

**ONE IS BELOVED**

**LOUISE PLATT HAUCK**

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# ONE IS BELOVED

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LOUISE PLATT HAUCK

*“This is the way of it the wide world over  
One is beloved and one is the lover.”*

ELLA WHEELER WILCOX

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*To*  
CHARLES CHALMERS SHOEMAKER

*To mark ten years of happy  
business association, and  
personal friendship*

**ONE IS BELOVED**

## CHAPTER ONE

SUE DAVENPORT came into the big livingroom with her own peculiarly light-footed step. She was flushed and tingling from the crisp October air. Her dark eyes, which had a trick at times of seeming far too large for her small oval face, sparkled at the sight of the first wood fire of the season.

“Bless Maggie’s heart!” she murmured, coming to rest one small brogued foot on the old brass railing which had enclosed the fireplace in her mother’s girlhood home.

She stood there for some time, smiling to herself in conscious enjoyment of well being. It was good to have walked for miles among the rustling leaves along the river bank until the rapidly falling dusk drove her homeward. It was good to come into this spacious room whose every furnishing had been familiar to her since her babyhood, though now it occupied a comfortable apartment instead of the big house where she and her brother Allen had been born. It was good—it was best of all! to be twenty-four and not unattractive, and the youthful mistress of this new home!

“Want I should turn on the lights, Miss Sue?” Maggie asked, entering quietly. “Most time to set the table for dinner.”

Sue roused herself with a little laugh. “I suppose it is! And I must have a bath and change before then.” She came close to the old woman. “I smell of woodsmoke and dusty leaves and walnuts. They’re thick under the big tree on Wyeth Hill!”

“Miss Sue, you haven’t been up there alone again—and this late in the day besides? How many times do I have to tell you ’tain’t safe up there? Jesse James used to hide in Dug Cut—”

The girl’s laugh rang out again and she seized the old servant in her arms and hugged her.

“Maggie darlin’, they ‘laid Jesse James in his grave’ before I was born—before you were born, if it comes to that! It was grand up there, watching the lights come on in the city, the planes circling down to the airfield. And—”

she forestalled the automatic protest which she saw on the other's lips—"I wasn't alone! Barbara was with me."

Maggie sniffed, unmollified.

"Miss Barb'ra'd be a heap of help if a tramp should creep outen those woods." Suddenly the implication of her young mistress' first speech dawned on her. "Sue Davenport! There ain't no walnut trees whatever right on the hill! You must have went right down into the woods to find them nuts. Honestly, *honestly*, Miss Sue! You ain't no more fit than a baby to be out after sunset. I'm going to speak to Mr. Allen—"

Sue laughed a trifle ruefully. It was perfectly true that even yet the woods along the river bluffs occasionally harbored undesirable characters. She deflected the outraged Maggie's rage with the adroitness of experience.

"Look at my hands, Mag dear! Wouldn't you know I'd take off my gloves and get all stained up the very day before Barbara's party? Do you know any way to get this horrible brown off?"

"Pumice stone, Miss Sue; that is, if you haven't used soap on 'em yet!" She examined the small palms anxiously. "Come straight into the bathroom with me! Body'd think you was only four!"

An hour later Sue presented herself to Allen, contentedly reading his paper before the fire. Her dark cap of curls lay smooth and shining, she had exchanged her dusty woolen suit for a silky brown velvet gown with a wide creamy collar, she smelled pleasantly of fine soap, powder and a hint of her own special perfume. Her brother eyed her appreciatively.

"Getting easy to look at, Sue!"

"Getting! You know I'm a raving beauty, darling!" she admitted modestly. He lowered his paper with a hint of seriousness in his manner.

"No, but really, Sue, you aren't bad at all! I used to think you were the world's ugliest child, with that stretchy red mouth of yours, your little brown face and those wild curls. What have you done to yourself, anyway? Bleached your skin, or something?"

She shook her head, shamelessly admiring herself in the long narrow mirror above the mantelpiece.

"It's not really white yet, just sort of creamy; and it looks better at night than it does in the daytime. But considering the fact that Mother used to absolutely cry over me when I was dressed for parties, the change is most gratifying, most gratifying indeed!" She lowered her voice pompously over

the last phrase, imitating the lawyer who had been her joint guardian with Allen after their father's death.

Presently they were at the table, devouring with healthy young appetites Maggie's delicious dinner. Allen put forward a finger to the silver bowl of violets, long-stemmed purple beauties with an expensive look.

