow, and he had so often used the phrase "an orderly mind in a clean body" that he took credit for originating the thought. Blanche Galloway was probably pure enough, morally, but her mind was anything but orderly, and by no sanguine effort of his imagination could he make himself believe that she was fragrant. However, that was nothing; he was ashamed of his hypercritical eye. What was a—a neck like Blanche's if the soul within was pure?

If mother and sister were a disappointment, the brother was a misgiving and a dismay. Sonny turned out to be a lathy, limber-jointed lad with large knuckles and huge, flat feet. There were no cosmetics, as in Blanche's case, to conceal the defects of his complexion: his cheeks were pocked and pimply. His active eyes were small and black and set close to a pointed nose, which gave him much the appearance of a bright, inquisitive fox. But that which shocked the elder man most disagreeably was Sonny's general style, his *tout ensemble*: the fellow's garments offended all accepted ideas of what the well-dressed male should wear. Sonny's socks, his shirt, his necktie, were flagrant, and he wore a "college-bilt" suit, designed after that absurd fashion which followed Royalty's visit to Long Island. It was pearl-gray in

color, the trousers legs were too long, and they were cut with an enormous flare. Sonny's generous feet were incased in heavy tan brogues, and his Fedora hat was of a shade even more perishable than his baggy suit. It was evident at a glance that the boy oiled his hair, for the oil had soaked through and stained his hat ribbon. Of course he smoked cigarettes. He reeked of them.

Now it was not so much the abominable cut of Sonny's suit that offended his fastidious relative as its unmistakable shoddiness. Gilbert abhorred everything cheap and everything extreme; this young man's appearance shouted aloud the fact that he had walked up one flight to save ten dollars.

The family luggage, too. Imitation leather! The kind that Pullman porters forget: bulging telescopes, battered suitcases tied with cord, and several cheap trunks. Sonny Galloway, it seemed, had no false pride, for he asked his brother-in-law where he could hire a dray and declared his cautious intention of riding with the driver to see there was no crooked work. Gilbert, of course, vetoed this proposal. He was immensely relieved when he finally got all three of his visitors into the limousine and away from the station. For the first time since he had owned an automobile he was forced to occupy one of the small folding seats, Belle and her mother having appropriated the large one in the rear.

One pleasant thing about these good people, the husband told himself, they were simple and unaffected and enthusiastic. Sterling qualities, those. Momma raved about the car: she wanted to know how much it had cost, if Henry had bought it new or second hand, and if he kept a regular chauffeur or had hired this one just to meet the train.

She wished Sonny could learn to drive an automobile. Chauffeurs are well paid and it was time Son settled down to something. Perhaps he could learn to drive this one or maybe Henry had an old car that he could practice on.

Blanche was wildly excited at the sights of Hopewell and repeatedly assured her brother-in-law that it had "*more class!*" and that she knew she would simply *love* it. Again and again she knocked on the front window and shrilly called Sonny's attention to something.

The latter was riding with the driver, and making friends with him, too. Belle had not exaggerated when she said the boy was a good mixer; most of the way home the chauffeur wore a broad grin, and once, when they were halted by traffic, Gilbert heard Sonny say:

"I bet you never heard the one about the old maid in the upper berth."

The Gilbert house—all of the new arrivals, by the way, referred to it as Belle's house—was magnificent. And so large, so expensively furnished! Why, it was a mansion. It must have cost— To think of it as *their* home! Momma Galloway was afraid it would take her a long time to get accustomed to so much elegance and to being waited on, hand and foot, by servants. But she was adaptable; she could fit in anywhere. That was a nice thing about her, she was just like an old shoe. Why, she could be happy the rest of her life to sit in a beautiful parlor like this and rock and look out into the yard. Another nice thing: if the servants quit, she and Blanche could pitch right in and do the housework.

Gilbert winced. "Parlor!" "Yard!" "The rest of her life!" He wondered how long they intended to stay. From the amount of baggage on that transfer truck it did not promise to be a short visit.

Well, sincere family affection was altogether too rare these days; he wished there had been more of it in his own family. Belle's relatives certainly adored her, and she them. At the first opportunity he would call her attention, diplomatically, to Blanche's lack of pride in her personal appearance and at the same time he would ask her to caution Sonny against unbecoming familiarity with the help.

Why, the fellow was outside now, joking loudly with the transfer men. As to the boy's clothes, he himself would feed that atrocious suit to the flames, if necessary, and buy him another.

Gilbert had left for the train without reading his morning paper; he settled himself now and unfolded it. He had barely become interested when he was interrupted by sounds at once strange and disagreeable. He heard a patter of feet, the passage of a rushing, scurrying body, then a frenzied barking. There was a dog in the house! Sonny was whistling shrilly and calling it.

A moment, then into Gilbert's presence bounded the liveliest, the most delirious dog he had ever seen. It was large, it was gray, it resembled in some respects a German police dog. At every leap it emitted a yelp, apparently of delight. Around the room it tore, slipping, falling, scrambling; one circuit, and the rugs were in piles.

Gilbert shouted, waved his paper. The dog lunged toward him, vaulted into his lap, and embraced him like a bride. In an excess of misplaced affection it "kissed" him. Before he could in the least protect himself it had

licked his face, gone over it as swiftly and as thoroughly as a paperhanger with a paste brush. Then it was down again, pursuing its mad career. It was a filthy dog; it had recently rolled in a wet place. Gilbert's newspaper was crushed and torn, his trousers were smeared; finger-printed upon his bosom was the muddy outline of a paw.

Sonny Galloway broke into the room, crying:

"Hey you, Otto! Cut it out! *Otto!* You son of a gun!"

Otto was deaf to reproach; he wriggled in a joyful paroxysm which threatened to unjoint his bones; his thrashing tail upset a jardinière. Gilbert had risen; he was trying in one impossible movement to dry his face and to rid his person of mud.

"Whaddya think of him, for eight months old?" the youth inquired, warmly.

"Who let that animal in? Good Heavens! I'm a sight!"

"You shouldn't get sore over a little dirt!" Sonny exclaimed, with a cheerful grin. "It's clean dirt and it'll rub off when it dries. He started rolling in the flower beds the minute I opened his crate."

"Is it—*your* dog?"

"I'll tell the cock-eyed world he's my dog. I'm training him for motion pictures. Big money in pictures. Wait till you see his tricks."

"We don't allow dogs in the house," Gilbert pronounced, stiffly. "I—don't like dogs."

"You'll like this one, all right. You'll be crazy about him in no time. Lookit the way he made friends with you. I mean to say he's *smart*! I call him Otto because he otto be full-blooded, but he ain't. Scandal in his family somewhere. Ha! Ha!" Sonny winked, nudged his brother-in-law. "But what's a little scandal in Hollywood? Eh, Pop? Say, that reminds me of a good story. J'ever hear that one about the girl with the hare lip?"

"Will you please take that creature out? I'll have to change my clothes."

"All right. He's hungry, anyhow. Come along, Otto. Let's go find the hired girl and see what the neighbors brought in."

Luncheon—the Galloways referred to it as dinner—proved an actual ordeal to Gilbert. His new relatives were so eager to make a good impression that they fawned upon him, hung upon his lightest word, and chopped off their own whenever he even threatened to speak. They eyed him

with open admiration; at his most labored pleasantry they burst into uproarious applause. More than once Blanche turned to her sister and said:

"*Isn't* he funny?" or, "I *love* that!" or, "He's simply a *scream*!"

Gilbert grew unbearably self-conscious.

Mrs. Galloway had, by this time, assumed a confidential attitude toward him that was more than motherly. She and Henry understood each other. Theirs was a meeting of settled minds; they shared a community of elderly interests. The man choked. She was treating him like Belle's father instead of her husband!

Again he heard more about his mother-in-law's harrowing ailment: her distress after eating—her "gas attacks," as she called them.

The ceremony of dining appeared to excite conflicting emotions in the good woman; she was appreciative and curious but darkly apprehensive. When a dish was passed to her she eyed it suspiciously and asked what it was before helping herself; when she tasted it she voiced her approval, then ventured the pessimistic prediction that it would disagree with her.

Blanche had not washed her neck as yet, and, although Sonny's table manners were good enough, his nails were in half mourning and he had a loud, braying laugh that was peculiarly trying.

Gilbert wondered if his wife were as sensitive to these things as he was. But evidently she was not. She and Blanche and Sonny were chattering like magpies. What a pity her family had become neglectful of the little niceties which were so natural to her. It—well, it somehow coarsened her.

When lunch was over and he had retired to the library to aid digestion, not with a cigar, but with a stick of chewing gum, he admitted ruefully that Belle's people were indeed coarse, common.

Momma Galloway was toiling upstairs with the aid of the banisters and he could hear her puffing heavily; on the upper landing the sisters were talking eagerly, but in subdued tones. The mother stopped to catch her breath, and Blanche's voice came plainly to the listener:

"He's nice, Belle, but, my goodness, *isn't* he *old*!"

Chapter Seventeen

Lois Alcott was annoyed when her maid informed her that Miss Pearl Gates was calling again. Miss Gates had sent word this time that she simply must see Mrs. Alcott on a matter of great importance. Reluctantly the latter acceded to the demand.

Pearl identified herself by stating that she was a friend of Edith Gilbert's, an announcement which the elder woman greeted with a lift of her brows; then she said, with a sigh:

"My word! You're harder to find than Stanley. This is four times I've been here."

"What is it you wish?"

Pearl had been eying the speaker, apparently trying to weigh her. Doubtfully she began: "It's about Edith. I may be wasting my time, but I hope not. You're a woman. I wanted to talk to you first. Do you know what has happened to her?"

"Why, no. I haven't seen her for—let me see——"

"Then you don't know. She's in trouble."

"Not ill, I trust?"

"No. Worse! But before I give you the bad news I'd like to know how you and she stand. She was your guest on that yachting cruise and I assume you must have liked her. She told me how the party broke up in a row, but I don't know whether you're sore——"

"A 'row'? I don't understand. Strictly speaking we were all guests of Mr. Hermann——"

"I know. He's the dark man I warned her about. That's why I don't want to go to him."

"Why should I be—'sore' at her?" It was an evasive query.

"Hm—m! We don't seem to be getting anywhere, so here I jump, right off the deep end. Maybe you'll feel like helping her and maybe you won't. She has been arrested."

"*Arrested?*"

"That's the well-known word. Arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced. They threw the whole book at her, and she's no more guilty than you are."

"This is astounding! What did she do? Speeding, I presume——"

"Dearie! If you knew the half of it! Murder's a joke to what they pinned on her. In the first place, I suppose it's my fault. Let me tell this my way, then you can cross-question. I'm the prize patsy of the world, Mrs. Alcott. I'm little Helpful Hannah, with a heart the size of a gas tank and a head—say, if ever you need a cue ball, try my skull! It'll never chip. Possibly Edith told you something about her father and why she came to New York?"

"No."

"Well, you'll have to know that to understand. He's a ranting reformer, the king of the sin-seekers and the bootleggers' foe. He's against everything from nicotine to the Pope of Rome. He believes boy babies should be raised on a bottle. Sex stuff! Understand? You know the kind. He's a—a padlocker, and he padlocked Edith. Of course she ran away. But he's rich and I wrote him to come and get her. I told him she was making some bad friends and slipped him the news that all the men in New York aren't Boy Scouts. You know, yourself, Mrs. Alcott, that Jesse Hermann doesn't help *old* ladies across the street.

"Well, that's where I crashed. Father came, all made up for the Avenging Angel, and threatened her. Of course she was frightened. We'd had words, she and I, so without letting me know a thing about it she ran for cover. She hid out with a girl friend, a member of our distinguished cast of artists at the cabaret. I haven't told you, have I, that I help to worry the patrons at Downing's ptomaine parlor? Well, I do. I halt their digestion with a series of sensational handsprings and refined splits."

"What happened to Miss Gilbert?"

"I'm setting the stage for her entrance. In this flat where she went was another girl besides the one Edith knew, and the place was as wide open as a gate. You know the kind of place—all anybody needed to get in was a knuckle. The very night she went there it was raided. The other girl fell for a plain-clothes man, took twenty dollars and wrote her own ticket to Bedford. The first Edith knew, she was arrested as an inmate."

Mrs. Alcott was leaning forward now, interest, incredulity upon her face.

"I didn't hear a word about it for days—I thought Edith had gone home ——then Amy Dupont, our girl, let it out. She happened to be away when

the raid came off and her pal jumped bail. But Edith—Edith was *convicted*! Can you beat that? Honest, when I heard it I thought I was on a third rail."

"How long ago did this occur?"

"Over two weeks. I'm crazy! Why, a thing like that could happen to any girl! I got hold of our orchestra leader and we beat it down to the court. It took us a while to find out what they'd done to her, and then, of course, it was too late. She was gone. All we could learn was that she had been sent up to Bedford for three years. Get that? *Three years*, for not knowing a stranger's business! And, mind you, her first night in the place!"

"I know nothing about such things, but it sounds incredible."

"There's better words than 'incredible.' "

"Are you sure you have all the facts? There must have been evidence. Good girls aren't sent to prison——"

"Wait a minute!" Pearl interrupted in an altered tone. "Take it from me she's a good girl. What's more, you *know* she's a good girl. Didn't you eat ship's biscuits with her for two weeks? Be yourself! I came to you because—well, because I don't want to go to Mr. Hermann. When a man gets over a thousand dollars I mistrust him. But I will go to him if you turn me down. That kid can't stay in Bedford."

"But what can I do?"

"Get her out! I can't tell you how to go about it, but there must be a way. *I* can't do anything—it's much as ever I can talk to a bailiff. And Rosen's no great help. Downing daresn't turn a hand. He's got trouble enough squaring his teacup trade and he can't risk a run-in with the padlockers. You stand for something; you've got money and position and you know people——" The speaker's voice wavered, caught, her face wrinkled, and she blinked hard. "Oh, Mrs. Alcott! If we knew what she's going through. I beat it out there as fast as I could go, but they wouldn't let me see her. She's in quarantine or in solitary for two weeks. It's a *jail*, Mrs. Alcott! And the women in there—thieves, hop-heads, street-walkers! Black ones and white ones! Why, the outside of the place would give you a chatter. Think what it must be inside. My God! And you can sit there and ask—what to—do?" Pearl fumbled blindly in her purse for a handkerchief, dabbed at her eyes, then blew her nose.

Mrs. Alcott was in frowning thought. "I dare say there must be some way to get a girl out of such a place if—she's innocent. But how to go about it——"

"You can find out, can't you? That's more than I can do, without hiring a lawyer. And if he told me, what then? I haven't got a nickel. I couldn't spring a mouse trap."

"It's a penal institution. Innocent or guilty, she'll be—disgraced. She can't live it down. After all, she's only an acquaintance. I'm not called upon to involve myself——"

"No, there's no reason at all for you to lend a hand—unless you're a human being. I hoped maybe you had a heart." Pearl dried her eyes, her lip curled. "If I was chafed by a bankroll of any size I wouldn't bother you, but I figured you were a woman. And women average higher in hearts than men. I'll try Mr. Hermann. If he gives me the air, I've still got an ace buried——"

"Don't misunderstand me," the elder woman protested. "I haven't refused. I merely—want time to—look into this. I'm at a loss how or where to begin. I think I'd better speak to Jesse—Mr. Hermann."

Pearl was all eagerness. "*Will* you? I didn't think much of her running around with him—why she doesn't know who won the war!—but I guess she'd take help from anybody. I'd slip a kiss to Jesse Hermann or Jesse James if he crashed a gate for me."

There was some further talk, then Pearl left with the feeling that at last she had accomplished something for her friend.

But, oddly enough, she heard nothing from Mrs. Alcott, and when, after several days, she telephoned the latter, it was to receive the impatient assurance that the matter was not forgotten and that it would be brought to Mr. Hermann's attention at the first opportunity.

Pearl was in a quandary. Rosen, who, by the way, took Edith's misfortune tragically to heart, had enlisted the aid of some welfare organization, but he could report little progress. Investigation involved the slow unwinding of a bewildering tangle of red tape. Whom next to seek aid from Pearl did not know, unless perhaps young Van Pelt. But Van Pelt was a pal of Amy's friend, Clark, and footless young fellows of their calibre were not likely to lend a sympathetic ear to a plea of this sort. Edith's arrest, as a matter of fact, had come dangerously close to embarrassing Van Pelt's friend. No! There was nothing to do but wait.

Lois Alcott had indeed bided her time; patiently and with malice she had been awaiting an opportunity to tell Hermann. That opportunity arrived one night when he was entertaining her and some other friends at an after-theater

club. Among the number was Major Carthwaite; he it was who gave the woman her chance by asking about Edith.

"Haven't you heard?" Mrs. Alcott inquired.

"Heard what?"

"Why, that she has abandoned her career, for good."

"Really? Did the fascinations of our Crœsus wean her away from Mother Art?" Carthwaite turned a reproachful smile upon his host. "Tut, tut, Hermann! Beautiful girl that, and clever, too. She had a future."

"I don't know What Lois means." Hermann leveled a curious look of inquiry at the woman, and there was something either in his tone or in his stare which warned her against squeezing too much satisfaction out of this moment. In a quite casual voice she said:

"I dare say Jesse could tell you if he chose, and I wish he would. He has such a delicate way of putting things——"

"Hello! Scandal?" somebody inquired. "Who's this you're talking about?"

"A protégée of Jesse's——"

Carthwaite cut in: "Little girl who went yachting with us. Charming. Nice family. Wonderful voice, I believe. Why all this reluctance?"

Mrs. Alcott, who by now was the center of attention, shrugged. "I hate to be humiliated, that's all. She turned out badly."

"Didn't she get her voice back?" Carthwaite was persistent.

"I don't know. You and Jesse must have spoiled the girl—turned her head. It so often happens, doesn't it? It seems she became ambitious, or impatient, and took a short cut to prosperity. The house was raided." There was a moment of silence. "She and another inmate were arrested and—our innocent little friend was sent up to the reformatory."

Major Carthwaite was staring open-mouthed at the speaker; she did not trust herself to look at Hermann. This moment, she rather fancied, pretty well squared their account so far as it involved the Gilbert girl.

"Impossible!" the Englishman exclaimed. "That child! I don't believe any such a damn' thing."

"It's true, nevertheless. And you ought to be ashamed of yourself. You men give those girls a taste of caviare and expect them to go back to bread

and milk. I can't find it in my heart to blame them."

"No, indeed! Lois has a heart of gold," Hermann was speaking smoothly. "Her charity is truly Christian. . . . You say she was convicted? Sentenced? For how long?"

"Three years, I believe. Under the circumstances, I feel bound to do what I can for the poor thing."

"Naturally. But why didn't you do something at the time of her arrest?"

"I knew nothing about it. Nobody knew. One of her friends discovered it by chance and appealed to me; but it was too late then."

Hermann frowned. "I'm surprised she didn't appeal to some of us. Pride, I presume. It's a wonder it wasn't in the papers, too."

"Deuced sporting of her, I claim." It was Carthwaite speaking. "She must have known we'd have to help. Ripping creature and a good little sport! I'll drop around and pay her fine."

Hermann shook his head. "Unfortunately, there isn't any fine in cases like hers. I presume I owe an apology to your wife and your niece, but—my knowledge of human nature is weak. And women can be so deceitful! Of all the women I know, Carthwaite, Lois is the only one I thoroughly understand and the only one who invariably does the thing I'd expect her to do."

Mrs. Alcott stirred uneasily and said she would like to dance.

No penal institution can be anything but ugly and shocking. No visitor, not even a passer-by, can escape some feeling of depression at the mere sight of one. Prison reform has done away with certain horrors and inhumanities of the old workhouse system; nevertheless, the most advanced institution of this character still remains a prison, and prisons are inhuman since they violate one of man's sacred rights.

The State Reformatory for Women at Bedford embodies much, if not all, that is current in the theory and practice of penology, and, as the name implies, it subordinates the worn-out idea of punishment to that of reform; nevertheless, it functions upon a foundation of compulsory restraint, of rigid discipline, and of routine work. If reform is not always effected, if inmates emerge no healthier, no more useful, no more nearly normal than when they went in, the fault is due less to the institution than to the perversity of human nature or perhaps to our whole punitive system. In spite of up-to-date

buildings, modern methods of operation, and humane treatment, it remains, of course, a penitentiary, a house of sorrow, and a place of shame.