"The faithful Kettle?"

She shrugged. "Yes. I must be losing my technique. I simply can't discourage him. Last night I deliberately picked a quarrel with him; and this morning he sent these 'to apologize for my unmannerly words which, I assure you, astonished me far more than they can have done you.' Isn't he an idiot, Allen?"

"He's a darned successful lawyer, my dear young woman. You might go farther and fare worse, you know."

She laughed outright. "Sue Kettle! It sounds like a Salvation Army lass! I can just hear Forest Webb toasting the engagement. 'Here's to Sue and James Kettle, and all the little pots and pans!'"

To her surprise Allen remarked meditatively: "I think I wouldn't let a babbling fool like Forest influence me in the choice of a husband, my dear!"

The goblet she was lifting to her lips was restored to its coaster with a tiny thump.

"Allen Davenport! Do I hear you calling your best friend a fool, and a babbling one at that?"

He selected a crisp bit of celery before he spoke. "You do, my lamb. He is a babbling fool—that's partly why we both love him, isn't it? His nonsense is sort of restful. But if you're going to take it seriously—let it count against Jim Kettle—"

She pushed back her plate, rested a rounded elbow on the table and propped her chin in her hand.

"For the love of Mike, Buddy! What's got you all excited over Jim Kettle? He's been under foot more or less for the last two years, and you never took him seriously before." She blinked suddenly. "Trying to get rid of me, Allen?"

"Now it's you who are the fool, Sis. It would take more than a whole storeful of Kettles to come between us you ought to know that!"

“Well—” she assented, mollified. Presently she went back to the subject. “You can’t resist a dig at his name yourself! ‘A storeful of Kettles’, you said! I see myself marrying a man with such a name! For that matter,” she went on, busy now with her salad, “I see myself marrying James if his name was Montague Montmorency! He’s a pill,” she said with finality.

“You don’t—well—care for him at all, Sue?”

She frowned with genuine annoyance. “I believe you are trying to marry me off, Bud! Why in heaven’s name should I, if this thing called love should descend on me out of a clear sky, select James Kettle as its object when the town is practically running over with eligible and charming young men? James is a million years older than I am—eleven, at least. He—”

Allen interrupted her. “Honestly, Sue, haven’t you ever been in love? Haven’t you ever wanted to have your own home, order meals for your man, put your hand in his and go . . . wherever he wanted you to?” A flush rose under his dark skin, but he kept on steadily. “I thought all girls had crushes! I know you’re always telling me about Barbara’s. You’re twenty-four, Sue dear; older than Mother was when she married Dad. Aren’t you—haven’t you—”

Really alarmed, she answered almost in a whisper. “Do—do you want me to, Allen? Are you afraid I’ll hang around your neck, a—an old maid?”

He laughed sheepishly. “No, idiot! I’ve made a mess of this, as usual. It was just that it suddenly came over me tonight—when I looked up and saw you looking so gay and pretty in your new frock—that you have no one but me to advise you on such things. And Kettle is a rich man and a smart man; better than that, he’s a good guy, too. I didn’t want any silly puns on his name to prejudice you against him.

“That’s all, infant!” he went on more lightly. “Just one of my attacks of fraternal conscience. Forget it!” He eyed the dessert Maggie put before him with interest. “The first pumpkin pie, eh? Plenty of cinnamon in it, Mag?”

Later when the two had settled down for one of their rare evenings at home, Sue curled with her book in a corner of the big davenport, Allen smoking his beloved pipe over his magazine, the girl referred again to James Kettle.

“You gave me a bad few minutes at dinner, Buddy, did you realize it? I truly thought you were trying to break something to me.” She let her book slide off her lap as she leaned toward him earnestly. “I suppose—I know! that you’ll marry some day. Of course I do—I want you to marry; but not

just now, Allen, not for another year or so. You're only thirty; that's young for men in these days, isn't it? Why, you've only been out of college five years!"

He chuckled. "You make me sound positively callow! Must I remind you that I emerged with my doctor's degree in three branches of engineering? That I'm a junior member of a somewhat important firm? And that," he added with a curious sort of deliberation, "Forest Webb and I are about the only bachelors left in our particular set?" He went on swiftly before she could answer: "It's your life we're talking about, Sue, not mine. It came to me all of a sudden tonight—as I said—that it's queer you haven't been in and out of love a dozen times. I wonder," he went on anxiously, "if it's because you know too many men? If your life wasn't all cluttered up with my friends—if you were really hard up for fellows to take you out, dance with you, send you flowers—"

Her low laughter halted him momentarily, but he began again, his kind eyes fixed on her worriedly, his affectionate voice full of brotherly concern.

"It doesn't seem to me—well, normal, Sue, for you to be so indifferent to men at your age. You're as emotionally immature as a child. You ought to be blushing and palpitating, jumping when the doorbell or telephone rings, half out of your wits with joy one day, dissolved in tears the next—"

"What on earth have you been reading, Allen? *The Development of the Emotions in Females between Nineteen and Thirty?* or some such idiocy? Out of my wits with joy one day, dissolving in tears the next! It sounds exactly like a Victorian female, jilted by a Lunnon rake." She half closed her eyes until the long black lashes tangled. "Old stuff, Buddy! Girls don't behave like that in these days, I assure you. Not even Barbara—lately at least."

"Doesn't she?" He seemed relieved. "I remember she used to, and I suppose I've been subconsciously expecting you to do the same—like catching the measles. But," he said, "I understand now it's not necessary to have those kid diseases any more. Maybe it's the same with sentimental attacks."

"Maybe it is," she agreed, and both fell silent watching the leaping flames on the hearth. But when, two hours later, she laid aside her book and came to tell her brother goodnight, she said a trifle forlornly: "Are you disappointed in me, Allen? Do you think I'm a hard-hearted little green apple that's never going to ripen? I wouldn't mind falling in love, you know," she told him seriously. "But—but one can't, can one? By sheer will

power, I mean? Just pick out an eligible man and say ‘I will now fall in love with this eminently desirable person!’?” She seated herself on the arm of his chair and laid her head somewhat wearily against his shoulder. He tightened his arm about her protectingly.

“No, Sue dear, of course that isn’t how it comes. And I’ve made a fool of myself as usual, getting you all stirred up like this. A hangover from those first weeks after Dad died when you and I were left alone. I suppose I leaned over backward, trying to be a whole family to you. Now forget it, Sue, promise me! It would serve me right if I’d stirred you up so you fell for the first young pipsqueak who comes into your life after tonight!”

He looked up and seeing tears in her eyes, pulled out his own big handkerchief and dried them tenderly. “Forget it,” he said again. “Forest has nothing on me when it comes to talking rot, it appears.”

“Well, but, Allen—but, Allen,” she answered unsteadily, “you don’t want to marry me off, you don’t want to get rid of me right now—do you?”

“Darling goose, I do not! What I really want you to do is to trot off to bed and put this whole silly conversation right out of your mind! You’re a grownup woman now, and there’s genuine good sense under that curly mop of yours. Remind me of it if I start maundering again!”

Sue, lying wakeful long after she had heard her brother seek his own bed, pondered this surprising talk. She went over it again and again: its first note of warning, the curious persistence Allen had showed; Allen, whose advice was usually given in the fewest possible words!

Was he trying to prepare her for some news of his own, or was he really worried about her wholeness of heart?

She thought back on the last five years. They had been happy years, gay years, with Maggie to look after the housekeeping and nothing for Sue to do but entertain her brother’s friends, sitting with demure dignity opposite him at table, shop with Barbara in the mornings, drive her own small car about as she would, run down to Kansas City every week or so for a play or a party, keep up her French with old Madame Loïselle, her music with Scarletti . . . it had all been fun, fun! Surely it was not going to end now?

“Why should it, idiot?” she inquired of herself as the clock in the livingroom struck twelve. “What on earth are you getting yourself so worked up about? Allen has these attacks of conscience every so often, just as he said. There was that time he decided I was too thin, and made me drink

raw eggs and cream twice a day—ugh! And there was the evening he caught Forest teaching me to smoke, and simply raised old Ned about it! This tonight means nothing—absolutely nothing!”

Nevertheless she tossed for another hour before she finally fell asleep, her hand tucked under her cheek as usual but a faint frown knitting her black brows even in slumber.

## CHAPTER TWO

THE next afternoon she went to the river bluff again, this time driving her car right up to the great stones which protected the edge against the thousand foot drop.

The spot had always been a favorite one with her. Her father had brought her here when she was a child, pointing out the changes the sullen river had made, showing her the flat country on the other side where once the Indians had roved undisputed.