To the average visitor that which is most depressing is not the aspect of the place, its jail feeling, nor the shadow of wrong-doing which casts a gloom over it, but the generally low level of intelligence of the inmates and the inevitable conviction that these people are indeed unfortunates. There are individual exceptions, of course, but not many. Crime, in the abstract, has a certain glamour, and criminals are often invested with a quite positive romantic interest: they are colorful persons. In reality, the direct opposite is true. It comes as a shock to discover how sordid, how flat and unprofitable crime really is and to learn how very common and uninteresting are the criminals themselves. If one will go to any reformatory, study the faces there, talk to the prisoners, he will come away with the melancholy conviction that he has seen and talked with defectives—people with the mentalities of children.

Upon reflection there would seem to be encouragement in this. But reflect, also, upon the effect of such an environment, such contacts as these, on a girl of gentle breeding and high intelligence like Edith Gilbert.

A woman marshal had fetched her by train from the city, and, arriving at the Reformatory, she had been put through the customary catechism, had answered questions concerning everything from the date of her birth to the particulars of the offense for which she had been committed. Her memory of that inquisition was blurry, although she did distinctly remember one question. They had asked if her parents were living and she had answered no. She had neither mother nor father—no next of kin.

That was quite true. Her father was as dead to her as her beloved Mims. Thoughts of him awoke in her a scornful bitterness such as she had never felt; they modified her outlook upon life and caused her to sneer at the things she had once held sacred. What could be sacred now? What had become of love and virtue and justice? They no longer were.

Following this interrogation she had been taken to the hospital and there subjected to another physical examination more rigorous and therefore more mortifying than the one at the Jefferson Market prison. It was a hideous experience to be quizzed, to be stripped, to be handled, to have her blood and her organs tested as if she were a mere animal. The ordeal had left her shamed, shattered, hysterical. Nor had it helped much to discover that the doctor was a sweet and gentle woman; no amount of sympathy from a

stranger could offset the horror and the sense of indignity from which she suffered.

Next she had been put in quarantine, placed in a room for observation to make certain that she would not contaminate the inmates of the cottages.

"Cottages!" It is a cozy, homelike word, but Edith could see some of these cottages, so called, from her hospital room. They had locked doors and grated windows; matrons came and went, each with a bunch of keys at her waist, and the cheerless "cottagers" themselves wore uniforms as shameful as stripes! The buildings were of red brick, bare and homely: black cinder paths and roadways led from one to another; the grounds were unattractive, for such trees as there were had begun to shed their leaves and the first autumn frosts had left the grass brown and scrofulous. Winter was not far off.

The building in plainest sight from Edith's window was occupied by young mothers and their babies. The babies, most of them, were illegitimate and many of the mothers were mere girls, almost too young to be held accountable for the crime they were here to expiate. For two years they could keep their babies, after that the law would send them away to asylums. It would provide two dollars and a half a week for the maintenance and care of each child.

That cottage, so the doctor told Edith, was the sunniest, cheeriest spot in the whole Reformatory, for every mother was proud of her offspring and took no shame whatever in it. Inside their hearts was something too big and too absorbing to leave room for, any other feeling. The doctor was always talking about those babies: there were black babies, brown babies, white babies, but all were darlings and in the poorest and most sickly was wrapped up a world of unselfish love. She tried unavailingly to arouse Edith's interest in them, but failed.

Sometimes, when she came out of the latter's room, she frowned and shook her head, for the Gilbert girl was taking things harder than any one she had ever attended.

After her medical examination the doctor had gone to the superintendent and had a long talk with him, following which she had made certain inquiries about the girl's commitment.

Two weeks of observation developed no signs of disease. Edith's blood was pure, her eyes, her teeth, her vital organs needed no attention. She appeared to be perfectly healthy; nevertheless, when she was transferred to

permanent quarters she weighed less than when she came into the prison. She was pallid and dull; she was lethargic.

Followed the breaking in to work, the learning of rules, the forming of acquaintances among her fellow prisoners. There began for her a dreary round of drudgery unrelieved by contact with her dispirited, illiterate, and uninteresting companions.

Again the jingle of keys, the click of locks, the tread of heavy feet became a part of her daily life. She felt herself growing drab and dejected, inside and out; the routine was stupefying. Occasionally, something within her roused itself and took fire: she had moments of furious rebellion when inner voices screamed and strange impulses took possession of her. At such times she felt an all-inclusive, murderous rage; it was levelled at the monstrous injustice of life, but it took in her keepers, her father, herself—the whole world. As time went on, however, these moments became rarer and her emotions burned themselves out more rapidly; the claws that tore at her grew duller. They were succeeded by periods of intense soul-sickness when she prayed to die. Many a night she soaked her pillow with tears and dragged herself to breakfast, haggard, weary, in her eyes the look of one tortured. She ate little at best; at such times as these her food was like ashes. Never could she become reconciled, no philosophy brought comfort; her nearest approach to reconciliation was a sort of mental numbness. As her strength failed, her work grew heavier, but she was too indifferent to care. It was a relief to lapse again into her habitual coma and to live in a merciful daze. Her suffering had begun to distil its own anodyne.

She found it impossible to make friends, for none of the women had anything in common with her, and besides, she could not overcome a feeling of contamination in their presence. She fought against this, but—it was like living with lepers. No doubt this repugnance showed itself; at any rate, the other unfortunates avoided her. As for the matrons, she looked upon them as turnkeys, as mere parts of the inhuman machine which had wrecked her life.

There was a naked parlor, a cheerless meeting-place, in the cottage where she lived, and here for a while every evening the inmates were allowed to fraternize. There were chairs, tables, some reading matter and a yellow-keyed piano. Some one with an elemental knowledge of music usually fumbled with this or thumped out some kind of a tune to which the others could dance. Edith had never dared to touch it; the instrument was a torture to her eyes as well as to her ears, for it was a mocking reminder of her high hopes when she had been a part of that world where hope existed.

Too painfully it recalled the time when she had been a live, pulsating human being and not a living corpse.

One evening she felt a desire to hear her voice again. The wish came all of a sudden. Why, within her throat lay solace; hidden there was a source of comfort for herself and perhaps for these other girls! She seated herself at the piano and ran her fingers over the keys.

Instantly she awoke startled attention. There were perhaps twenty girls in the room. Silence fell upon them; they turned astonished faces in her direction. Well, whaddya know about that? Lady Vere de Vere was playing and—Gee! She could soitenly tickle that crate. Classy stuff, too, like in a pitcher show.

The feeling of those keys, the sounds they evoked, brought a wave of keenest pleasure and of poignant anguish to the player; she opened her lips finally to sing. A few notes, a few words, issued, then—something was wrong. The voice was unruly and unmusical; it quavered, grew husky, cracked, split. It was not her voice at all. It was no voice that she had ever heard. She tried again; again it failed. It was like the dismal croak from some sick bed. One of the listeners laughed.

Those who were looking on saw the singer's pale face grow ghastly; she turned upon them a queer, stricken look of inquiry, of astonishment; she raised fluttering fingers to her throat, then slowly she drooped forward. Her outstretched arms embraced the instrument; she clung there as if crucified. Terrible, coughing sobs racked her body. So! They had taken all. They had robbed her even of this. Something told her that she would never sing again.

Chapter Eighteen

For some time after her evening of triumph Lois Alcott neither saw nor heard anything of Jesse Hermann. Then, one day he called. She knew, even before he spoke, that she was in for some unpleasantness, for the lines about his mouth were deeper and more cynical than usual, his eyes were harder, greener. The mere fact that he had sought her out instead of commanding her to come to him gave her cause for apprehension.

"You succeeded very well, the other night," he began abruptly. "You humiliated me beyond measure. Nobody has dared to laugh openly, but I dare say there's amusement enough going on behind my back."

The woman assumed a look of blank astonishment. "Why, Jesse! What *are* you talking about?"

"*Don't*!" he said, icily. "Don't insult my intelligence. . . . But you must have known I wouldn't take it lying down. You must have been out of your head to think you could do a thing like that. I had no idea you'd risk it. . . . There was a time when I would have laid it to jealousy or to pique, but that was long ago. About all the pleasure we've been able to get out of each other's company these last several years is the malicious joy of causing pain."

"Still I can only guess what you're driving at. I— You mean about—the Gilbert girl?"

He nodded. "Clever of you to wait your time, but I read you like a book. Funny thing about that, Lois: the moment I learned to know you I lost interest. It frequently happens. Unfortunately, the damage was done by that time."

" 'Damage'? What damage have I done you as compared with the damage you've done me?" Mrs. Alcott spoke fiercely, but her companion shrugged.

"To your way of thinking, none. To mine—well, I was married to a very charming, an extremely clever, a most complete woman. Too clever for us." He raised a quick, admonitory hand: "Oh, I'm not blaming you nor whitewashing myself! Retribution was deserved. If I have regrets, I've managed to swallow them. I made a bad investment—so did you, for that matter; neither of us ever charged it off. We have continued the account and

under the fiction of a romantic attachment we have maintained a relation which gives each of us a chance to make the other suffer. Odd, isn't it, that two people so indifferent to each other should pretend to keep up an intimate friendship? It's a perverted sort of affair, but, lacking something more amusing, it serves its purpose. War has its fascinations; there's more kick to an active enmity than to a passive friendship. Anyhow, the arrangement is satisfactory to me—so long as I maintain myself on the credit side."

"Surely you didn't come here to quarrel again. We've gone past that. What has this to do with the other night?"

"No. You couldn't afford to let me quarrel with you even if I tried." The speaker smiled mirthlessly and cast a leisurely glance about Mrs. Alcott's expensive apartment. "I came to tell you about Edith and to—collect another dividend. I made an investigation promptly and the result will astonish you. It's not often I permit myself to become indignant over other people's misfortunes, but in this case I indulged in that extravagance. The child has been persecuted. I don't like persecution—that is, persecution of the innocent. Our little private affair is different. And she was innocent of any wrong-doing whatever. Really! She is in Bedford because, or partly because, of me. Her father had her committed. He's a psalm-shouting old pharisee, from all I can learn, who heard of our—association, and believed she would be morally benefited by the discipline of an institution. Not much of a compliment to me, eh? It's an incredible story. I was moved. Needless to say, the girl is perfectly pure."

"Is it her innocence or her purity which intrigues your interest? Humph! You'll rescue her, of course. You'll purchase her freedom and she, all tears and gratitude, will melt into your arms. Simple, obvious, and, no doubt, satisfactory. But if she is what you say, why not look elsewhere? There are lots of girls——"

"Why discuss my motives? Suppose I told you that I became tremendously fond of her and that I miss her smile, her voice, her magic youth and freshness? Or suppose I told you that her pride touched me, awoke something clean and decent in me? Remember, she had only to call me by phone and I would have torn every prison in this city brick from brick. If I told you that would you believe me?"

"Certainly not."

"No. Who would be so deceived in a man like me? So I shan't—pretend." Hermann smiled again.

“You’re a satyr, Jesse.” Mrs. Alcott spoke in a quivering voice. “An old man playing with the embers of burned-out desires. Well?”

Hermann did not defend himself against this accusation; he seemed intent only upon causing discomfort to his companion.

“Unfortunately, it’s not so simple to release a prisoner from one of our state institutions as you make it sound. Money is a miracle-worker, to be sure, but it won’t purchase Miss Gilbert’s freedom.”

“Oh, you’ll manage it somehow, if your heart is set on it! But I don’t see why you’re telling me all this. I don’t care what you do. It seems to me your ‘dividend’ is mighty small, this time.”

“Wait! . . . By rights, the child should have her name cleared, but I’m afraid that’s impossible. You see, she committed no actual crime—it was merely the pleadings of that accursed father! Otherwise I’d have a rehearing, force another trial, and vindicate her. No. She can only be discharged or paroled, and the board of managers won’t discharge her so soon. She hasn’t had sufficient time, as yet, to be ‘morally benefited.’ Neither may an erring girl be paroled in the custody of an unmarried man. I am an unmarried man—thanks to you, my dear—and a not very nice unmarried man, either—thanks to life in general. She must be paroled, if at all, in the care of a woman. An older woman, a woman of some position and importance. That woman need not necessarily be of high moral character, so long as the court is made to believe she’s all right. Surface respectability will suffice. Now do you begin to see where you come in?”

Mrs. Alcott stared at the speaker for a moment before she was able to gasp:

“Impossible! I won’t! . . . Don’t be a—fool! What do you think I am?”

“I don’t think—I know exactly what you are, Lois. You’re a sensible, selfish, luxury-loving woman, who is entirely dependent upon my bounty. You’re a smart woman, moreover, and a reasonably good actress.” Hermann was grinning widely now. “You have played leads, vamps, heavies, and now you’ll round out your career with a character part. A mother! They all come to it.”

The woman rose, walked unsteadily to the window, and stared blindly down into the street. “So! This is how you get even! It’s like you. God! How I pity that girl!”

“Admirable!” crowed the other. “Already the maternal heart is wrung. Is it possible that we have been deceived in each other? . . . Yes, I’ve taken

steps to have the child paroled in your care. You will be responsible for her good behavior, your slightest wish will be her law, one word from you and she will be returned. Think of the power you will wield over her! And her gratitude to you—us. You'll make it plain, of course, that I'm responsible for her deliverance and you'll urge her to think well of me, to trust me."

"You devil!"

"No, no! Good angel," the man said, tantalizingly. "I'll make a singer of her and give her a future. Isn't it amusing?"

"Very. My pay will be—what?"

"Oh, anything! You know how liberal I can be. Already I've leased, in your name, a place out on the Island. Just for the autumn. Autumns are splendid out there! not so perfect as in Westchester, perhaps, but there's golf and riding—I ride rather well, you know. I thought of having you take one of my country places, but that wouldn't do. You'll probably entertain some, in a quiet way, and later in the season we may all go South. We must help the poor child forget."

Mrs. Alcott turned a bleak gaze upon the speaker; listlessly she said:

"This is the last straw. I can't and I won't go much lower. When do we—begin?"

Hermann rose, took his hat and gloves and stick. "I'll advise you in due time. One of these days we'll run out to Bedford and bring her in, bring her home. It's lovely of you to volunteer. Neither she nor I will ever forget your goodness."

It was on her way back from her third visit to Bedford that Pearl Gates made a sudden resolution. Thus far she had obtained no satisfaction whatever from her appeal to Mrs. Alcott. The latter was evasive and about all she would tell Pearl was that the matter had been placed in Mr. Hermann's hands—an announcement which carried little encouragement. Certain things which Pearl had seen and heard that day at the Reformatory induced her to take a taxicab from the station to Norman Van Pelt's address. This was no time to weigh possibilities. Something had to be done.

Van Pelt was in, but when his caller made known her errand he showed a disinclination to discuss it. With a frown be declared:

"I heard all about Miss Gilbert's trouble. Clark told me the whole story."

"*Did* he, now?"

"He did and it was a pretty dirty business."

"You're a kind of an agate-eyed reformer yourself, aren't you? Without the whiskers? I bet if somebody told you Coolidge is crooked, you'd believe it. Sure. Your idea of a bee line is a corkscrew. . . . But you and she were good pals for a while, weren't you? You hunted wild bogeys or night-blooming nib-licks, or something, all over a golf course; and went swimming together. To hear her tell it there was nothing between you except a couple of one-piece bathing suits. Am I right?"

Van Pelt flushed. "Well, what of it?"

"Do you know where she is now?"

"Sure. Bedford Reformatory, where she belongs."

"*My!*" Pearl stared at the speaker with apparent admiration. "Your heart has swelled up to the size of a bird seed. You must have been out in a shower. That's the trouble with you trappers—a girl steps around your deadfall and it spoils your whole season. Sore, eh?"

" 'Sore'? No. It's an unpleasant subject and I'd rather not talk about it."

"Me, too. I wanted to come here just like I wanted to go over Niagara in a barrel. But it's got to be talked about. I just came in from Bedford. She looks like a ghost—and no wonder. My God! what a place! The girl is sick; it'll kill her to stay there. Do you know what it's like up there?"

Van Pelt lit a cigarette and irritably flung away the match. "No. I don't know and I don't care a whole lot. Now then, you've got me wrong, Miss—er——"

"Call me Pearl, just as if you'd been drinking. That's what you called me the first time we met."

The young man smiled faintly. "You think I'm a wild bird because I fly high, wide, and free, but I'm not. I carry more liquor than a rum runner, but never more than one flat key. Understand? I play around, and drink anything that will flow freely, but I—I live with my mother. I give parties and dance and carry on with you girls, but I don't kiss you or——"

"I'll say you don't kiss *me*. Better change that 'you' to 'them.' I'm the first person singular. Darned singular!"

"All right. Maybe you'll understand how *I* look at such things. I like girls, girls of all kinds. I'm crazy about 'em. But I like good girls best. My peculiarity, merely. Some people prefer high game; I like it fresh. I wouldn't

marry a bad girl, and when I find the right one I don't want to have to do a lot of explaining and risk losing her. Selfishness, see?"

Pearl was silent for a moment, then she inquired, "Are you on the level?"

"Why not? I'm rather proud of myself."

"Then why so flinty about Edith? She's a good girl."

Van Pelt laughed shortly. "Better go into your dance, Pearl. Your act is flopping. It's funny to——"

"If that's funny, *you* tell one."

"Good!" Van Pelt frowned. "I will. She's in Bedford, isn't she? She was living in that flat, wasn't she? Don't you think I know what kind of a place it is—or was?"

"*She* didn't know."

"Stop this noise! . . . Mind you, I don't blame her for living any sort of life she wants to live. She has looks. It's her affair how she gets ahead, and it's her affair, not mine, if she pays the penalty. We all pay, somehow, sometime. That's one reason why I'm such a short sport: I prefer to keep my books balanced."

"You may be a swell accountant," Pearl declared, earnestly, "but this time you're as wrong as Russia. She never dreamed the sort of snare those girls ran, and it was her first night there. The coppers didn't accuse her of actually doing anything. She just happened to be inside, like the night latch."

"Indeed? I suppose she just happened to be on Jesse Hermann's yacht when I met her at Comfort Harbor? Oh, boy! *That* was a wallop! I stayed drunk for three days. I don't mind telling you that she had me hanging on, and all but out. That's one time the bell saved me. You've uncovered the grave, Pearl. That's where the body is buried. . . . Sore? Sure! I'm good and sore. I'm a Bedford booster: I hope they lock her up and throw the key away." The speaker leaped to his feet, flung himself nervously about the room. His face was agitated and his gestures were jerky.

Pearl looked on in real astonishment. After a while she said, quietly: "I wish you'd land, brother. Tie up to the bank, make all your lines fast, and hang on, because I'm going to blow a gale. What a panic you've got coming to you! I'm going to start in by telling you all about that steamboat ride, and if you're enough of a man to vote you'll know I'm talking truth."

Pearl did start in and Van Pelt listened. The girl talked rapidly, earnestly. She told how and why Edith Gilbert had come to New York, how she had met Jesse Hermann, what the latter had promised to do for her, and how she had been induced to accept his invitation to cruise on the *Swan*. Swiftly she explained Edith's unexpected return from that cruise, and the reason for it. Van Pelt, by this time, was leaning forward with an eager, incredulous expression upon his face.

Then the coming of Edith's father. Pearl had learned a good deal which she did not know at the time she appealed to Mrs. Alcott. Edith herself had told her why she fled from her lodging house, how she had been arrested, and all the harrowing experiences that had followed.

When the speaker came to recite Henry Gilbert's part in the hearing, Van Pelt cursed. He was up and pacing the room again when the story was finished.

"It's—outrageous!" he declared, indignantly. "To blast a girl's life on the word of an old sin-buster like that is horrible! If it's true! You're not covering up anything?"

"Do I look like I'm lying? I've been fit to be tied this last month. That kid's dying on her feet, Mr. Van Pelt. You wouldn't know her." Pearl's voice broke. "You'll help to get her out, won't you?"

"Certainly. Good Lord! yes! But why did she let them do it? Why didn't she appeal to me? Or to Hermann? He's a decent chap, really."

"Why didn't she get word to *me*?" Pearl demanded, tearfully. "I'd have let up a squall they could have heard to Peru. She was ashamed to call on anybody and she never dreamed, of course, that her father— Damn his soul! I hope he chokes to death in the dark! For that matter, why didn't she phone WKL? They like her. They'd have come——"

"What? . . . What's that about WKL?" Van Pelt had come to a sudden pause.

Pearl was wiping her eyes. It was not the first time that day that she had wet her handkerchief.

"She was one of their broadcasters. I meant to tell you. It was her only chance to sing good stuff and she hated those rotten songs they gave her at our place." Pearl noisily blew her nose. "Believe me, that gal can warble, too."

"What was—her name? I mean— She isn't—'The Lark'?"

Van Pelt was leaning across a table, clutching it. His face was white and sick, his eyes were staring.

"Why, yes! That's what they called——"

The young man uttered a cry. "Oh, my God!" He began to beat the table with his fists. "Lark! Lark! Oh, my God!" It was a cry of agony, of dismay. Pearl watched him in speechless bewilderment. What was the matter with him, she wondered. For some unaccountable reason a wave of relief swept over her—his emotion, no doubt, had stirred her own—tears washed him out of her eyes, dissolved him into the mere outline of a man. But above her own sobbing she could hear him pounding with his fists and calling: "Lark! . . . *Lark!*" It was a heart-broken cry.

"She's not a—lark, any more," the girl told him. "She's just a poor little frog. She has lost her voice."

"*What?* Don't tell me that!"

"It's gone, completely. The last thing she had. That's what's killing her. The dirty robbers! It was the shock, I suppose."

"No! *No!*" Van Pelt shouted. "Why, that's what I love most! I mean as much—" He choked, his face reddened, grew purple; he went suddenly into a boiling, foaming rage, and began to wreak his fury on whatever he could reach.

Followed the strangest, the most startling exhibition of blind animal passion that Pearl Gates had ever beheld: the fellow seemed bent upon breaking everything in the room. It was a real brainstorm. Spoiled boys with ungovernable tempers occasionally run amuck in the same way.

The fellow's anger apparently was directed as much against himself as against his inanimate surroundings, for he kept cursing himself and shouting: "Fool! Idiot! Imbecile!" Meanwhile, he threw Whatever he could lay his hands upon; he picked up and he flung down; he hurled himself about the room, kicking, striking, lashing out with hands and feet. Devastation stalked behind him.

It was some time before the frenzy wore itself out. Then he gazed with sullen satisfaction at the havoc he had wrought. The room was in chaos.

"That's pretty!" Pearl told him. "Why didn't you save some of this for Bedford? Give you a club and you'd have her out in no time."

Van Pelt paid no heed. Haltingly, in harsh, half sentences, he explained what ailed him. He had heard "The Lark" sing. He had tried to meet her and

failed. He had tried to forget her and had failed at that, too. He had loved not alone the voice, but also the singer whom his imagination had built up and idealized. Something about Edith had trespassed upon that feeling and had puzzled him, distressed him. The reason was now perfectly plain. To think he had known her, had been with her, had let her slip. And now it was too late. He'd get her out, of course, but—she was branded. She was disgraced!

Again his face became convulsed; he seized a lovely, fragile ash receiver, a thing of iridescent glass overlaid with gold and ivory, which somehow had escaped his malevolence, and hurled it at the stone fireplace. It shivered into bits.

How could a girl live down a prison record? he demanded to know. That charge upon which Edith had been convicted was worse than disgraceful. No charge could be more hideous. What if she *were* innocent? How would people know? . . . He had no plan in mind; he'd have to see his mother before making plans. Yes, he'd have to see Nat. She'd know what to do. Nat ——

Without further words, without an apology or a backward glance, he rushed out of the room. Pearl heard him run to the outer door, wrench it open, and slam it behind him with a mighty crash.

Chapter Nineteen

It was a long hour's drive out to Natalie Dubose's North Shore home, but Van Pelt made it in considerably less time than that. He was calmer when he arrived than when he started—the rushing wind had accomplished that much for him—nevertheless, he was in a condition of mind that alarmed his mother.

She listened attentively while he told her what he had learned. When he had finished she nodded comprehendingly.

"It's plain, now, why the girl appealed to you so strongly. No wonder you were confused, but this explains it. What an unfortunate situation! Are you sure this friend of hers hasn't made out a better case for her than she deserves? It's so easy to permit our sympathies to influence——"

"No, no!"

"Jesse Hermann can be an extremely fascinating man when he tries."

"If you knew her as I do, you wouldn't have any doubts. I was a fool—a suspicious idiot!"

The mother smiled faintly. "You had your doubts, Norman. However, if they have been satisfied, why, that's that. Remember, though, an infatuated lover isn't a reliable character witness. Even assuming that she did—make a mistake with Jesse Hermann, it's of small consequence as compared with the injustice that has been done her. Many nice girls have made mistakes. You wouldn't allow that to influence you?"

Van Pelt stirred. "There are some things a fellow can't swallow. I've never had anything but the best; I don't want damaged goods. But what's the use of supposing? She's a good girl. Hell, don't I *know*?"

"To be sure."

"The frightful part is that she was convicted of frequenting a—house of ill-fame and sent to a penal institution! That's a brand that doesn't wear off. Not many people know about it, but—it's an impossible thing to conceal. When I fully realized that fact I went off my head. I broke things; behaved rather badly, I guess. All the way out here I've been trying to figure some way—" The speaker sighed, shook his head.

Mrs. Dubose spoke dryly: “Her future is a painful problem, but I dare say the girl is less concerned by it than by her present situation. Do you seriously propose to help her face the world?”

“You mean——?”

“Are you thinking about marrying her?”

Norman was in no mood for discussion; thus far he had acted upon impulse. He could not answer his mother’s query. He rose, fumbled for a cigarette, and lit the cork end. “I don’t know what I’m thinking about,” he confessed. “Things have always come so easy to me that I’m not used to weighing consequences. I’ve always been terribly particular about women; this would be like marrying a girl out of a brothel. At least, that’s how it would look to strangers. . . . Oh, Nat, I’m in a tempest! I’m two men. One of me is wild, hungry, utterly reckless. That’s the one who smashed all your pretty things. The other—well, he stood back and looked on at the exhibition and tried to make himself heard. He’s the one who tells me it—can’t be done.” Agitatedly the young man roved about the room, then flung himself back into his chair. “One me is a regular fellow and the other is a coward. Yes, I’ll marry her! We’ll manage somehow to cover it up. I’ve been thinking—she could change her name. You could take her abroad and she could study for a year or two. We could be married over there. Who’d ever know? If she made a success of her singing——”

“You said she has lost her voice.”

Van Pelt looked up blankly. “Don’t you think it would come back? . . . For that matter, it might be better if it didn’t. Sure! Don’t you see?”

“I can’t encourage you to build any false hopes, my boy. Facts have to be faced. The point to be settled is this: do you love her or don’t you?”

“Certainly! What d’you think ails me? Prickly heat? But that isn’t the question. The question is *can* I marry her?”

“Don’t count on keeping her disgrace a complete secret. It will be bound to turn up.” The faintest shadow of a pitying smile disturbed Natalie’s lips when her son groaned audibly. “Don’t be in a hurry to make up your mind, boy. The very best and wisest man of all time, when he had to fight a battle with himself, went out into the wilderness for forty days. I’m sorry you came to me before you made sure which Norman Van Pelt is the master and which is the slave.”

The son broke out resentfully: “Good Heavens, Nat! I’ve got to think of something beside myself! I can’t forget you. I’ll have to continue living

among the people I know."

Natalie spoke sharply: "Don't bring me into this. It's an affair between those two Van Pelt boys. I asked myself, a good many times, whether I loved your father, and when I said yes I would have gone to Bedford, I'd have gone to hell, for him. . . . But there's only one of me. Don't you think it's rather selfish of us, by the way, to sit here discussing ourselves rather than Miss Gilbert? The first thing to be accomplished is her release. How to effect that I haven't the faintest idea, but I fancy we can find a way. You can count on me, of course."

"Gee, Nat! You're an ace," the son declared.

Now that the Gilbert girl had passed out of her immediate charge, Dr. Allen, that reformatory physician, saw considerably less of her than at first, but still enough to convince her that here was one prisoner whom the institution could in no wise benefit. Her medical examination, quite aside from her later acquaintance with the girl, had impelled her to make a confidential report to the superintendent, as has been said, but her interest did not end there. Having learned what she could about Edith's commitment, she made up her mind that the latter's imprisonment should end as quickly as the law allowed, and so she recommended the girl's early discharge. Injustice had been done—injustice, of course, was a weak word—for, however incorrigible, however resentful of family discipline, no penal institution is a safe place for a good girl, as those words are ordinarily accepted. Clean minds as well as clean bodies are quickly defiled by contact with vice. Of what consequence is common chastity if the soul is bruised and begins to rot? So argued the doctor.

Observation and acquaintance, as a matter of fact, had not convinced her that the girl was incorrigible or that there was any valid reason for her presence here, and it was with genuine concern, therefore, that she watched the inevitable change creep over her patient, beheld her bitterness become settled, and saw her take on the sullen demeanor of some of the women about her. When she pleaded that Edith's health was breaking down she was reminded of her duty to look after the physical well-being of the inmates.

True enough, Edith was growing hard and sullen and as bitter as gall. And why not? She had lost faith in the Christian virtues. Their profession, it seemed to her, was an empty, selfish pose. Evil was more powerful than good; injustice tyrannized; old standards had been proven false. Even religion gave her no consolation, for it was religion—her father's religion and the kind she had been taught—which had put her here. At chapel she sat

like a stone, with her lips compressed into scornful lines. Why preach to her of a tender, loving God? Attendance at these rites was compulsory or she would have avoided the mockery.

At first she had been concerned wholly in trying to realize the catastrophe which had befallen her and in attempting to adapt herself to it, but of late she had begun to visualize its effect upon her future. She would not always remain here; some day she would be set free. And then what? It was a prospect from which her imagination recoiled. Where could she go, what could she do, how could she hold up her head? That charge upon which she had been convicted would remain a scarlet badge of shame. It was almost better to stay here than to wear it where it could be seen.

Knowledge of a new sort came to her daily; she was forever learning something from the women with whom she associated. For instance, she was told that life is not good and is nothing to be glad about. It is a sordid struggle of wits in which everybody cheats. Crime is not "criminal"; its only punishment comes from being caught. One should be smart and pay as little as possible. Vice, in itself, is not reprehensible, it is merely one line of conduct which the reformers have outlawed. She became acquainted with many words, parts of the daily vocabulary—hideous words like moron, addict, pervert, degenerate, prostitute. Within the definition of each was a whole volume of knowledge denied most women and known to but few men. She heard other words and phrases, too, which were not merely suggestive of evil, but vile in themselves. At every turn she touched pitch.

All this would have made a deeper impression, the pitch would have proven stickier, had she been wholly herself. But she was not. Shock had paralyzed certain of her faculties as it had paralyzed her singing voice, and her mind absorbed only a part of what it came in contact with. Subconsciously she refused to believe that this experience was anything more than a nightmare.

After that one attempt to sing, by the way, she never made another. She was afraid, and moreover she lacked the energy. She was tired all the time, now—too tired, often, to sleep. Many nights she lay as rigid as a corpse, her nerves stretched like wire, her eyes open. It was torture. And of course her work showed the effect.

She was put first to one thing and then to another; they tried to teach her various trades, but in none of them could she summon sufficient interest to promise the slightest mastery. She remained a clumsy automaton. She

became a problem; the matrons began to believe she was shirking. Malingery was common.

One of them complained finally, saying:

"The girl's utterly impossible! I've pleaded with her and reasoned with her and warned her, but it's no use. She half does her work and most of it has to be done all over again."

"She isn't trying," another agreed. "And the airs of her! You'd think she owned the place. She'll have nothing to do with the other girls, even the nice ones, and the food isn't fit for her to eat. But call her down once! Why, she'll look at you as if you were the dirt under her feet. Who does she think she is?"

After some discussion it was decided to take the high and mighty airs out of the upstart and to cure her of shirking. So they gave her a job in the laundry. The work here was heavy and it was performed mainly by women who knew nothing better, or by those who had revolted at discipline. There was much lifting and carrying, there were machines to serve, the air was hot and steamy and rankly odorous, the hours were long. The place reeked of filth rather than of cleanliness. To Edith Gilbert it was hell.

She did the best she could as long as possible, then Dr. Allen was called in a hurry. She was told over the phone that the Gilbert girl had fainted at one of the mangles and could not be revived.

Several days later the cheerful doctor bustled into Edith's room at the hospital and inquired:

"How are you feeling this morning, my dear?"

"All right, thank you." The girl tried to smile, but it was a feeble attempt.

Dr. Allen eyed her shrewdly before asking, "Are you feeling enough better to stand the shock of some good news?"

"What good news could come to me? You mean—I won't have to go back to the laundry? You're very kind, but it really makes no difference to me where I'm put."

"You should never have been put *there*. You should never have been sent here at all, Edith, and I've been trying to arrange your discharge, but I didn't tell you because I was afraid of arousing false hopes. However, I've learned that you have friends who are more powerful than I."

"Friends? *I* have friends?"

The doctor nodded. “They came the day you collapsed. They’re coming back today. Do you feel strong enough to—travel?”

The girl uttered a thin cry. She sat up. “Father! He’s coming! I knew ——” Her face had softened, her eyes had filled; she raised a bloodless hand to her throat.

“No. A woman and a man. A Mrs. Alcott. You have been paroled in her custody. Everything is arranged, or can be, if you’re willing—and you ought to be very happy.” Edith stared at the speaker blankly. It was a while before she could be made to understand. When, finally, she did grasp the astonishing fact she nodded gravely.

“Yes. I’ll agree to anything, and I’m well enough to leave this place. That’s all I need to make me perfectly well. But—Mrs. Alcott! . . . It doesn’t mean I’ve been cleared? I’ll go out under a cloud?”

“To be sure. But that’s better than staying here, isn’t it? You’ll be on probation, but as long as your behavior is good——”

“I suppose I’ll always bear a—a criminal record. I’ll be a jail-bird the rest of my life.”

“Don’t quarrel with good fortune,” the doctor said, briskly. “Other girls have lived down worse things and made fine women of themselves. Some of them have married well. Don’t let’s think of what is past. The important thing is—you’re free! I, for one, am mighty glad, for you’ve worried me dreadfully. Mrs. Alcott has bound herself to give you a good home and to exercise careful supervision over your moral welfare; you will have to obey her. This should be a happy day for you.”

On their way out from the city Lois Alcott and Jesse Hermann said little to each other. Their first trip to Bedford had depressed the woman; the place had made a deep impression upon her, and Hermann had seemed to share her feelings. Today, as their motor turned in through the gate, he said:

“What a dreary place!”

Lois shuddered and drew her cloak closer. “I used to think I knew you,” she told him, “but—you’re a queer man. Haven’t you any heart?”

“I assure you that my circulation is caused by the same muscular phenomena as your own. I’ve asked you to perform a disagreeable act, but that doesn’t argue——”

“Oh, I wasn’t thinking about myself; I was thinking about this girl. I’ve sworn to—take care of her. If you had seen her as I saw her the other day!

Her little pinched face! Her mind gone—tortured out of her body!"

Hermann spoke sharply. "I did see her. I tiptoed in."

"And you still insist on going through——? Are you entirely without pity? Are you utterly selfish?"

"You're the one who is 'queer,' Lois. The discovery that you have a heart is even more astonishing than my apparent lack of such an organ. It's a sadly misjudged organ, by the way. Pity, fidelity, gratitude, generosity are considered high virtues; in reality they are elemental impulses. They're not even peculiar to human beings. Why, dogs are more faithful than men! . . . The drab little street-walkers in this prison are more generous and have more pity in them than some of the women you know. . . . I assure you that I possess a full complement of those low-grade emotions and perhaps an unsuspected number of those more—spiritual. But do me the favor to cease analyzing me. Women are not analytical. I've never fully analyzed myself; I'm as much of a mystery to myself as I am to you. Now—we have arrived!" The car stopped as Hermann spoke. When he opened the door for Mrs. Alcott to step out his hand was trembling and he was paler than usual. In a voice suddenly grown harsh and uncontrollable he exclaimed, "For God's sake, make haste!"

Later that same day another car made the trip from New York to Bedford and return; another visitor called upon the superintendent of the Reformatory. Natalie Dubose had acted upon her son's appeal as promptly as she could, but it had taken her some little time to learn how to go about the matter. On her way back to the city she confessed to a feeling of some relief, but she showed no sign of it when she reported to Norman the result of her journey. Briefly she told him what she had learned—namely, that Edith Gilbert had been paroled in the custody of Lois Alcott and had left the institution no later than that very morning.

"Lois Alcott!" the young man exclaimed, in dismay. "Why, that means Hermann!"

"Exactly. He drove out with her."

"*Nat!* I hope you told 'em who and what *she* is?"

"How could I do that? How could I explain anything about her? Or him? Naturally they don't know and it would serve no purpose to show that she isn't a fit person to assume charge of a young girl—even if we had legal proof. It would only result in sending her back. For that matter, the Alcott woman can send her back at a word. You know what that means?" Van Pelt

uttered an explosive oath. “The girl went willingly and we may be sure she won’t allow herself to be returned. There doesn’t seem to be much that we can do.”

“There’s something *I* can do. I can take her away, set her free. And I will.”

“Nonsense! You don’t think for a minute that Jesse proposes to lock her up? Better make sure first that she wants to be ‘taken away.’ She probably knows enough about Mrs. Alcott to— Wait a minute!” Norman had risen; into his eyes had come that same destructive glare which Pearl Gates had witnessed when she finished talking to him. “If you break any more of my things you’ll clean up the mess. You’re utterly spoiled!”

“Perhaps, but—you helped to spoil me. I’ve never learned to do without anything I really wanted.”

“Humph! That’s the pay mothers get for——”

“You can’t quit now, Nat. You’ve got to make Hermann let you have her. It can be arranged. He wouldn’t dare refuse.”

Mrs. Dubose stiffened, her face set itself. “I’ve given you everything I could give, done everything I could do, but here’s something I can’t and won’t do. Ask Jesse Hermann to give up a woman! Indeed! Why, I refused to do that when I was his wife.”

Chapter Twenty

So many successful business men are remarkable, not for their brilliance or their originality, but rather for their lack of these qualities, that it almost seems as if commercial success is the reward of the commonplace, unimaginative mind. Take Henry Gilbert, for instance. He had made a conspicuous success and yet he seldom had an original thought; he was deeply grooved in his convictions, and those convictions were orthodox; his mental tread was heavy—the inelastic tread of a moral patrolman pounding his beat—and he lived in the comfortable belief that he had never made a mistake. It is an agreeable frame of mind and one conducive of old age; but, unfortunately, the older such people grow the more infallible they consider themselves. The prosperity that had attended Gilbert's various enterprises, financial and otherwise, was proof sufficient to fortify his implicit belief in himself.

Men of his type may be counted upon to do the obvious thing and to voice the expected remark, likewise they run to platitudes. Gilbert, for example, often announced with the enthusiasm of a startling discovery that honesty is the best policy, that necessity is the mother of invention, and that there exists a law of compensation. He had uncovered these truths for himself and he wished to make the world better by uttering them. Another gem of thought for which he took credit was that life is real, life is earnest, and the grave is not its goal, or words to that effect. Life, to him, was a devout and meditative pilgrimage from the cradle to the tomb and thence onward without pause to the heights of perpetual beatitude. Those who pressed forward, strong in the Lord and with a literal belief in His word, could not fail to arrive. Important events, turning-points, he called "milestones along the way." Marriage and parenthood were two such milestones. So, too, was the first quarrel between husband and wife, the beginning of domestic inharmony. This, by the way, he referred to as "a rift in the lute." In the ideal marriage there was, of course, no inharmony: the happy pair marched, hand in hand, down the smiling avenue of life, bearing a certain number of children en route—each an epoch-marking monument in that particular pilgrimage.

His marriage to Belle Galloway was an epoch, but he was soon advised that there would be no parenthood for them—no child milestones to mark their passage—for she was too old to risk children. She declared, too, that

she had seen so little, had been denied so much enjoyment, that she did not propose to make a slave of herself and spoil her figure.

In spite of this pronouncement, a second "turning point" in their lives was not long in coming. Domestic inharmony, their first quarrel, followed so quickly after marriage that those two milestones resembled gate-posts.

Belle's family occasioned the clash.

Gilbert's home life had always been so free from petty annoyances that he entirely lacked training in patience. Naturally it came hard for him to put up with such trials as followed the arrival of the Galloways. All three were in every way abhorrent to him, and each, he discovered in time, was more abominable than the others.

Sonny Galloway was the first to excite his disapproval. Within a week Gilbert had learned to detest that young person venomously. Sonny was fresh and vulgar and he insisted upon keeping Otto in the house. Otto, by the way, grew constantly more friendly and boisterous; he loved everybody and especially he loved Henry Gilbert. In view of the latter's frank disfavor there was something almost abnormal about this one-sided friendship. Dogs are usually sensitive, but Otto flung himself at Gilbert's head like a wanton; in his devotion he made up for all the dislike that other dogs held for the man.

It was trying enough to be pawed and licked and dirtied up by a dog which always smelled as if it had been rolling in dead fish, but it was no more trying than to receive attentions equally familiar from a youth whose behavior and whose habits were quite as coarse as the dog's. And Sonny was coarse—coarser than shark skin. He had made himself as thoroughly at home as Otto and he stood upon no more ceremony.

He invariably called Gilbert "Pop" and soon began telling him stories of obscure meaning, winking and nudging him the while. Gilbert's stiffness on such occasions amused the fellow enormously, and he seemed to believe that the elder man's attitude of high morality was nothing but a pose. It was an amusing pose, inasmuch as it deceived everybody except Sonny, and the latter accepted it as a great joke. He chose to treat his brother-in-law as if they shared a dark secret.

This infuriated Gilbert even more than to be called "Pop".

Sonny made free with everything on the premises; he even helped himself to his new relative's handkerchiefs, neckties, and underwear, and no doubt he would have appropriated coats and trousers had they fitted him.

When Gilbert protested to Belle she laughed tolerantly. Wasn't that just like Sonny? Never mind, he didn't mean anything by it.

Gilbert had lost no time in sending the boy downtown to buy a suit with which to replace those shapeless "Oxford bags" in which he had arrived. Sonny went willingly enough, he entered into the project with an inordinate zest, but, alas! the result was an appalling failure. He plunged, but on sport clothes; he wore nothing now except plus fours of dizzy pattern, impressionistic sweaters, and golf hose of rattlesnake plaid.

With incredible celerity he made himself known to the people of Hopewell; inside of a fortnight the city understood perfectly that he was Henry Gilbert's brother-in-law. At the Gilbert plant, too, he made himself acquainted. He became the intimate companion of teamsters, yardmen, and the low-salaried office help. At the Gilbert home he started an affair with the upstairs girl, a maid who had been in the house for several years, and he pursued it so impetuously that she quit without notice.

Blanche was less trying than her brother, probably because Gilbert saw less of her, but she and Sonny were forever quarreling at table—they were like salt in each other's wounds—and this got upon Gilbert's nerves dreadfully. It affected him the more because their quarrels were always senseless and led nowhere. Neither participant took them seriously, but they occasioned Mrs. Galloway untold pain and despair and she usually put an end to them by bursting into tears. She wept easily, did the mother; her feelings were tender, and incidentally they were always exposed. Her sensitiveness, she explained, was the result of her ill-health; and when she cried it upset her stomach and caused more gas. Gilbert, by the way, had never been able to accustom himself to those eructations of hers and most of his meals ended in nausea. He, too, began to have indigestion.

So much, then, for the petty provocations which led up to his and Belle's first quarrel, the first "rift in their lute." A time came when the husband was compelled to inquire as diplomatically as might be how much longer he could count upon enjoying the pleasure of his in-laws' presence. Belle answered indifferently that she hadn't the slightest idea. Henry insisted that they must have voiced some expression as to when their visit would end, and he was surprised when his wife turned upon him angrily to ask if he was tired of them.

"Why, no! Certainly not," he lied. "You are welcome to have them here as long as you wish. I was merely wondering——"

"If they were *your* people, I wouldn't ask *you* when they were going and try to hurry them off."

"My dear! Nothing could be further from my thoughts than——"

"You haven't any thought for anybody except yourself."

"*Belle!* Why—*Belle*!" he exclaimed, in consternation.

"Oh, it's true! I'd ask *your* people to come and *live* with us. We're rich, we have lots of room and plenty of servants."

"We won't have any servants if Sonny continues to carry on the way he did with that chambermaid," Gilbert flared up, spitefully.

Belle gasped, for a moment she was speechless, so he continued: "I've wanted to speak to you about that for some time. It's shocking. I can't permit anything so disgraceful to recur in my house."

"*Your* house?"

"Sonny, I'm afraid, is a bad boy and——"

"*Your* house? It's as much mine as yours."

"Of course, but——"

"And he's my brother, so please don't criticize him. It was time that girl went. She's too good-looking and she had been here too long. Perhaps there's some reason why you hated to see her go?" Gilbert uttered an indignant exclamation. "Oh, don't look so holy! Why, you're as red as a lobster!"

"This is—abominable! I shan't permit you to harbor such a thought. Your very suspicion calls for an apology."

Gilbert had always admired Belle's dark eyes, feeling sure that they indicated deep emotional possibilities; for the first time now they more than justified his expectations. They blazed. The woman herself was aquiver: her face was distorted.

Loudly she cried: "Don't dictate to me! I'm not like your first wife. You can't browbeat me."

"*Hush!* For Heaven's sake lower your voice." Gilbert was in a panic. If anything, Belle raised her voice; he felt sure it could be heard throughout the house. It astonished him to discover that she had an ungovernable, nay, an insane temper.

"You're not going to squelch me," she fairly screamed, "and you're not going to throw my people out in the street!"

"Sh-h! I don't propose——"

"They're as good as you are, for all your airs. And they're as good as your own people. They're better! None of *my* relatives are in the penitentiary ——"

"*Belle!* They'll hear you! Think of the servants!" The man was in an agony of apprehension; he pawed at his wife, but she flung his hand aside.

"Let them hear. *I've* got nothing to be ashamed of. Thinking about yourself again! You're too good to have honest folks in your house, but what about your first wife? What was she? What became of your daughter? Answer that."

Gilbert moaned, he lifted his eyes. Falteringly he cried, "What have I done to warrant this?"

The inquiry was not directed at Belle, nevertheless she answered it:

"I'll tell what you've done, if anybody wants to know. I'll tell what happened to Edith and who put her where she is. And I'll tell what happened to her mother, too. I'll tell everything, . . . Well? . . . I'm not the meek and suffering kind, Henry Gilbert, and you'll never drive me to commit—to do what your first wife did. Sonny's a bad boy, is he? If I were you I'd keep still about bad boys and bad girls." The speaker had herself under better control by this time, nevertheless her voice was still pitched in a key to carry well. "Let's understand each other right now. I've got as much to say about this house as you have and I'm going to say it or I'm going to get out. If you drive me out I'll have something else to say that will set Hopewell afire. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

Now this last admonition was merely an excited figure of speech, for Gilbert's tongue had never been defiled by the "filthy weed"; nevertheless he choked, turned green, became quite as ill as if he had indeed inhaled a lungful of poisonous tobacco smoke.

For some time longer he tried ineffectually to quiet his wife's hysteria. He implored. She continued to rage. Like most domestic squalls, this one had arisen suddenly, and when it had blown itself out it had settled nothing. On the contrary, it had left troubled waters in its wake.

As soon as his dignity permitted him to close the disgraceful scene, Gilbert rose and with a heavy sigh exclaimed:

"Alas! it is true that the rain falls alike on the just and the unjust."

This was another spark; it ignited Belle's ire anew, but a sound from the hall checked the impending outburst. She listened.

Gilbert, too, became aware of that sound. It was a subdued sobbing with which, alas! he was already too familiar. It came from Momma Galloway. She had been listening!

Momma presented a piteous spectacle of grief when they found her. She had settled in a palpitating mass upon the top step of the stairs: her face was wet and swollen. She turned imploring eyes up at her son-in-law and shrank away from him as if she anticipated a blow.

"Now see what you've done!" Belle exclaimed, in a key of high tragedy. "You've frightened her to death."

"No, no!" the old lady bleated. "I'm only—hurt. Henry doesn't love us any more. We've got to go."

"Nonsense!" the man exclaimed. "You both misunderstood——"

Mrs. Galloway uttered a thin, heart-broken wail and rocked herself ponderously to and fro.

To her distracted husband Belle cried, passionately: "There, you *brute*! I hope you're satisfied."

Gilbert fled the premises.

The first quarrel between man and wife is always tragic, putting an end, as it does, to that pleasant fiction that marriage is a harmonious relation; usually it is followed by repentance; passion helps to heal it and in time it is forgotten. Not so in this instance. Gilbert kept asking himself how much his mother-in-law had overheard and, pending enlightenment, he could not bring himself to seek reconciliation with Belle. As for her, it genuinely pleased her to feel wronged! It was a sensation she enjoyed. Years of repression had distorted rather than stunted her emotional nature; that "mother hunger" of which she had spoken so eloquently before marriage manifested itself in a perverted desire to nurse a grudge instead of a child. This one she nourished jealously and derived much resentful satisfaction therefrom. Some people are born hostile, and there is, no doubt, a thrill in living under fire.

Before long Gilbert began to sense a downright antagonism on Belle's part which entered into all their daily relations, and in this her family

covertly shared. He became a common enemy and She their champion. They dug in behind her and from cover sniped at him.

Dug in, pretty well expressed what they had done. There was no end to their visit in sight and he concluded finally that they had come to stay. When, for instance, he apologized to momma for that scene with Belle, the old lady misconstrued his listless protestation of welcome into a hearty invitation to spend her declining years at his board, and she accepted. He could not very well disabuse her mind for fear the mistake was honest. Nor did he dare try, on Belle's account; there was no telling what a woman of her temper might do. He realized now, or thought he did, that she proposed to use her hold over him to win her relatives an easy living. Blackmail it was; nothing less. Naturally such a situation was all but intolerable to a man who had been a despot in his own home.

Nor was the task of supporting four such people a small one. Belle, herself, was extravagant, and the others were as wasteful as parrots; she was likewise a careless housekeeper. Household responsibilities irked her and in consequence Gilbert's bills doubled, trebled, discipline vanished, his home became dirty, meals were had at all hours and were badly served by incompetent help. As a matter of fact, there was a procession of domestics in and out of the place, not alone because of Belle's incapacity as a manager, but also because of Sonny's amorous attentions. Sonny had a predilection for servant girls.

Blanche's tastes were not much higher than her brother's. She was not such a "born politician" as he, and therefore made fewer friends, but those she did make were common. Gilbert's home filled up with young people of whom he disapproved—many of them were his own employees—and it became a sort of bedlam.

He sometimes regretted the placid and orderly life he had lived with Alice and compared these young folks with Edith's friends. Everything in those days had been—if not quite in accord with his ideas of decorum—at least dignified. Refined, too. Here was coarseness, ignorance, and vulgarity.

Sonny and Blanche became favorites in their own peculiar clique, and after a while they decided to get into the Country Club set. Why not? Henry was a founder member. To that end they took up golf.

Gilbert learned that they had taken up golf, as he usually learned what they were doing, when they quarreled one day at lunch over Edith's clubs. Sonny had found them somewhere and claimed them by right of discovery;

Blanche asserted they should be hers because they were women's clubs. Followed the usual acrimonious exchange of compliments.

Why did Blanche want to learn golf, anyhow? Sonny asked this question and answered it. It was because she was struck on that pro at the club.

Oh, was that so? Sonny was a smart boy. What was wrong with a golf professional? He worked for a living, didn't he? That was more than some people could say for themselves. Some people wanted to play golf so they could wear a lot of trick clothes. A pair of skinny legs in plus fours was Blanche's idea of nothing to look at.

Oh, was that so? Blanche had her nerve talking about clothes. At least his weren't second hand. Where did Blanche get hers? Out of that upper hall closet. Ha, ha! Wait till they saw her at the Country Club wearing Edith Gilbert's stuff.

Oh, was that so? Well, wasn't it better to wear out clothes than to let the moths eat them up?

Gilbert paled. Edith's dresses! The vandals! The buzzards! That was his shirt which Sonny had on.

Momma Galloway belched complacently and said that Sonny was right. It wasn't very nice to wear Edie's things.

Not even Gilbert himself had ever called his daughter "Edie."

It was like wearing a dead person's clothes, the speaker declared. Yes, sir, a dead person! It must be like dying to go to——

"*Mother!*" Belle spoke sharply. Mrs. Galloway started, there was an awkward hush, glances were exchanged. Henry Gilbert turned such a glare upon his mother-in-law that she gasped.

"Oh! I'm—sorry. . . . I'm always putting my foot in it." She stared from one face to another; her own assumed an expression of acute distress. It began to swell, as usual. She breathed deeply, heaved, the ready tears flowed.

"Aw, can it momma!" Sonny exclaimed. "What's the diff? Ain't we all in the family?"

But momma was heart-broken. She had blundered. Henry was angry with her. To have her loved ones angry with her was worse than death. She practically dissolved. She asked for her medicine and Blanche directed the brother to fetch it.

Sonny shrugged. “What’s the matter with you getting it? Are you crippled? Do a little waiting on momma and you won’t feel so much like golf.”

There began another argument. The brother’s stubbornness stiffened that of his sister and meanwhile the mother continued to suffer. Belle finally rose and went for the bottle.

Later, while Gilbert waited for a word in private with his wife, he wondered what sort of tonic it was that so promptly brought Mrs. Galloway out of her faint spells. He felt the need of something like it, himself. It must be a harmless stimulant and pleasant to the taste, for she consumed large quantities of it and was always accusing Sonny of helping himself.

When Belle appeared he asked her what the remedy was.

“It isn’t a real medicine,” she told him. “It’s port wine. Momma loves it and it agrees with her.”

Gilbert opened his mouth to protest against the use of rum in his house, but thought better of it. Belle did not take kindly to strictures upon her people and there was a more important matter on his mind. Nevertheless, this explained certain peculiarities of Mother Galloway’s behavior.

In a tone of stern reproach he said: “You promised never to mention that trouble of Edith’s. I’m surprised——”

“Bosh! Half the people in Hopewell suspect where she is.”

“Then somebody in this house must have—said something.”

Belle turned away indifferently. “What of it? You can’t keep a thing like that secret.”

That was an unhappy afternoon for Henry Gilbert. What a mess he had made of things! His daughter disgraced, and that disgrace known to his friends; a loveless marriage; a home life that was a torture; a drunken mother-in-law—those were but a few of the misfortunes that vexed him. And all were so unwarranted! What next?

He discovered what next when he returned home that evening to find the house in an uproar. Momma Galloway was in hysterics, genuine hysterics at last, and the doctor was with her. The cause of her seizure was not made plain until the doctor came downstairs; he was the doctor who had always attended the family and he announced cheerfully:

"It's nothing but nerves. She'll be all right when she gets over the shock."

"What shock? What happened?"

"Why—it's her room." The speaker avoided Gilbert's eyes. "She had Mrs.—er—the room your first wife occupied——"

"Yes. To be sure."

"She didn't know anything about what happened there until today. About the gas, I mean."

"Who told her?"

"I assume your—ah—present wife must have let it drop. The old lady was quite unmanageable when I arrived; said she couldn't stay there another hour; she'd go crazy if she did. She had an idea she could smell gas. Silly, of course, but when a person like that gets a notion in her head there's only one thing to do. Mrs. Gilbert moved her into your room." The listener jumped. "She'll probably be all right now, but I'll drop in during the evening and make certain."

Mrs. Galloway in *his* room! Where did Belle expect *him* to sleep? Belle herself had appropriated what used to be the best guest chamber, and refused to sleep with him because it was not sanitary and because he snored. Blanche and Sonny occupied the other two. Surely she didn't propose that *he* would take Alice's room!

But that was precisely what Belle did propose; in fact, she had already transferred his belongings. When he uttered an incoherent protest she wanted to know if he expected her to put momma in one of the small rooms. What if she *were* merely his mother-in-law? She was an old woman. And certainly he didn't think that she, Belle, would move into the room that had belonged to her predecessor. Humph! And just as certainly neither Blanche nor Sonny would consent to do so.

But why did he object to the exchange? Belle eyed him coldly, sardonically. Surely he wasn't an hysterical old woman. If there was any reason why that room should remain unoccupied, perhaps they had better get a larger, finer house. Was there any reason why he couldn't sleep as well there as anywhere else? No? Then that ended it. She ventured the prediction that he would soon learn to like his new quarters even better than the old ones.

Gilbert was sweating nervously; his palms were wet and cold when he climbed the stairs heavily and turned the knob of that door which he had locked so many months before.

Chapter Twenty-one

It would be difficult to imagine a more sudden or a more startling change of fortune than that which came to Edith Gilbert upon her release from Bedford Reformatory. To awaken, one morning, a bitter, disheartened patient in a prison hospital; to be lifted in a few hours out of utter wretchedness and into surroundings more luxurious than she had ever known; to go to sleep that very night in her own bed with the comfortable assurance that she was safe and that her troubles were over—was more than any mind could encompass. It was too much like a child's fairy tale to be credible and she kept telling herself that it was merely the caprice of a sick imagination.

Charity, love, good and beautiful things, were mythical; only injustice, degradation, locks and bars, laundry machines, were real. She would wake up sooner or later.

It had been a silent journey on her part, for she was very weak, her mind was in shadow, and it was haunted; all the way in she had sat huddled in a corner of Hermann's limousine, speechless, dazed. Now and then she had dozed for a moment, only to start into wakefulness and to turn frightened eyes upon her companions. In her pinched, white face those eyes had looked enormous. Occasionally she had reached out a timid hand and touched one or the other of her fellow passengers as if to assure herself that they were real flesh and blood.

The first time she did this Hermann was oddly affected. He had been saying something at the moment, but he broke off abruptly and into his face crept an expression so out of place upon that satirical countenance that Mrs. Alcott was startled into attention. He took the girl's hand in his and stroked it; his lips opened, closed; his emotion, whatever it was, twisted the deep lines about his mouth and eyes. Mrs. Alcott was swept by a wave of anger and of resentment. This girl at her side was so weak, so helpless, such a child! And he was so ruthless! What a powerful thing, she reflected, is this sex attraction, and how mysterious its manifestations. White magic had carried this girl's voice through the air, but something even less comprehensible than those electric impulses had broadcast an appeal from her to him. Whatever that force, it was strong enough to pierce prison walls and rouse his emotional nature, whip it like a tempest. Sex! Mrs. Alcott hated the word.

Hermann continued to hold Edith's hand as he would have held a flower.

The arrival at Mrs. Alcott's place gave Edith an even keener feeling of somnambulism than her release or the journey thither; it was the final chimera. Here was fairyland, the golden dream of Anaschar come true. And what was it Mr. Hermann was telling her? It was her home—her sanctuary? She was too stunned to cry, and yet—she touched her cheeks and found them wet. It was the beauty of the place that brought those tears; she had been starved so long that she was supersensitive to beauty.

The estate which Hermann had leased was not large, but it was charming. There was a Tudor house, its walls covered with ivy which the first light frosts had deepened into richer shades, and it was old enough to possess an atmosphere. There were smooth lawns bordered by rhododendron, laurel, and other shrubs, a sunken garden with a pool at the end, and in addition to the native trees there were some really fine plantings of evergreen which formed shady retreats from the summer sun and barriers against the winter winds.

Edith's room deepened her conviction that some benevolent enchantment had been cast upon her. What was the significance of these incantations, she wondered; but she was too weary to search for an answer and contented herself by asking God to bless these two kind-hearted people who had delivered her. It was the first appeal to God that she had made since her commitment.

It was several days before her feeling of bewitchment wholly wore off, and meanwhile other magic had been at work. She was gaining strength, she was reviving like a wilted bloom.

Mrs. Alcott, what little Edith saw of her, was kindness itself and exercised an almost professional supervision over her guest's welfare, but she showed no desire to become well acquainted. Hermann came and went at his convenience. Usually he brought gifts, and in the main his attitude was fatherly, but at times there was an ardor to his gaze and his voice took on a quality which troubled the girl. It also affected the older woman so that she rose and walked away when she noticed it.

Once, as Hermann was leaving, she stopped him to inquire: "Well? As a nurse am I satisfactory?"

"You are," he told her. "The child is almost well. She's losing her bitterness, too."

"Oh, the bitterness is there; her soul is scarred. She'll never be what she was." Hermann frowned; there was a pause. "How long must I keep this up?

Don't pretend. You know what I mean. She has dropped out—fallen behind the herd. She's helpless. Why don't you get it over with?"

"Ah! Still thinking of me as the wolf, eh?"

"Listen, Jesse!" The speaker could not conceal her agitation. "She thinks we're the only good people in the world and that all kindness and unselfishness is centered in us. She strokes my dress; she kisses my hand. It's—unbearable! I suppose you're going to ask me to break the bad news to her—or, if worse comes to worst, to threaten to send her back. Well, I won't do it. I refuse. I'm sorry I let you drive me this far. . . . She'll accept you, no doubt. What else can she do, poor thing? You've got her tied, hand and foot. But—I should think you'd hate yourself."

Hermann had reddened slightly. "Have you never hated yourself?"

"I hate myself now. I'm thoroughly ashamed."

"Perhaps I——"

"The wretchedest part of it all is this—she thinks *you're* good!" The speaker laughed harshly. "Why, if I told her the truth at this minute—if I told her what I am and what you are—she wouldn't believe me. She'd call it a poor joke, and—pat my hand. God! but we're a couple of rotters!"

"I never posed as a saint, Lois, and you're not going to tell her anything."

"No. I daren't. Not for my own sake, but for hers. Of course you'll give her everything, but she's not like the rest of us. How she will hate you."

Hermann spoke angrily: "That's my affair. Oblige me by doing what you're engaged to do. I can't abide lectures." He stepped into his car and slammed the door behind him.

Mrs. Alcott had not exaggerated. Edith did, indeed, cherish some sort of notion that her two friends monopolized most of the virtues, for she was in no condition as yet to form half likes or dislikes. She knew by now whose efforts had freed her and whose money provided this retreat; it seemed equally fine and generous of Lois to lend herself so liberally to Hermann's charity. Her obligation to the pair was overwhelming and no payment that either could exact would be too great for her to meet. She felt like a slave, for the law had bound her out to Mrs. Alcott, but it was a willing and an affectionate servitude.

How really lovable they both were. Lois, for instance, was not at all the woman that she pretended to be: she had a passionate, hungry nature and it

shamed her to show, or to be shown, sincere affection. Mr. Hermann was a revelation, too. Beneath that armor of suavity, of worldly cynicism, beat the heart of a boy, and his mind was a limitless wonderland which she loved to explore. They were like—like oysters, Edith told herself: they dwelt within stony shells, the outsides of which were rough and unpromising, but when opened they showed iridescent nacre and pearls of priceless worth. So ran her mind during the days of her convalescence. Following the law of reaction, her spirits rose to abnormal heights; she was effervescent; she romped like a child; she laughed and she played. The servants adored her; she made friends with the horses. Hermann came more and more often; frequently they rode together. Autumn wine was in the air and they were drunk with it.

Edith grew well and strong, but suffering had stamped her with a certain spiritual quality she had never before possessed, and physically she was more fragile, more ethereal, than formerly. In only one other way was she changed: she no longer showed the slightest interest in music and Hermann realized that not once had he heard her try her voice.

He asked her about this one day, but instantly regretted his inquiry, for into her eyes leaped a look of misery. She told him what had happened that night at Bedford, and, although she tried to speak casually, she failed. He realized that this was the tragedy of all.

“Did you never try again?” he queried.

“Yes. A few times. It was always the same.”

“Don’t be discouraged. The voice is there and we’ll bring it back, better than ever.”

Edith smiled wanly. “Shock, they say, often makes a voice or destroys it. It was my luck to lose mine. I don’t believe I’ll ever again attempt to sing. It’s too terrifying; too much like trying to breathe life into a dead person. That makes me something of a problem, doesn’t it?”

“How a problem?”

“What’s going to become of me? What are you going to let me do with myself?”

“What would you like to do with yourself?”

“I haven’t much to say, have I? We girls are usually put out at housework. Mrs. Alcott must need a maid. I learned to make beds and do laundry work and——”

“Don’t joke!” the man exclaimed, sharply.

“But—I can’t remain here indefinitely like this. I understand the situation; I even know what you pay for this place. Naturally, I can never earn enough to begin to repay you.”

With an effort he inquired, “Do you like the place?”

“It’s—heaven!”

“It’s yours if you’ll take it and promise never again to talk like this. The owner will be glad to get rid of it.” He was surprised when the girl reached out and laid her hand on his.

“How generous you are. And how good!”

“I? *Good?*”

“Oh, you’ll deny it, of course. That’s your pose, but I’ve heard about so many generous things you have done. Things like this. How many artists owe everything they are to you? How many fine charities do you support? You won’t answer, you blessed fraud. The finest charity any man can do is to help those who are struggling to do something and to be something, and to help them unobtrusively. It’s something new to me, for when my father gives it somehow gets into the newspapers. If he donates a hospital bed his name has to go up over the door. But I’m not an artist and I have no future. I’m a bond girl.”

Hermann regarded the speaker with a curious alertness; he appeared to be upon the point of some decisive speech, but hesitated. Tied hand and foot, Lois had said. A bond girl! Was this the flutter of the white flag? Her signal of surrender? She met his eyes frankly; she was smiling. How slim and young and clean she was! That wasn’t coquetry in her eyes, it was—faith. Faith in him! Slowly the tautness went out of the man’s nerves. He heard himself saying:

“You must try your voice, and keep trying it; not with fear that it may fail you, but with confidence that it will not. Faith, you know, will move mountains.” What balderdash he was talking! But he had to say something. “Wonderful thing, faith. And there’s a lot in the power of mind, too; it works real miracles. You were ill and frightened up there; you’re well now and perfectly safe.” He had not meant to say quite that. Safe, indeed! With these savage desires rending him! “Will your voice to come back, command it to return. Know that you *can* sing. When the time comes that you actually *know*—you—you’ll sing.”

This was good, comforting advice, but so far as the giver could see it accomplished no more and no less than he had expected. Good advice is always barren of result. He continued, as the days went along, to see as much of Edith, not as he wished, but as he dared to see, and constantly the spell she had cast over him grew stronger.

From the time of their first meeting he had tantalized himself with the dreamy delights of anticipation, but he had come to the point now where they no longer sufficed; they merely made his yearnings the more uncontrollable. In imagination he felt her in his arms, felt the pressure of her lips upon his, and such moments were a torment. “Tied, hand and foot!” He wished Lois had not put those words into his head; they conjured up such drunken fantasies. This could not long continue; his moment must soon come, and then—Hermann grew dizzy, blind at the thought.

Come that moment did, and as unexpectedly as most great moments come.

He had formed the habit of telephoning to her frequently and seldom permitted many hours to elapse without ringing her up. Sometimes he had nothing more than a cheerful greeting for her, or told her some amusing thing that had happened; perhaps he merely asked what she was doing and how she felt. Again they held long, intimate conversations which were the despair of the switchboard operators. This afternoon he phoned to say that important matters had arisen which would prevent him from coming out during the evening as he had planned. He hoped she was disappointed. It was nice to be missed.

He had honestly meant what he said, but the lodestone was too powerful; nine o’clock found him speeding out the Island.

The house was dark when he arrived, except for a warm glow from the library windows which indicated that Edith was reading. When he stepped out of his car, however, he heard music. She was at the piano.

He let himself in and slipped out of his coat, then started for the music room, but paused. She was trying her voice. Delicacy urged him to retreat or at least to make known his arrival; curiosity impelled him to remain.

She had begun by trying a note or two softly, fearfully. He could tell by the way she fumbled the keys that she was numb with dread. Her voice was husky and uncertain. She stopped.

Hermann craned his neck and saw that her head was thrown back and that her eyes were closed. Her hands were clasped above her bosom, her lips

were moving. He could almost read the words of her prayer.

She summoned all her faith, all her will power, she tried to *know* that she could sing; it was a laborious effort and she repeated several times the introduction to a simple song before she could again bring herself to risk the actual experiment. The notes came truer this time, but they were thin. Gradually they increased in volume and in beauty. Jesse Hermann stood rooted in his tracks.

Followed an astounding thing—a thing which, to the observer, was intensely moving and deeply dramatic. He witnessed, or heard, the rebirth of a divine talent, and he shared in both the pain and the ecstasy of that birth. Anyone who loved music as Hermann did must have been stirred by the struggle, but that which shook him to the very depths was the rapture of the singer. As her vocal cords responded and their tones grew fuller and finer, her excitement mounted, it grew to exaltation. Vitality flowed into her; her touch upon the keys became surer, more electric; confidence returned. Soon she was playing, singing, in a perfect frenzy; strong and clear and magnificent, her voice flooded the room, filled the whole house, the night itself, so it seemed. It was not a song which issued from her throat, but a pæan of thanksgiving and of praise.

This was miraculous enough, but it was not all: something else held the man spellbound, and it was the realization that this was not at all the voice he knew, but another voice—a richer, deeper, more colorful voice, and an infinitely finer one. It was one voice in ten thousand; it was the sort of voice that rears altars in the hearts of men. Jesse Hermann felt as if he were standing uncovered in some great cathedral.

The girl herself was in transports, of course; her face was glorified; all the emotion in her came forth in those tones.

She ended suddenly, with a crash.

Hermann found himself clapping his hands and hoarsely crying: “Bravo! Bravo!”

Edith saw him, and rose.

“I can sing! *I can sing!*” She came running toward him, flung herself into his arms. “*I can sing!*” Such excitement he had never seen on any face. She pulled at him, beat her hands upon his breast; over and over again she sobbed: “I can sing! I can sing!”

“Yes. *Yes!*” he told her in a shaking voice. “Oh, my dear! You can, indeed.”

“I thought they had taken everything. But—they left me this. It—it was worth the sacrifice.” Suddenly she choked, then she hid her face against him and he could feel her bosom heaving, her heart fluttering.

She had come to him of her own free will, his arms were around her at last, his hour was here, and yet he took no profit out of it, for something new had been born in him as well as in her.

An alterative had been at work in Jesse Hermann ever since that moment at the Bedford infirmary when he had stolen into this girl’s room and looked down at her as she lay sleeping. Or even earlier than that, perhaps. A new feeling, the like of which he had never experienced, had been steadily growing and assuming shape; it had required a sincere soul upheaval such as this to put breath into it and give it actual being.

He held her gently, he stroked her hair, he murmured to her, but his voice, too, had suffered change. It sounded strangely soft and musical to him.

Nobody had ever called him an artist, and yet he possessed the deep emotional capacity of a very great artist, and at this moment a feeling infinitely more powerful than mere physical yearning had possession of him. The beast in him had been cowed and driven out. As yet he was aware of this change in only the vaguest way—it was a metamorphosis too surprising to be soon appreciated—but one thing he knew beyond all doubt. This girl was safe in the shelter of his arms. She was inviolate.

It was some time before Edith could control herself sufficiently to do more than cling to him and repeat her exultant cry, “I can sing!” but finally she grew calm enough to say:

“I’m so happy; so happy! And do you know what makes me gladdest of all? You were here and heard! Yes, and now I can repay what you’ve spent on me. Oh, don’t I know that you fooled me about Professor Lorelli? You *hired* him!” She disregarded Hermann’s effort to stop her. “Of course I can never repay you for your courtesy, your kindness, your love, but I can give you back the actual money, bit by bit. It will take years but— Why, every day since I’ve been here I’ve worried myself ill about running into debt ——”

“Please! Please!” he implored.

“You told me to have faith—to *know*! I’ve been trying, trying so hard to make myself believe, and tonight for the first time I got up courage to test

my faith—*your* faith. I'd never have dared, if I'd known you were listening. My voice *is* better, isn't it? It's a good voice now. Tell me it is."

"My dear! My dear!" he said, breathlessly. "It's incredibly fine. I wonder if you would trust yourself to sing again? It may help me to understand more clearly what has happened to—to each of us."

"Yes. I'm eager to make sure for myself. I—think I can sing better for you than for anybody in the world." She returned to the piano, seated herself, remained motionless for a moment. "I was praying to my mother before I knew you were here. I called on her to help me. You see, it was she who taught me what I know, and so—do you mind if I sing something to her? Something she loved? I'm sure she can hear."

Hermann made a gesture of assent.

It was a simple, religious thing that Edith sang, not at all what her listener had expected, and therefore its effect upon him was the more profound. In a voice low and sweet and singularly wistful he heard this:

"Make channels for the streams of love,
  Where they may broadly run: . . .
And love has overflowing streams,
  To fill them, every one.

"But if at any time we cease
  Such channels to provide,
The very founts of love for us
  Will soon be parched and dried.

"For we must share, if we would keep
  That blessing from above:
Ceasing to give, we cease to have.
  Such is the law of love."

When Edith turned it was to see a white-faced man staring at her. She spoke to him, but he neither heard nor answered.

They were seated side by side; she was talking in a torrent when he interrupted, to quote vaguely:

" 'We must share, if we would keep!' 'Ceasing to give, we cease to have ____' "

" 'Such is the law of love!' " she finished for him. "That was Mim's religion and she lived it. I think it must be yours."

“Mine? It is a doctrine that fills me with dread. To a wretch who takes and then tries to evade payment no thought could be more terrifying.”

He felt a finger laid softly upon his lips. “Stop pretending! Who but a great and good magician could have done all that you have done?”

He rose; he said, almost roughly, “I must go now.”

“But you just came! I want to talk, talk—I have ten thousand things to say and I’m bursting. Don’t you understand? This is my supreme moment and you mustn’t leave for hours yet. Tonight, for the first time, I live.”

“I must go,” he repeated. “I have something to do.”

“Nonsense! At this time of night?”

“Something very important and very particular.” Of a sudden he smiled crookedly. “Oh, a very delicate undertaking! I’ll tell you what it is: I’ve got to weigh a man’s soul and—and find out its worth. It’s a small thing—the average man’s soul—after all the devils have been cast out of it—so tiny that it has to be weighed in a vacuum. It will take me all night.”

Edith walked with him to the door, and when he held out his hand she impulsively lifted her face and kissed him.

“You are so good, so kind!” she told him, sincerely. “I can never prove my gratitude.”

Hermann turned blindly and made for his car; he stumbled as he entered it.

Gratitude! That’s what she felt. Well, how could he expect more when he deserved so much less? Gratitude, of course. She was at the threshold of life and he was old—older than sin.

As she closed the door and turned happily back into the house Edith heard a sound that startled her. It issued from the darkness of the stiff little reception-room at her left; it was faint but unmistakable. Somebody was weeping, softly, wretchedly. Quickly she entered the room and snapped on the lights. Lois Alcott was crouched, huddled upon the floor, her face hidden against the brocaded seat of a chair. She was in negligée; it was evident that she had slid into this position and lacked the strength to arise.

“Mrs. Alcott! Dear——!” the girl cried. She ran forward and strained at the woman. “What has happened?”

“Don’t—touch me,” the other gasped.

“My dear! Are you ill?”

“No! No! Let me alone. Please! . . . Why did you come in here? Go away! Go away!” The speaker lifted a distorted, tear-stained face.

“What have I done? Have—I hurt you?”

“Yes, of course you’ve hurt me. Don’t you understand? . . . I’m not fit for you to—touch.” Again the sobs came. “I didn’t want you to know—or him, either, but—I heard you singing. I came down, slipped in here. . . . I’m wicked—wicked! . . . But he’ll never harm you, now: I could see that by the look on his face. He’s hurt, too.”

“There! There! You don’t know what you’re saying.” Edith knelt and put her arms around the elder woman. “Of course he won’t harm me. He couldn’t. Why should anybody——?”

“I heard everything you and he said. And that song—that hymn you sang! Oh, my God! . . . Don’t you see, child, that the worst thing you could have done was to—to come here, with me? . . . It was wrong of me to let you, but away down inside I’m not bad. I’m like most women. I’d—I’d rather be good.”

“Dear, you are hysterical.” Edith could speak quietly now. “Of course I don’t believe a thing you are telling me. I *won’t* believe! But for that matter, I don’t *care* what you may have been or done; you are good to me, you are my friend. You are one of the two friends I have in all this world. Think what I was and where you found me. I was living with thieves and fallen women; I carry a brand which will go with me to my grave. You took me in, nursed me, gave me your love and—took mine. That’s something I can’t forget and nothing you say or do will ever change my love. Now then, you must come to bed. Sh—h! Not another word, for I won’t listen. I won’t!”

Edith kissed the damp face, drew the woman to her feet. Mrs. Alcott clung to her and wept as if her heart would break.

Chapter Twenty-two

Jesse Hermann looked up with a frown as his butler announced that a lady was calling.

"I'm not in." When the butler hesitated, his employer inquired, sharply: "Well? What is it? You know I'm never in to strangers."

"It is—er—Mrs. Dubose!"

Hermann uttered an exclamation; he uncrossed his long legs and sat forward.

"Yes, sir, Mrs. Dubose. And she says you would do her a great courtesy by seeing her."

"Why, certainly. Yes, yes—! But wait; I'll go down, myself." The speaker rose, still with that look of incredulity upon his face. Natalie here! In this house! What on earth could have induced her to call?

Mrs. Dubose came forward when she saw her ex-husband descending the wide, curving stairway; he took her gloved hand and bowed over it, saying:

"Naturally I am surprised, but—before I bid you welcome may I pause to admire you and to tell you how well you look?"

She smiled coolly. "I *am* looking rather well this autumn, but furs become me. Every woman over thirty should wear furs of some sort. They're putting them on negligées, you know, and I suppose we'll soon have Eskimo nightgowns. That probably explains why so many nice men go in for Arctic exploration. Permit me to say that time is gracious to you, Jesse."

"And why not? I'm a boy again. I live a temperate, pleasant existence and I try to keep fit. Life, after a certain point, is a battle against wrinkles and—"

"Isn't it? Autumn! What a hideous word and what an abominable season! Dead grass, faded leaves, decay! Well, now that you have so nobly survived the shock of seeing me here, won't you ask me to sit down and make myself comfortable?"

"I offer a thousand apologies."

“Oh, the embarrassment is mutual! That’s why I chose to come here rather than to go to your office. I want to talk to you.”

“Then come to the library. You’ll notice changes elsewhere in the house, but none there, except for a few more accumulations.”

A moment later, when he had laid off her wrap and had drawn two chairs up before a tiny grate fire, he said: “It gives me a positive thrill, Natalie, to see you here once more. How like old times. And look—your favorite cigarettes!” He proffered her one from a bronze box, then held a match for her. “That’s a compliment to your unerring good taste. There are a great many more about the house. I’m a sentimentalist.”

“Isn’t it fortunate that we are sufficiently well bred, if not well behaved, to make it possible to meet amicably?”

“Many thanks for the charity of that editorial ‘we,’ but I protest against your use of the present tense. If we could live as long and thrive as robustly as the memory of our evil deeds, the doctors would starve and the spas would go out of business, wouldn’t they? Really, Natalie, it wasn’t so much a question of behavior as of disposition. Yours I have never criticized, or permitted others to question; mine is something for which I shouldn’t be held wholly accountable.”

Mrs. Dubose nodded. “Environment and common custom had something to do with it, too, I’ve no doubt. We made an experiment and it failed. Marriage is always an experiment and frequently it fails—we are such imperfect vessels and it is so hard to profit by others’ mistakes. Ours was something like a midnight joy ride: you drove too fast and I wouldn’t read the danger signs. After the wreck we behaved rather generously toward each other. But people usually behave well when they’re smashed up. . . . Of course you’re perishing to know what on earth impels me to call on you.”

“I’m human,” he smiled. “Whatever it is, you may count on me.”

“Don’t promise too readily. Naturally it is about Norman.”

“I assumed as much.”

“And a girl.”

“Ah!”

“You know he’s a clean boy, Jesse—about women, I mean. Quite an unusual fellow in that respect.”

"So I understand. Rather puritanical, almost hyper-scrupulous, but in other ways quite as liberal-minded and as normal as the rest of us. He has a brilliant future."

"He should have," the mother agreed. "That's why I am so deeply concerned."

"Am I to infer that the girl isn't all that you'd wish?"

"Exactly. But that's of no great consequence; mothers are narrow and the best girls don't always make the best wives. Take my own case, for example."

"Naturally I challenge that remark. But how can I be of service?"

"By allowing me to take the girl abroad and make something out of her."

"*I?* . . . I can't imagine what you mean."

"He is quite madly in love with Edith Gilbert."

In spite of his self-control Hermann started. Mrs. Dubose continued, quietly: "I hope you appreciate how distasteful it is for me to come here on such an errand. And yet Norman couldn't very well come to you, could he? Legally the girl is in the care of Mrs. —— Alcott, but actually she is in yours. It is a wretched situation, made so by the fact that you secured her release before I had time to do so."

"Let me understand. You know how and why she was sent to Bedford?"

"Norman learned about it and at the same time he learned that she was 'The Lark' whose voice he was already in love with. He heard her sing while he was on a fishing trip last spring and he tried in every way to meet her. He built up quite a romance. Oh, it was an asinine procedure! But such things do happen. He is convinced that she's a good girl, in spite of—of—"

"Of her knowing me?"

"I was going to say in spite of appearances. I distrust appearances, but I do put faith in circumstantial evidence. Let me express it this way: it took less to convince Norman of her integrity than it would have taken to convince me, for I know you and I know women. Frankly, the circumstances of her arrest, and her conviction on the testimony of her own father, wouldn't tend to reassure a woman as worldly as I."

"Perhaps you are too worldly."

Mrs. Dubose shrugged. “No matter. As I said before, the truth about the girl herself is of no great consequence. I took steps to remove her from that institution, but you forestalled me. We were puzzled to know what you had done with her; nobody seemed to know. We could find no trace of her and I assumed you had sent her away. To be honest, that suited me. But Norman learned a few days ago where she is, and he—”

“How?”

“Through her friend, the Gates girl. She’s staying with her, isn’t she?”

“Yes. I took her out. Edith was lonesome.”

“Norman met them and had them somewhere to tea.” The speaker sighed, made a gesture of resignation. “That started it all over again, set another match to it. You know him.”

For a while Hermann pondered. “Tell me exactly what you have in mind,” he said.

“Norman wants to marry her. That would be all very well if the circumstances were different—if she hadn’t been convicted of a crime. But she was an inmate of a penal institution. Why, technically, she is still serving time! Am I right?”

“Quite right.”

“It’s most embarrassing. Who ever heard of a boy in our set marrying a girl with a criminal record? And the nature of the charge upon which she was convicted! But—he has reconciled himself to the possible consequences, so that’s one complication out of the way.”

“Is there another complication?”

“There is. *You!* To me, at least, it’s a complication. Norman believes in her purity and I can’t bring myself to disabuse his mind. I can’t tell him that —” The speaker hesitated. “Really, Jesse, you humiliated me very bitterly at one time, but I think this is even more humiliating. To take for a daughter a girl whom you have—”

“You need feel no humiliation,” Hermann asserted, sharply. “Nothing I can say could strengthen that simple statement. She is much too good for Norman, or for any other man.”

Mrs. Dubose stared in some perplexity at the speaker, then she nodded. “You’d swear to that, of course, and I take it for what it’s worth. No man was ever accused of perjury for testifying to a woman’s virtue. But mere

chastity isn't everything. More important, by far, is the girl good and true at heart? Would she make my boy happy? Does he love her?"

"Right! Does he love her and, more important still, does she love him? That question is directed at you."

"Why—of course!" Mrs. Dubose was genuinely surprised. "They're of an age, they have tastes in common, and he's everything that any girl—Why, Jesse, they're all wild about him. I take it that you're sincerely fond of the girl, but the point is Norman will marry her and you won't. . . . Naturally, I shan't permit him to marry her right away. I'll take her abroad for a year or two—for several years, if necessary. That's where I must have your help; there are legal complications in the way. Her voice has possibilities and I'll be fair to her. I'll give her every opportunity to make a career. Really, it's the only way out that I can see and I'll gladly sacrifice my time. She can at least change her name. Time is a tomb-builder, we'll have to risk her record."

"Does Norman agree to this plan?"

"He will agree to it. The success of it depends upon you, for I can't ask Mrs. Alcott to make it possible. It's the chance of a lifetime for Miss Gilbert, as you must realize."

Hermann rose, tramped the full length of the room and back again before he spoke, then it was with more than a trace of irony. "It is a nice plan—a thoroughly sophisticated and diplomatic procedure. There's only one thing wrong with it: *I* love the girl and *I* want to marry her."

Natalie Dubose sat back in her chair; her eyes widened.

"Impossible! You—*can't*!"

"Can't love her?" he inquired with a queer twist to his lips.

"Can't marry her."

"Why not? I'm no puritan, no hyper-moralist. I don't care a damn whether she has a criminal record or not and I won't ask her to change her name—except to mine."

"But your age, Jesse!"

"They say a man is as old as his arteries, but that's wrong; he's as old as his heart, and my heart is young. I never knew how young until just lately. And it's clean, Natalie, for it has just been born." Hermann was speaking earnestly. "I haven't lived like Norman. I've involved myself in some evil

doings, the which I regret—you don't know how bitterly I regret them now—but in justice to myself I must tell you that certain of those wickednesses have been exaggerated, and usually they injured me more than anyone else. Mind you, I plead nothing in extenuation except possibly this; when I did wrong I did it because there wasn't much else to do, and at no time was my heart in it. How could it have been when I had no heart? Yes, it's a clean, pure heart. Like a child's! Why, Natalie, it's barely a week old. I—I'm afraid I can't indorse your plan."

"This is extraordinary," Mrs. Dubose confessed. "Quite the most extraordinary thing I ever had to meet. Has she accepted you?"

"No. I have been too deeply conscious of my unworthiness to ask her, in so many words. But now I shall; at the earliest possible moment."

"No doubt she'll say yes. You have put her in your debt, and such an offer would turn any girl's head. But think of yourself—you're more than twice her age."

"Time will steadily alter that ratio to my advantage."

"To your disadvantage! You're as mad as my boy. What is this girl like that she can make fools of——?" The speaker checked herself, breathed hard, then: "This is becoming an emotional discussion, and I detest emotion. . . . I don't mean to call you old, Jesse. Heaven knows *I'm* not old. You're in the very prime of your life. Yes, and you're in a mood where you'd accept the certainty of disillusionment and disaster for the sake of one year, one month, one week of delight. Don't I know? Dubose was years younger than I. Nevertheless, facts are facts. Time is merciless. You'll *grow* old while she is still young. Some younger man will come along." Hermann paled, his face twitched. "It has worked out happily upon occasion, but so rarely as to prove the rule. No, Jesse, it can't be. You have sowed and you must reap."

"It *can* be! It *will* be! It *must* be!" he exploded. "God above! I'll make her a princess: I'll give her the world. I tell you I'm young, *young*! I'll fight for this happiness—the first I ever knew; I'll wreck everything, destroy everything! Never have I wanted as I want now, and I shall permit nothing to balk me. Mad? Yes. Quite insane and utterly reckless. Nothing so enormous, so overwhelming as I feel could enter a man's soul unless it were right, and true and holy."

"I'll fight, too. I'll fight for my boy!" the woman exclaimed. "Frankly, I was of two minds when I came here: for self-evident reasons I disapproved

of the match and I rather hoped a long engagement would serve to cool Norman off; on the other hand, I realized that I had no right to interfere. I'm ready to believe that I was mistaken in the girl, and your opposition arouses mine. I've given Norman everything he asked for. I'll give him this. . . . You say you love her; you say she's a good girl——"

"More. I could speak of lilies, of saints, of—of God! She has suffered cruelly, too, and that has made a gentle, gracious woman of her."

Not often had Natalie Dubose been so baffled as at this moment. To be frustrated was a new experience and one to which she did not take kindly, yet here was a man set like stone. She had come up against a wall and could see no break in it, nor any way around. When she spoke next her voice had grown metallic: "Every word you utter proves that it's impossible. If she is the kind of girl you say she is, what will she think when she learns that in order to further your ends you had her paroled in the custody of your mistress, the corespondent in our divorce case?"

"I dare say she would loathe me," Hermann admitted, gravely. "I loathe myself. It is one of the things on my conscience, but I didn't feel toward her then as I feel now: I knew neither her nor myself. I trust she will never learn ——"

"Suppose I tell her?"

"I know you too well to believe you capable of such an action. Another thing: Mrs. Alcott and I, for a good many years now, have been less than acquaintances——"

"Who supports her?" The question came like a gun-shot.

"I do. It is a debt which I contracted in a moment of—well, intoxication. I pay all debts, however contracted, and I shall continue to pay this one by providing for her. No two people more thoroughly dislike each other than do she and I; we maintain a counterfeit friendship merely to afford the occasional opportunity of causing each other misery—the genial amusement of inflicting pain. Neither has forgiven the other. But to get back: do you seriously propose to betray my baseness to Edith?"

Mrs. Dubose drew a deep breath; it was almost a sigh. She shook her head. "No. I couldn't do a thing like that."

"You're a fine woman, Natalie, and a good sport. You can understand now why I lacked the courage to ask Edith to be my wife. I think, in the days that have passed since I learned what worship is, that I have passed

through enough hell to punish me for all the evil I've done, and perhaps to leave a considerable credit."

"I had no idea it was like this, but I'll find a way. You're inflexible; so am I. It's a pity we must be enemies, but that needn't prevent us from being —friends." The caller smiled and extended her hand.

When her one-time husband took it and bent over it, she could not help thinking what a courtly man he was. A magnificent, hawk-like man, this Jesse Hermann! He had done her a great wrong, to be sure, but he had paid like a gentleman, and she thought well enough of herself to feel certain that he had suffered more for his sin than had she.

After he had helped her into her coat with a deftness and an air which she well remembered, he said: "You have paid me a great compliment by coming here. If matters were in any other wise, if it were anything else you asked of me— But I love her, Natalie. At last I know what love is and I thank God for letting me know." There was a solemnity to his words which was deeply impressive.

She had taken a step or two when she turned.

"You told me just now that I'm a good sport. Are you the same?" He met her question with an alert, suspicious scrutiny, so she ran on: "I can see that you do love her, but I don't believe you understand, yet, what real, true love involves. You've only felt a part of it. If that heart of yours is clean and unselfish you'll want her to be happy——"

"I'll make her happy."

"——even though it means your own unhappiness."

"Don't ask me to alter my decision, for I shall refuse," he said, harshly. "I'm by no means saintly. I'm just a hungry, starving man."

"Will you give my boy an even chance?"

"No. He had his chance, and it was more than even. He had every advantage: he had youth, and fire, and looks. *Youth!* Damnation! What would I give for that! If he was fool enough to throw away his chance, must I lose mine? No! *No!*" Hermann made a violent gesture of refusal.

"Promise to let him see her without interference. Give him time—and her, too. Give them time in which to make certain how they feel toward each other. Play the game as cleanly as I played it. I refused to play crooked. Surely, you're as good a sport as I."

"No! I— . . . How much time?"

"I don't know; a week, perhaps. You will, you *must*, Jesse. It isn't in you to refuse if you honestly care for her. Let them see each other, let me have her over for dinner. After all, she's the one to choose. Why, if you asked her before she knew her own mind it would be cheating the girl. . . . Leaving Norman out of it, whose happiness is the more precious to you?—hers or your own? Answer that and prove if you've been reborn." The man made a sound in his throat and turned away, but the speaker followed him. "Promise you won't see her nor ask her for a week. It's all I ask. You—you paid your debt to Lois Alcott; you say you always pay. Well, you owe me something on the old score."

Anxiously the mother waited for an answer; it was a long time coming, and meanwhile she could see that Hermann was waging a desperate fight with himself. When finally he lifted his head and met her gaze, his face was haggard, sick—all vitality had fled from it. Its heavy lines were bitten deeper than ever, his green eyes were lusterless. Dully he said:

"I promise. But—it means the end." He dried his forehead, which had begun to glisten.

"Thank you!" Natalie was too wise to jeopardize this moment of victory, so she started again for the door, but he checked her.

"Wait! It isn't because I'm a good sportsman, or to settle our account, or for fear she may learn what sort of man I am. It's not because of anything you said, but because of something *she* said—sang rather. Something she taught me and which I cherish as—as coming from her. . . . It had to do with 'the law of love.' 'We must share if we would keep.' . . . 'Ceasing to give we cease to have.' All Christianity, it seems to me, is embodied in the words of that song. Hymn, it was—in three verses. She honestly believes it is my religion, the code I live by. No one but she ever believed well of me, so—it's rather up to me to warrant her faith. Isn't it? . . . But I know what it means. . . . Autumn! Dead leaves and—dead hopes! Winter! . . . You've cast me to the lions, Nat. Cast me to the lions!" With a groan he sank into a chair and took his head in his hands.

Silently the woman stole out and away.

Chapter Twenty-three

Henry Gilbert regretfully acknowledged that, for once, he had failed. He had been so easily and so uniformly prosperous in his sundry undertakings that he had come to accept success as his due reward and to regard failure as a chastisement visited upon people less deserving than he. That a man without shortcomings, a stainless man, should suffer misfortune was contrary to all his theories and it completely upset his ideas of divine law, and yet misfortune had overwhelmed him; misfortune, in fact, was a miserably inadequate word to describe the catastrophe which had come upon him. His marriage to Belle Galloway was more than a mere failure, it had turned into such a fiasco that he felt not only grieved, but also humiliated and victimized. No man who has been buncoed at a shell game can retain much self-respect.

He knew by now that Belle had married him only for his money. This suspicion had been slow in forming, but after a certain amount of eavesdropping at home he heard her acknowledge as much to her sister. Even then he refused to believe it; he told himself that he had misunderstood her or that she had been joking, for it was inconceivable either that he could be deceived or that any woman upon whom he conferred the honor of his regard could fail to requite his affections tenfold. But when he reproached her for speaking lightly of him, instead of confusion and apology he met with defiance. Belle flashed up like loose powder and derided him for listening. People who sneaked around with their ears stretched out like sails were sure to hear something unwelcome. No use for him to buy a radio set, with cars like his. A man of his sort would peek through keyholes and go to bed in a transom. She hated snoopers. Well, what if she had said it? What did he propose to do about it?

Nothing! He proposed nothing. He was desolated, that's all; his universe was in ruins, his world a wreck. Since he had failed to make her happy, he supposed—a deep sigh—they had better consider a divorce.

Oh, *that* was it, eh? He intended to cast her off—to take her, use her, and then fling her aside without a penny? Belle guessed not. She hadn't asked him to marry her. What grounds would he sue on? Probably he'd hire detectives and pry into her past life the way he had pried into the life of the first Mrs. Gilbert—a man who'd fit a door-knob into his car would do

anything. There was no stopping the woman when she had lashed herself into one of these furies; she became strident.

Very well! She had nothing to conceal. She had never been on the stage and there were no men in her life. What was more, he wouldn't browbeat her; he wouldn't lock *her* into a room with a leaky gas grate, to smother. Just because he was tired of her. Leaky gas grate! Ha! If the people of Hopewell only knew what she knew! Divorce *her*, would he?

Followed a terrible ten minutes for Henry Gilbert during which he felt like strangling this shrill-voiced macaw.

He had taken refuge in flight, finally, but not before he had heard Momma Galloway noisily weeping in her room. His room.

It was days before that storm settled, and meanwhile Belle's relatives treated him with a queer mingling of servility and terror: they fawned and they cringed. As for the wife, she remained resentful and derisive.

Gilbert awoke to the rueful fact that into his home had crept all the evils, all the vices that he abhorred. Dirt, disorder, contention, envy, hatred, greed —they had stolen in and they sat at his daily board. Nor was there any way of ousting them.

He had long since abandoned hope of the Galloways leaving. They had squatted on his domain. As soon look for the scale to loosen from an apple tree as for these parasites to separate themselves from him.

Momma, by the way, had sent for her furniture and it was scattered through the house. She kept offering to sell it to Henry at a bargain.

Sonny remained incurably shiftless and effected the worst company in town. He had learned to drive a car and he drove mostly at night. Gilbert found many hairpins in his limousine, and his gas bills mounted. When he remonstrated about the latter, Sonny poked him in the ribs and told him that a guy had to drive fast and far, nowadays, to find a dark parking place.

Sonny smashed the car one night in a collision and was arrested for driving while under the influence of liquor. Gilbert most certainly would have allowed the young reprobate to stand trial, only for the fact that in the car with his brother-in-law at the moment of the accident was the Gilberts' upstairs girl. By the time Henry had settled with her, with the owner of the other vehicle, and with the officer making the arrest, he experienced such a feeling of personal guilt that he was quite ready to drop the matter. His own repair bill ran to several hundred dollars.

The incident, as was to be expected, induced another of Momma Galloway's spells. She wept almost constantly for several days, during which time her breath smelled strongly of port wine. Indirectly she blamed herself for the catastrophe, for Sonny had taken a quart bottle of her "medicine" with him that evening. This prohibition was awful; it had taught all the young people to drink, and the girls were worse than the boys; they wouldn't go anywhere unless there was something on somebody's hip. You couldn't blame Sonny. No, this accident was directly chargeable to the Volstead Act. It was a mercy the poor boy hadn't been killed.

Blanche, in her way, was even more of an anxiety than her brother, for she was now engaged, not to the golf pro at the Country Club, but to the caddy master, and one of Gilbert's acquaintances—a man whom he disliked—spitefully warned him that it was by no means a desirable match. The caddy master was a loose-living young man and there was already a caddy mistress, if Gilbert knew what the speaker meant. The fellow seemed to derive considerable satisfaction from imparting this news, for he grinned maliciously. Nor were the members of the golf committee any more sympathetic when Gilbert demanded of them that they discharge the club employee. They refused. They appeared to be more amused than alarmed at the threatened blot upon the escutcheon of Hopewell's leading citizen.

Gilbert tried to reason with the girl herself, but she told him coolly to mind his own business and cease interfering in hers or she would up and run away with the object of her affections. It was awful! And Belle had hoped her sister would make a good marriage! Had expected her to take Edith's place in Henry's affections!

There had been put into effect at a recent session of the state legislature an extremely rigorous enforcement act which not only prohibited the transportation and sale of intoxicating beverages, as defined by the Federal law, but also made it a felony to possess liquor, to drink it, to give it away, or to have any traffic whatever with the poisonous stuff. For the comprehensive prohibitions of this statute Henry Gilbert was largely responsible. Always an uncompromising foe of the demon rum, he had helped to shape the act and force it through; with his own hands he had written in a clause which rendered the purchaser equally guilty with the seller, and another—most cunningly conceived of all—which afforded immunity to either party who informed against the other. Gilbert had never been able to differentiate between the Constitution and the Decalogue and it was his honest conviction that he had fathered a law which put his native state far ahead of other states in the march out of degradation and into enlightenment.

In view of his paternal relation to this get-good-quick statute, he could not help feeling deep apprehension over Mrs. Galloway's wholesale consumption of port wine. It would prove more than an embarrassment if it became known that in his home intoxicants were used. Even upon a doctor's order. People were prone to talk.

Imagine his dismay, his chagrin, when the city's most notorious bootlegger called at his office one day and handed him a memorandum covering the sale, purchase, and delivery at his residence of ten cases of "fine Italian port" at one hundred and fifty dollars a case.

"What's this?" Gilbert stammered. "You've made a ridiculous mistake."

"It's that stuff your brother-in-law bought. How did it turn out? O. K.?"

"Don't jest. You know very well that I never use rum and that I don't allow it in my house."

"You allowed this, all right, because I put it in your cellar myself and I got a witness. Anyhow it ain't rum, it's port. Rum's cheaper."

"Um—m! Perhaps Sonny ordered it for his mother."

"Perhaps!" The bootlegger winked.

"But ten cases is an enormous amount. I supposed a bottle at a time was all she—And—er—the *price*, too! I'm not familiar with such things, but ____"

"It is a little high, but nobody drinks wine any more; they want hard stuff, and the best ain't any too good for a man like you. What's an extra hundred a case to a guy with your jack? Nothing but insurance."

Gilbert turned livid with anger. "So! That's it! Well, my good man, I refuse to suffer extortion. I won't even discuss this bill with you. Mrs. Galloway's health compels her to employ a mild stimulant, but I understand it is issued on prescription, like any medicine."

"There's my prescription," asserted the caller, "and I'd advise you to fill it, quick. Fifteen hundred pills. You know damn' well the drug stores don't stock port wine; they handle stuff with a kick. And say! Don't 'good-man' me. Come through or I'll turn you up. The law lets me off, you know—anyhow, you *oughta* know, seeing as it's your law—and all I gotta do is prove I put it in your house."

"Why, this is—nothing less than blackmail! Robbery!"

"I should worry what it is. How about a little good Scotch at ninety?"

"Will you leave my office?"

"Sure! When I get a check. Or I can call headquarters right from here. Which'll you have?"

After some further debate along lines as unsatisfactory as this, Gilbert paid—in cash, rather than by check. When the scoundrelly lawbreaker had pocketed his fifteen ill-gotten hundred-dollar bills he said in great good humor:

"You certainly did us boys a big favor with that enforcement act of yours, Mr. Gilbert. It keeps prices up and we don't have any more bad accounts. We're with you heart and soul, and if ever they try to repeal it, leave us know and we'll back you. My regards to Sonny."

Gilbert, of course, took his brother-in-law sternly to task for involving him in a transaction so illegal, so disgraceful, but the latter indignantly denied his guilt. He had never ordered ten cases; he had ordered only five and that's all that had been delivered. What was more, the price agreed upon was forty dollars a case. Henry was a boob to let himself be cheated like that; if he wanted to toss his coin away, for gossakes toss it to Sonny.

Now annoyances such as these were trivial, but in the aggregate they weighed heavily upon Gilbert and, what is more, new ones were forever piling up on him. He was being crushed, not beneath a sudden avalanche of disasters, but under a slow accumulation of petty embarrassments. It was as if he had started a gradual slide of loose dirt from some canyon-side to which there was no end. Already he was in up to the waist and hourly he became more deeply buried.

Belle no longer pretended to care for him; they lived under a sort of armistice the harsh terms of which she herself had dictated and which she felt free at any time to make more onerous or to wholly disregard. Her relatives no longer pretended to consider him as anything except a provider—the sap-filled source from which they sucked a livelihood. Only the erotic Otto, that emotional police dog, loved him, and the entire sincerity of that affection was open to doubt, for Otto pretended to love everybody. He had simulated a fondness for the milkman and then had bitten him.

Such were some of the physical afflictions, so to call them, which assailed the man. They mortified the flesh rather than the spirit, but inside him were springs of bitter water which were hard to drink. Regret, of course, was his constant companion. Life had swindled him. Love was no longer the universal motive power; hate was quite as animate. He lived in constant

apprehension, harassed hourly by fear that the facts of his first wife's death and his treatment of Edith would become known, or rather that the distorted story of them would be made public. The truth would wash him of any actual guilt, but the whole truth could never be told. He convinced himself that either Belle, or one of her loose-tongued relatives, had already let slip enough to place him in a false position, for his circle of intimates steadily contracted, his friends dropped away, and even upon the tongues of strangers he fancied he could hear the faint hissings of gossip. Commendation being the oxygen upon which he existed, he keyed his ears to what was being said, he strained his eyes to detect some sign of disapproval, and naturally he was rewarded. His fears were confirmed; never popular in his own person, he saw ample, when he looked, to warrant his darkest suspicions.

This did not mean that he felt remorse for anything he had done; remorse is a punishment for evil-doing. It was too bad that nobody knew Alice's nervous condition at the time of her death, or the anguish it had caused him to impress reform upon their wayward daughter. That latter had been a sort of forced feeding, painful but necessary, and it had hurt him worse than it had hurt her, so he was fond of assuring himself. But who could be made to believe? People are so uncharitable.

He became nervous and irritable; he had difficulty in sleeping; he lost weight and his face hung in folds; his cheeks drooped until Sonny Galloway likened them to dewlaps. Gone was that hearty demeanor and that syrupy unctuousness of the man without bodily ills or moral shortcomings.

One thing which got upon his nerves more than anything else was having to occupy Alice's room; this was a torture which he resisted to the point of physical exhaustion. He tried to rise above it, to vibrate on a plane too exalted for such a circumstance to affect; but he failed. He was weak, it was silly to let his imagination run wild, and yet he could not harness it. Harder even to endure was Belle's sardonic satisfaction at the situation; she watched him like a cat and gloated over his shuddering repugnance to that room. To her this appeared in some way deeply significant and she took every occasion to explore its meaning. Alas! what an unsuspected streak of suspicion and of cruelty the woman possessed. She was a figure out of the Inquisition; she had him on the rack and was bent upon wringing confession out of him, whether true or false. And she had masqueraded as such a simple, sincere Christian person. Gilbert could think of her now only as a malignant vampire crouched upon his breast, fanning him with her black, noiseless wings the while she sucked his veins dry. Compared with her, Alice had been a saintly combination of virtues; her faults were superficial.

Belle's amounted to depravity; she was actually vicious. To the eye she was admirable enough, but inside she crawled with vices. A shell infested with worms!

That was hyperbole, nevertheless it showed how Gilbert's mind was working.

As for Edith, how little her inclination to waywardness weighed when balanced against the selfishness, the greed, the thousand hateful traits of the younger Galloways.

They, too, had sunk their teeth into him and were hanging on in the expectation of sharing in his money, of fattening on his corpse. Why, Belle was constantly after him to make a will! He made a will one day, but the terms of it he did not divulge.

Sometimes the man asked himself wearily if it was worth while fighting as he had fought to rid the world of its obvious evils when diseases so much more cancerous were lodged at the very core of human nature. It was like flapping the sleeves of a scarecrow when the fruit of the tree was rotten. After all, skin treatments are of little avail if the blood is foul.

But he had no time for abstract problems; others more imminent and more personal pressed him.

One such was how to get rid of that gas log in his room without confessing to Belle that it terrified him and explaining why. He made one or two feeble attempts which she aborted, and he hesitated to have it torn out for no valid reason, feeling sure that she would construe such an action as proof positive that Edith's hysterical accusations were true and thus have him further at her mercy. So far she harbored only some vague, outrageous theory, unformed even in her own mind, but he shrank from doing anything which might induce her to put that suspicion into words.

He complained one day about smelling gas, whereupon Belle went to the room, sniffed carefully about the fireplace, and told him he was growing more notional than Momma. What ailed him, anyhow? It was too early to start the furnace, but he had to have some heat, didn't he?

Thereafter she made it a point to see that the gas was lighted every evening before he came in. Invariably he turned it off the moment he got inside the room. He turned it off so often and put such pressure upon the valve as to blister his palms. Had he been possessed of more strength he would surely have twisted it off. The last thing he did at night was to test that valve, and more than once, when he awoke with that imaginary odor in

his nostrils, he would leap out of bed, stagger across the room, and strain at it.

That nightmare continued to recur, by the way; periodically, he awoke gasping, fainting, his heart aflutter and in his ears the echo of shouting voices. Always they cried the same accusation: "Henry Gilbert killed his wife."

After such a phantasm he would switch on all the lights, open every window, and shiver until daylight. He tried sleeping with his lights on, until Belle noticed it and asked him why. Was he afraid of the dark? What ailed his conscience? He turned them off again.

On nights when he could not sleep he was plagued with visions: he could actually see Alice lying over yonder in her little blue party dress, like a tired child asleep, and this was worse even than the familiar nightmare. It was so real! He sometimes felt as if he were locked in a cell with a corpse of his own slaying.

People began telling him that he looked ill, and when he assured them that he was quite well they voiced the pessimistic conviction that he suffered from some obscure ailment. Why, the proof was in his face. He'd better have himself looked over; nothing like taking such things in time.

He began finally to believe these croakings, so he went to the family physician. Examination, however, disclosed no organic or functional disorder, and the doctor asked him what was troubling his mind. Gilbert experienced a mad, a suicidal impulse to tell everything, but restrained himself, and after a while left the office with a box of sleep-inducing pills and a bottle of vile-smelling nerve tonic.

He was desperately fagged today; he was numb, and yet he suffered acutely; he hurt, but he could not lay his finger on the pain. Tired, that was it. His nerve force was exhausted, his resistance had run out, he was sick of everything. He groped through a world in which familiar objects were just sufficiently distorted to make them unreal, in which faces looked odd and voices sounded strange.

He retired early that night, craving rest as a drunkard craves drink. As usual, he found the gas log burning—mute testimony to Belle's demoniac solicitude—and he turned the valve savagely. In a burst of rage he put all the strength of both his hands into the effort and felt an ungodly regret that it was not her throat that he clutched. He wanted to curse her. She was a fiend and she was driving him insane. That's what she wanted to do, run him mad,

cause him to destroy himself so that she could squander his money. The harpy! The bat! That's what she was, a bat. Sharp teeth and claws. She slept, hanging by her claws. His money, eh? . . . Suicide was the unpardonable sin and the thought of Alice's act had always caused him to shudder, but—some things are worse than self-destruction. Better that than to become the living prey of ghouls.

He shook so when he undressed that he had to rip the collar from his throat, and when he went to take his pills he upset the box. These would make him sleep, would they? He hoped so, but what good were a few hours of unconsciousness when he would awaken to the same fiendish persecution? That doctor had declared there was nothing the matter with him. The fool!

Well, why didn't he sleep? It was terribly dark. But who could sleep with that racket going on downstairs? Sonny Galloway was laughing—braying like a jackass—and Blanche's shrill voice was like a razor blade. They were playing the same phonograph record over and over, wearing it out. That's how much consideration they had for him. No doubt Belle was urging them on to more noise. The vermin! He could hear Momma in her—his—big comfortable room getting ready for bed.

Gilbert sniffed suspiciously. What was that he smelled? Let's see, he had turned it off, hadn't he? Of course. He had almost ripped the pipes out of the floor. Thank God, this medicine would keep him from suffering that fantastic dream!

But it did not. He awoke gasping, suffocating, as usual. It was back again. His heart was pounding, it had swollen and was choking him. He could have shrieked with the torture of this thing. Would it never leave him?

It was late. The house was still; even the street lights outside had been turned off. He tried to sleep again, but he was too tired. Oh, how tired he was! Too tired even to rest. . . . That's how Alice must have felt, but she had attained rest so easily. . . . Peace! A twist of that valve, a blessed numbness, then—exaltation. . . . He had failed in everything; life had become unutterably dreary and oppressive.

Gilbert's mind recoiled from these thoughts, but persisted in returning to them; he could not get them out of his head. . . . Unpardonable? Was it unpardonable to slip a burden too cruel for shoulders to bear? He envied Alice. . . . How gentle and sweet and forgiving she had been. He wished she would take him by the hand and lead him into that land of restfulness which

she had explored. And she was ready to do so, for she was yonder, smiling, nodding to him, holding out her arms.

But he loved life. He wouldn't be so weak. . . . Never!

He sat up and pulled the chain of the shaded night light at the head of his bed. This was better. . . . No, it was worse, for it brought him back closer than ever to the hateful things which he had been trying to escape. He could see Alice quite plainly now, and sight of her awoke no horror. She was beckoning——

It went on for hours. Gilbert struggled out of bed, finally; like a somnambulist he crossed the room. He was neither awake nor asleep. Some part of him fought against what he was going to do, another force propelled him irresistibly.

He was surprised to note that the real odor of gas was less offensive than the imaginary odor with which he had become so familiar.

Chapter Twenty-four

In addition to the listed telephone which served Jesse Hermann's residence there was another, a private wire, the number of which operators never gave out. It was the channel for all of his important business communications and most of his social messages. It led directly to his library and usually he answered it in person.

It rang now as he sat dejectedly at his desk; he reached for the instrument, then withdrew his hand. He knew who was calling, for she frequently called at about this hour, and he knew just how she would begin; he could hear the very tones of her voice. He was already too weary with the effort of resistance to risk conversation. Why harrow himself unnecessarily? What could he say? How could he explain? Better to let her think he was out. Suddenly he snatched at the phone and cried, with an eagerness that sounded almost harsh:

"Hello!"

"Hello!" The greeting came softly and was followed by a pause. "Are you cross?"

"No. Why, no! Cross with *you*?" He laughed uncertainly.

"I must annoy you, calling up this way so often."

"Don't say that. It's the one thing I look forward to. You've no idea what our little chats mean to me."

"They can't mean very much or you'd call me once in a while. It's a week, tonight, since I saw you."

"Do you miss me?" he queried, breathlessly. "*Me*, I mean."

"You don't deserve to be told. I'm going to ask you again for the very, very last time if I offended you or in some way hurt your feelings."

"And again I repeat, no!"

"I'd feel terribly distressed if I had. Nothing would make me more unhappy."

"But you haven't. I'll explain everything when I see you."

"When will that be?"

“Why, tomorrow, perhaps. That depends upon what happens tonight. I’m waiting for a decision.”

They talked on idly for a while, and to a listener what they said would have sounded casual enough—merely a somewhat bewildered young woman attempting to apologize for some fancied hurt to a dear friend, and a denial on his part of any offense, but to Hermann every inflection of Edith’s voice had meaning, her every hesitation was significant.

Over this very phone and from this chair he had, by a curt yes or no, settled affairs of enormous moment; he had swiftly decided matters that affected government policies and the fortunes of whole peoples, but now he gossiped idly with a girl, thrilled to her laughter, led her to talk on and on, and lacked the determination to hang up. It was an exquisite torture which he could not bring himself to end. He asked her what she had been doing that day.

“I practiced most of the morning. I’m gaining confidence. Mr. Rosen—you remember him—came out for lunch and he played for me. We had quite an emotional hour or two. He agrees with everything you said, by the way, and I’m beginning to believe that a real miracle has occurred. This afternoon Mr. Van Pelt took Pearl and me to tea, again.”

“Where did you go? To the Longue Vue Club? It’s lovely there. And always a smart crowd.”

“No. I wouldn’t risk embarrassing him by going to one of his clubs. We went to a little Japanese tearoom, overlooking a lagoon with swans. They ate clover out of my hand. It was very peaceful. I’m to meet his mother tonight, you know, and that’s one reason I called up. Do you honestly think I should go?”

“Why—why not?” Hermann’s hands had begun to shake; he made an effort to speak calmly.

“Your voice sounds queer.” There was a pause. “I won’t go if—”

“Of course you’ll go.” The man smiled and nodded, but his eyes were strained. “By all means go and have a good time. Norman’s a splendid fellow and his mother is wholly charming. She’s quite the most—effective woman I ever met.”

“I know, and it’s to be informal. Just we three. But under the circumstances—I—feel some embarrassment. I wish I could talk to you.”

"You may, at any time. Any time after tonight." When she made no response he thought she had been cut off. "Hello! Hello!"

"Yes. I'm here."

"There are no 'circumstances' so far as you are concerned. Natalie and I are friends and I've talked to her about you. I have convinced her that your future, your success, your happiness is of supreme importance to me."

"I'm sure that's true and—I've thanked you so many times. You will let me talk to you soon, won't you?"

"Whenever you wish. Call me at any hour. And now good-by, my dear."

"Good-by!"

That's what it was, Hermann mused, as he leaned back and closed his eyes. Good-by! . . . Norman would ask her tonight; the stage was all set. He and Edith had been together every day. Hermann knew about their every meeting, where they had been, what they had done. It seemed to him that he knew everything they had said. Youth! What could defeat that? The tastes and the enthusiasms of those two young people ran parallel. She was in Elysium at the return of her voice; he was wild about her and his impetuosity would not be denied. Why, they had been in love at Comfort Harbor and it had taken all of Hermann's craft to turn them against each other. That was not a nice thing to think about, by the way, and it had proven quite as futile as double-dealing is apt to prove; their reconciliation had been all the sweeter by reason of their misunderstanding. Edith had confessed as much.

Natalie Dubose was a clear-sighted, sophisticated woman, to be sure, and she hated to see her son wreck his career upon the rock of some unwise infatuation, but Hermann knew her too well to believe that she would actually intervene to prevent such a headstrong action even though, to her, it spelled catastrophe. No. There was little comfort in the mere fact that at heart she was his, Hermann's, ally. The man relapsed once more into somber brooding.

Pearl Gates had entered Edith's room while she was telephoning. "Who's that you were talking to?" she inquired.

Edith told her.

"Humph! I thought it must be your favorite movie actor, the way you poured the prune juice. Say, if that's what they teach at Bedford I'm going to haul off and pick somebody's pocket."

“It seems so odd that he suddenly stopped coming out here. He used to come every day.”

“Possibly you’re not the only thing on his mind; the poor fellow may have to make a living. How does he know where his next million is coming from?” Pearl shook her head and clucked with amazement. “Tse! Tse! What leaves me kicking is to think of a tadpole like you paging a porpoise like him. ‘Call Mr. Hermann to the phone, please! Miss Polly Wog, speaking.’ And I mean to say he comes! Does he holler because you split him away from a directors’ meeting to ask him if you’d better wear the white organdie or the pink paloozas? He does not; he coos like a squab!”

“I never think of him any more as the—the big fish. I’m awfully fond of him.”

“And he doesn’t exactly hate you, either. That’s what I can’t get. You’re not hard to view, but I bet he’s witnessed better lookers; you’re not smart, and you certainly don’t get by on your comedy. Why, I’m funnier than you are. No. He’s got something dirty up his sleeve or else I’m as much at sea as a bell-buoy!”

“Pearl! Did you ever try thinking the best of people, instead of the worst?”

“Yeah! I’ve tried it on a few girls. The last one ran out with the best half of my wardrobe. But there must be something in it. Look at you, landing on Broadway with your hair in braids and still thinking rabbits lay Easter eggs. You do everything a girl shouldn’t do and get away with it. You sing vulgar songs in a knife-and-forkery and the swordsmen get sentimental and cry into their coffee cups. Rosen, the Jewish jazz king, falls for you, and he was raised in the forties. He grows a beard like an Airedale because he’s afraid to trust himself with a razor. You do-re-mi an Indian love lyric clear to Nova Scotia and the principal gate-crasher of New York’s social set breaks down a forest getting out. He runs you ragged and wants you to meet his mother! Yachting parties with the demon of Wall Street! He tolls you out past the three yell limit and—ravishes respectful attentions on you, then sends you home with an armful of calla lilies. Even the law curls up when it goes against you. You fall in jail and immediately make a bum of our whole police system. The Four Hundred arms itself with plush-handled jimmies and pries you out of prison, then pays the first installment on a furnished palace and puts you in it. I bet if you beat up a baby you’d be canonized. It merely shows how far a girl can go when she gets her own permanent wave-length. Van Pelt’s vibrating like a flivver and is all goose flesh for fear you

won't approve of his mother. Even Straight-pan Louie is picking rose petals to see if he dares offer you his bank roll."

"Who?"

"Hermann, the Iron-faced Man! Yes, and I bet I know why they sent the Prince of Wales to Africa. They were afraid you'd grab *him*."

Edith eyed the speaker with a queer, shocked expression. "You—you're not serious about—Mr. Hermann!" she exclaimed.

"No? I'm as serious as a hard artery. Why has he quarantined himself? Because he's afraid to come out and risk a chill. Say, stupid, I'm going to cut out a couple of cardboard earrings for you and have 'em printed, 'No Parking Between These Signs.' You wear 'em, clown. It'll keep the ideas out."

Edith had slowly paled; she opened her lips to speak, but stammered. Pearl, once she had hit her conversational stride, had a habit of meandering along until she had completely explored her subject, so she went on to explain to the best of her ability the phenomena her friend had provoked:

"It's your voice, I presume. It can't be anything else. I listened to you and Rosen this morning and—I had a rotten time. I cried like a fool. It's no voice I'd pay to hear. Luck? Say, I couldn't smuggle a rabbit's foot into Bedford but you slip through with a horseshoe in every pocket. You lose your voice and then go and find Patti's. If you lost a time-table somebody'd give you the railroad. By the way, when Van Pelt asks you to wed him don't stall, or he'll start hurling dishes. When he gets wound up he doesn't care what he throws. Why, he'll say it with pop bottles! And believe me, he's got a hop on his fast one."

"I'd be very unhappy if I—believed everything you've said," Edith declared, again with that agitated catch in her voice. "It's amusing to hear you tell it, but Mr. Hermann doesn't, he couldn't, feel anything for me except—"

"Speak on. You're as psychic as a wash-rag."

"Except what I feel for him. And how could a person like Mr. Van Pelt ask me to marry him? It's impossible. There's a blot! I'm branded, don't you understand?"

"Gimme that cardboard and your scissors," Pearl exclaimed. "I'll have those earrings done by the time you leave."

It was after eight o'clock. Aside from the open fire in the enormous fireplace there was no light in the Hermann library, and its corners were lost in blackness. In a chair where the flicker played over him the owner sat with his head back and his eyes closed.

He had been here all the early evening, having left word that he wished no dinner and that he was on no account to be disturbed.

He started nervously at the sudden buzz of his private phone. He drew a deep breath; reluctantly he rose to answer. So soon! She was calling from Natalie's house to give him the good news. The instrument was heavy when he lifted it.

He was surprised to hear Lois Alcott's voice. Her first words sent a tremor through him.

"Jesse! Something quite dreadful has happened. About Edith."

"What is it?" Hermann tried to speak calmly, for Lois's tone was one of extreme agitation, but he was thinking in lightning-like flashes. An accident! She had been hurt! Van Pelt was a reckless driver. He was a fool—!

"Has anybody phoned you? Any newspapers, I mean."

"No. What has happened? Quick!"

"They've had me. They're trying to locate her, and a reporter just left on his way to Mrs. Dubose's. Her father has died."

"Oh!" It was an exclamation of relief. An instant, then: "Why do they want her? How did they learn where she is?"

"They've been trying all day to get trace of her. He left her most of his fortune—some enormous amount. There's something unusual about his death, too. They traced her to Bedford—that's the wretched part—then, of course, it was only a question of time until they located me. I'm afraid it's all going to come out, Jesse. They think they've got a big front-page story: rich man dies, or kills himself, and leaves his millions to a daughter in the Reformatory. Committed on a—an unspeakable charge. See? Paroled in my charge—and of course they know who I am. What do they care if they ruin that child?" Lois's voice broke. "Jesse, you've got to do something instantly. They're after her like bloodhounds; they've got her by this time. My phone has rung five times in the last ten minutes. What shall I do?"

"I—don't know, yet. Warn Van Pelt not to let 'em in—No, that won't do any good. If he learns what's up—" Hermann uttered an oath. "Don't answer any more calls, Lois, and don't let anybody get to you or to her, if you can

help it. I'll be out as soon as I can. Maybe I can do something in the meantime. I don't know. I'll try. Good-by!"

So! The press had Edith's story and she was to be crucified. He rose and snapped on the lights, then paused with his finger on the button. But wait! Was not this the hand of Fate? If this story came out—and there seemed to be no way of killing it—it Would be the end of Norman Van Pelt and his cautious scheme. In view of the notoriety which was inevitable Natalie would exert her power of veto and the road would be open—A love like Norman's, a love that counted consequences, was no love, anyhow. The hand of Fate, indeed! People scoff at "the long arm of coincidence," but life is one series of dramatic eleventh-hour surprises.

In credit to Jesse Hermann it must be said that his moment of hesitation was short—a flare of heat lightning that lit the heavens and died out almost before the picture it revealed had time to photograph itself—then he thought of the girl. Lois had it. Her concern was unselfish. What did those newspapers care if they ruined a girl, blasted a career? Hounds on the trail of a wounded doe! They'd run her to cover, bay her, pull her down. They had her cornered now and she was holding them off alone, for Van Pelt had proved that he was a coward. Hermann flung his head high. Damned if they would!

But what accursed luck for him to isolate himself here at a time when he should have been instantly available. If he had known about this in time he could have done something to check the hue and cry, he could have at least delayed it, gained a few hours—enough, perhaps, to spare her this one night—her night of nights. He swore that she would have her hour.

He strode back to the telephone and called a number. The man he asked for was entertaining guests at dinner and could not be interrupted.

"Tell him that Jesse Hermann is holding the wire in person," he ordered, brusquely. "Tell him I must speak to him inside of two minutes." There was a brief wait; then he said, affably: "Hello, Jim. Sorry to disturb you, but I had to."

"Quite all right, Jesse. I have ten seconds to spare out of those two minutes. What do you want?"

"A favor."

"Good. Delighted to grant it."

"I want a story in your paper killed."

“Certainly. I’ll phone down at once. Financial story?”

“No. It’s about a protégée of mine, a girl by the name of Gilbert, who has a brilliant musical future ahead of her. She’s engaged to marry a fine fellow; one of our best families. Her father has died, leaving her a fortune, and somebody has dug up some scandal about her. Quite unwarranted, I assure you, but I haven’t time to go into the details. May I rely on you?”

“It’s done.”

“Thank you, old man. Good-by!”

Time and again Hermann repeated this procedure, with variations. Certain newspaper offices he called direct and talked with editors or publishers, but more often he called private homes, clubs, even out-of-town numbers. Sometimes he used confidential wires like his own. Most of the men he talked with had no apparent connection with journalism; one, for instance, was the Tammany leader; another was a banker; a third was a great department store owner who controlled millions in advertising. Many he had difficulty in reaching; others he could not get at all. One call followed another until his arms ached and his muscles were cramped. These indirect approaches consumed precious moments, for they had to be duplicated, fortified, but he persisted. He was pressed for time; always it was a race against the moving clock hands.

The story was being cast in metal, forms were being made up, presses were beginning to turn. He had the presses stopped, the forms torn down, the metal melted. His name was a shibboleth, it worked magic, but he realized that he was running up a bill which would stagger him to liquidate. It involved humiliation, too—the healing of quarrels and the suing for peace; the asking of favors from men who were begging him for favors a hundred times more costly. His very plea for mercy made him grist for their mills, as he well knew: it caused them to smile; it inspired mental notes and penciled memoranda.

It is a giant’s task to stop the wheels of journalism, even for an hour, and he who flings himself into the cogs must count upon paying the price.

The large reputable papers were comparatively easy to get at, but there were the yellow journals and the scandal sheets. If one double-crossed him the damage was done. Finally there were the press associations to be dealt with, and last of all those reporters out on the Island to be called in. It took the winding of many horns to bring that pack to heel.

Hermann worked swiftly and at tremendous nervous tension, and, moreover, he had to work alone. It was well on toward midnight when he flung himself back in his chair. He believed he had won, but he was utterly spent with the effort. More of the same thing tomorrow, perhaps, but by that time his strength would have returned. Savagely he vowed to throttle this thing, kill it with his own hands. He had the will and the power. They wouldn't dare play crooked: they must realize what vengeance he could and would exact.

Tonight, it seemed to him, he had done a good deal to cancel Natalie's score against him—yes, and to pay the debt he owed Edith. Perhaps he wouldn't feel so abominably false if ever again she thanked him for what he had done. By this time Van Pelt must know that everything was all right.

A mirthless smile curled the corners of Hermann's mouth; he had certainly broadened "channels for the streams of love." Oh, decidedly! "Ceasing to give, we cease to have." Rot! All rot! The trouble with those high-sounding moral abstractions is that they're too damned one-sided in their actual operation.

His phone buzzed again and his muscles jerked. Now what? Somebody weakening?

"Hello!" he barked.

He was surprised when Natalie Dubose answered him. She spoke with annoyance akin to his:

"Hello! I've been trying to get you for the last two hours. I've had the desk a dozen times, but they wouldn't put through my call. Said they couldn't."

"Right. I was trying to get to the newspapers and I wouldn't permit anybody to cut in."

"Well! . . . A fine kettle of fish, isn't it?"

"I've done my best to smother the story, and I think—"

"What good is that? The damage is done. Heavens! what an evening I've put in!"

"I tried at least to hold it back—"

"Oh, you did!" Mrs. Dubose almost snorted. "For our sakes or for your own?"

"For neither," the man said, slowly. "I wasn't thinking in the least of myself and, to tell you the truth, very little of you or Norman."

"All right. Let's not quarrel. I've had enough to stand, as it is. Norman and I clashed and I'm thoroughly fed up on the whole affair. I'm through, understand?"

"No doubt I'm stupid, but I don't understand."

"Go ahead and have your own way. I release you from any promise. Only go ahead quickly. There's no telling what that simpleton of mine may do. . . . We had a hideous time, Jesse. Norman behaved very badly. A newspaper reporter came while we were at dinner, and asked for the girl. Norman insisted upon going out to see what he wanted and—they had a fight. A disgraceful brawl. In my house! Such yelling and smashing of things—! We got them separated and the fellow blurted it all out. I was really sorry for Miss Gilbert—she's a sweet girl and the whole thing is terribly unfortunate. Then Norman made it worse by denying her identity. He was quite insane. He even threatened the fellow's life if he dared to print a line—Imagine such a thing! Oh, yes; and he tried to buy the man off! After the fellow had a black eye and his nose was bleeding!"

"Then what?"

"Then, for a climax, Miss Gilbert defied both of us. She agreed to be interviewed. Said she had nothing to conceal. She appeared to be more distressed over her father's death than—the other."

"You astonish me!" Hermann said dryly.

"Oh, you're delighted, of course, but—"

"On the contrary, I am deeply distressed."

Mrs. Dubose was plainly having difficulty in expressing herself calmly. After a moment she continued acidly:

"She insisted upon seeing the fellow alone and telling him everything. You know what that's bound to mean. I daren't think of the morning papers. I took the occasion to show Norman what he would let himself in for if he persisted in defying the conventions, and I think I made him understand."

"*What?*" Hermann spoke eagerly.

"He was terribly cut up, of course, but I give him credit for good sense. The point I'm getting at is that I'm not as brave and as defiant of the world as I thought I was. I've had enough scandal to do me. What's more, I can tell

you now that I've been secretly hoping that I'd fail and you'd win. When I think how decent you were about it, I heartily regret the part I played. I wash my hands of the whole matter, Jesse, and—I wish you luck." There was a click as the speaker hung up.

Hermann ran from the room; he took the wide marble stairs three steps at a time, and when he told his chauffeur whither he was bound he added, sharply:

"Drive as fast as you dare."

It was a dark night, the sky was low, and it bespoke a promise of early snow, but Hermann opened the windows and let the cold air pour over him. He drank it into his lungs and felt an inspiring vigor spring up within him. Tired? Old? He laughed silently. He made it a practice, winter and summer, to keep cut flowers in every car he owned. Out of the vase he removed a carnation and placed it in his buttonhole. What ailed the driver? He had told him to hurry, but the fellow was creeping.

Edith had been waiting. She opened the door for him when he sprang up the steps. She still wore her dinner dress; on the hall table was the wrap she had discarded when she came in. He thought she had never looked so beautiful and he felt a reckless impulse to snatch her into his arms; instead, he lifted one cold little hand to his lips.

When she had led him into the living-room and they were seated side by side he told her approvingly:

"I'm relieved to see how well you stood everything. I was afraid you might take that news about your father too much to heart."

"It was a great shock, naturally, but I don't seem to feel it as deeply as I should. Perhaps I'm growing accustomed to shocks. Instead of grief, all I'm conscious of is sadness and—pity. He was so blind, so foolish and so mistaken! He was so intolerant of evil and yet he caused so much."

"Tolerance is the poor, despised younger sister of the greater virtues. And yet none of them can wear her little silver slippers."

"After all he made me suffer I can't feel much honest grief or any actual sense of loss. I went through that, you see, when I was alone. It isn't like Mims's going away. I know that she's still with me, or close by. I've never been able, since father took the stand that day in court, to think of him either as living or as—my father. For me, he died then."

“A quite natural feeling on your part, I should say, and perfectly understandable. You’ve borne a great deal more than your share. It’s unfortunate that this trouble should have come tonight, of all nights.”

Edith shook her head in grave negation. “No, it’s fortunate. Fortunate for everybody. . . . So many things have happened that I’m still bewildered. I hardly know how to begin.”

“Don’t try just yet. Think of something else. For instance, it must afford you considerable satisfaction to realize that your father relented. I understand he left you well provided for.”

“I believe so. I’m afraid he robbed his wife; at any rate, he made it impossible for her to share in his fortune, whatever I do. If I followed my inclination I wouldn’t touch a penny of his money, but, you see, I have a debt to pay.”

“No, no! Nothing of the sort. No, my dear, you’re beholden to nobody. You are mistress of your own career! It’s splendid!”

With a gesture Edith dismissed the subject. “I’d rather not talk nor think about it. There is something else so much more important. . . . I want you to know what occurred tonight and to hear it from me rather than from somebody else.”

“I think I do know. Mrs. Dubose telephoned me.”

Swiftly the girl looked up, anxiously she scanned his face. “How could she? What did she tell you?”

“Well, she told me how that reporter came there, how he and Norman went together, and the result; how you insisted upon making a clean breast of everything in spite of their protests. Oh, I fancy she pretty well covered the matter!”

“Do you know why she asked me to dinner?”

The questioner had lost color and Hermann assumed that he understood the reason for her agitation.

“I do,” he said, with a smile. “Isn’t it the business of necromancers to read such a thing in the stars or from their symbols?”

“Did you—approve?”

“Why, of course! Your happiness means a great deal to me. I knew very well that Norman would take the occasion to say something serious to you, and that’s what I meant when I called this trouble unfortunate.” He

wondered why his listener drew a deep breath and appeared to relax, why the expression she wore gave way to one of relief.

As for her, she rejoiced that her apprehensions had been ill-grounded and she berated Pearl Gates for an empty chatterbox.

He was saying: "I think I've managed to smother that story so you needn't wait up for the morning editions." Again he smiled and took her hand in his.

"I'm so glad you feel as you do——" Edith's voice broke, her eyes filled. "It makes it easier to tell you the rest. On the way over there Norman asked me to marry him."

Hermann received this announcement calmly enough; as a matter of fact his own confidence was growing momentarily. "Really? An impulsive lad. He couldn't wait, eh?"

Encouraged by his demeanor, the girl continued: "It was a great honor, but—I refused it. I tried to make him see how impossible such a thing was, how unwise to jeopardize his career; yes, and how I could never bring myself to marry anybody so long as that stain is on me. It wouldn't be fair to either of us. You can understand that, can't you?"

"Perhaps. But no matter, if that's how you regard it. On the other hand, have you the right to let your own sense of injustice stand in the way of two people's happiness?"

"He asked me something of the sort, but I wouldn't budge and I'm thankful now that I didn't. What happened later cleared up every doubt I may have had; it showed me what's in my own heart and the sort of man he is. . . . I dare say none of us know ourselves until we're tested."

Hermann had restrained himself as patiently as he could, but he was eager to turn this page, the gist of which he already knew, so he broke in impulsively: "Let's forget all the distress of these last few hours. I know what there is to know and I want to——"

"You can't know," she asserted. "Please let me tell it my way. I think it will be necessary for me to put it into words to make sure that I understand it, myself. . . . When that fellow came and he and Norman locked horns, we all saw—I mean Norman, his mother, and I—just what we faced. The issue became clear, right there and then, and there was no evading it. How great is love? That's what it spelled. Mrs. Dubose explained her position and I think I explained mine. I said I wouldn't dare marry a man who wouldn't dare marry me."

"Good!"

"Nor would I consent to dodge, to hide, or to temporize. We had a stormy few minutes. Then I went in to the reporter with my head up and I answered every question he asked. I'm glad I did. I'm glad Mrs. Dubose took her stand, for it gave Norman the chance to prove himself. On the way back here we were married."

"Eh? I— What's that?" Hermann did not recognize his own voice.

The girl's eyes were swimming again, she was smiling mistily. In her face was a glory like that which had descended upon it on the night of the miracle, that night when her voice had been restored.

"It seems that he had made up his mind days ago. He actually had the license and had made all arrangements. I didn't know where he was taking me until—we were there. Then he told me quite simply that he wouldn't dare marry a girl who wouldn't dare do a thing as brave as I had done. I wasn't brave at all; I merely wished to spare him—Oh, he was very fine! I—can't even talk about it—yet." Edith groped for her handkerchief and bowed her head.

There was a look of death in Hermann's face. The girl was saying something more, but her voice came from a distance. He felt a terrible fear that she would lift her head and read the truth which his open mouth and staring eyes betrayed; frantically he struggled to control himself, and in the course of that struggle the vigor, the life ran out of him like water out of a broken dam. Nor was it enough that he should hold himself in check; he must say something. Mechanically he obeyed that last flickering impulse of his pride: he found the girl with her face hidden against him; his arm was about her. God! How merciless, how cruel youth can be!

He awoke somehow to the fact that Norman Van Pelt was here, waiting outside in his car, but whether Edith had told him or he had divined it psychically he was not sure. Yes, they were on their way to the city. Edith's things were being packed now. She had waited to tell him, her benefactor. From the intensity of her present reaction that telling must have proven an ordeal even more trying than those which had gone before. Or had she actually said as much? He wondered what she meant. He was glad she appeared to take sincere comfort from his mumbled congratulations, and that the lies which spilled out through his stiff lips brought her relief. Relief from what? Why was Van Pelt waiting out there? Why wasn't he here to gloat?

Pearl Gates was in the room now and she was looking at him queerly. She acted curious and fearful; she was telling him something. He heard the word "telephone." Somebody wanted him on the telephone. It was important. Mechanically he rose, but for the moment he could not remember where the telephone was located, so he wandered dazedly about the room until Pearl beckoned to him.

Edith, too, had risen, and was hurrying toward the front door. That was good. He wished the Gates girl would stop staring at him.

Down and out! Floored! It wouldn't do to show how dizzy he was. Like a prize-fighter groping toward his corner he made for the hall whither instinct now directed him. Slowly his head cleared.

A voice which he recognized with an effort as the voice of that newspaper owner he had first called early in the evening came to him:

"Hello, Jesse! The office has just routed me out of bed about that story you want killed."

"Yes? . . . Oh yes; to be sure!"

"Say, what did you let me in for? They're raising the devil down on the Row. That story can't be killed."

Hermann heard the front door open and close behind him; over his shoulder he saw that Norman Van Pelt had come in out of the night.

"Why not? Why can't the story be killed?"

"Too big, Jesse! It's enormous. It broke out West, in Miss Gilbert's home, and there's a lot to it that we didn't know earlier in the evening. What good will it do to kill it in New York if all the out-of-town papers run it? And they're going to. Anyhow, there's nothing in the story to hurt the girl. She was persecuted. Why, Jesse, the way it comes to us, it's the keenest heart-interest story in weeks."

"Tell me what you mean?"

There followed an interval during which the three listeners could hear only the metallic rasping of a distant voice to which Hermann nodded. He interrupted, after a while, to say:

"Wait a minute, Jim. I want you to repeat that slowly and distinctly." He waved to Edith and to Norman; he brought them closer until they bent over him, then he held the receiver away from his ear so that they, too, could hear. "Now say it over again, please."

“It seems they discovered out in Hopewell, where Miss Gilbert came from, that she was framed—railroaded into Bedford by her father and his second wife. He was a kind of reformer and the whole city is sore on him anyhow. Well-meaning old fellow who wanted to padlock everything except the Sunday schools. You know the sort; we have our share right here. His wife is a good deal like him, only worse. The office checked up our end of the story at the Women’s Court this afternoon, and tonight the judge gave us a statement. So did the district attorney. Good Heavens! man, it makes the girl a heroine! That’s not all, either. She had a marvelous record at Bedford—worked at the laundry machines until she fainted. Can you imagine how we’ll play that up? And the fact that she lost her voice? Say, the wireless fans will devour that. She sang for the radio, it seems——”

“Let me tell you something you don’t know, Jim.” Hermann was speaking, and for the first time since he had sat down at the telephone his voice was normal and it issued from the lips of a man whose mind was at work. “It is a great voice. And it has just come back to her, better than it ever was.”

“Hell! That’s too bad.”

“It’s a Metropolitan voice—the greatest I’ve heard in years—and it came out of a prison cell. It’s the voice of all the martyrs.”

“Good line, that! May we use it? You ought to know voices, Jesse, and your word will make her. It’ll pack that place. Great glory! What a story this is! New diva who found her soul—Say, can we go ahead and shoot?”

“You promise to treat her right?”

“Leave that to us, will you? And one thing more. What about her engagement to marry into the Four Hundred?”

“Perhaps I’d better let her tell you about that, if she cares to. She’s right here at my shoulder.” Hermann rose, and when he surrendered the receiver into Edith’s trembling fingers there was a light in his tired eyes which none of the beholders had ever seen.

Norman Van Pelt followed him down the hall; impulsively he reached forth and crushed the elder man’s palm in his own. There was a husk in his throat as he said:

“Jesse, you’re the only prince I ever knew.”

Hermann laid his free hand upon the speaker’s shoulder. “She made a good deal out of me, Norman. She’ll make more out of you because—she

has more to start on. Don't feel bad about Natalie's stand; she would have come around even without this. She's the second best woman in the world."

He stood at the door, a few minutes later—a slim, clean-cut, incisive man, as proudly erect and as surely poised as a falcon. He waved at them as they drove away, and he was smiling.

When they had gone he saw that the first snow of winter had begun to fall.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some pages of advertising from the publisher were excluded from the ebook edition.

[The end of *Padlocked* by Rex Beach]