She remembered one glorious day when a tall, gentle-voiced newspaper man from Denver had pointed out the exact spot from which the Pony Express rider had boarded the ferry boat on the first lap of his picturesque journey. Neither man nor child knew then that some carelessly scribbled verses of his were to make him famous around the world; that "Out Where the West Begins" would be quoted and paraphrased wherever English print was to be found.

Later she and Allen had visited Arthur Chapman and his pretty clever wife in New York City; and only a year ago she had been saddened by the news of his untimely death.

"Why do you always want to come up here?" Barbara demanded now and then. "It's always the same old view."

But it was never the same view, Sue told herself; never were river and sandbars and low lying hills below quite the same. Born in one of the most picturesquely interesting of all Middlewest towns, she had been steeped in its history and traditions. From where she stood she could see the spot on which candy kettles had boiled for more than a century. She liked to think of the young Frenchman brought especially from St. Louis to cater to the bold fur-trader's sweet tooth; of the unpretentious log cabin in which "molasses stew" was made for the '49 emigrants, enduring the long winter in camps about the village, "waiting for grass." It thrilled her even yet to remember that specially made "sticks" of wintergreen, clove, mint, a dozen flavorings brought all the way by train from Boston itself, had been pressed by mothers and sweethearts into the hard young hands of the boyish Express riders to lighten their dangerous journey.

The trees had been cleared from this high point and a level parking place made for motorists who like herself loved the superb view. It was deserted this late October afternoon. Sue sat in her car, her lip caught beneath her teeth, still puzzling over Allen's inexplicable words of the evening before.

“Hi!”

Something crashed violently into her car from behind, sending it forward until its wheels were stopped by the great rocks; bumping her head smartly against the wheel and driving her teeth through the scarlet satin of her lip. As always when she was frightened, rage seized her.

“Have you no sense at all?” she cried. She was out of the car in a flash and standing before a roadster in which a very white young man sat limply. “With practically an entire block of vacant ground, must you choose the identical spot where one lonely car is parked? Or were you trying to commit suicide and I got in your way?”

To her mounting fury he made no answer; merely essayed a sickly smile at her and slumped a little further down on the sloping seat of the smart car.

“I believe you're drunk!” she said with icy contempt.

He sighed like some one emerging from ether.

“No—I'm not. I damn well wish I was though,” he assured her earnestly. “I thought—” he gulped and wet his dry lips with his tongue—“by George, I thought for one awful second that I'd pushed you right over rocks and everything.” He fumbled for his handkerchief; dabbed at his suddenly wet forehead. “I don't dare get out just yet; 'fraid my knees would give way under me.”

She was not in the least appeased by his obvious fright. Her eyes were enormous in her small pale face, and smouldered underneath their inky brows.

“I'm waiting for you to explain!”

“Brakes. Nothing held. I grabbed the emergency but—”

“And do you usually drive on high hills without any brakes?”

The color was beginning to creep back into his face, and he sat a little straighter.

“Look here! Let me explain, won't you? I haven't touched this car for a month. Lent it to a friend who was touring the Ozarks. I picked it up about fifteen minutes ago—downtown somewhere—and drove it up here to have a

look at the river. Uphill all the way, so I didn't consider the brakes were all shot to h—pieces until I tried to stop alongside of you and . . . didn't. It's the truth," he insisted, seeing her sternness had not abated under this explanation.

"You ought to have looked before you started up here!" she stormed. "You ought not be allowed to drive! You ought to have your license taken away from you! If you'd hit me just a little harder—or at just the right angle—I'd be down there this minute, struggling in the river. That is, if I were alive at all," she added.

"Don't!" he protested feebly, turning his eyes from the drop below. "You can't say anything stronger than I'm saying to myself. The only excuse for me—if it is an excuse!—is that I had a rather upsetting piece of news just as I took over the car—and it made me forget everything else. Also I've always kept everything in such order in this car it never occurred to me any man would return it in such a condition."

He opened the door and climbed out, at once proving himself a true prophet. His knees bent slowly beneath him, and if it hadn't been for Sue's firm little hand at his elbow he would have collapsed ignominiously at her feet.

"Never scratched a fender in all the years I've driven," he muttered. "Never killed even a yellow pup. And now!"

"Sit on one of these rocks," she directed. "No, facing away from the river, idiot! Now get some of this air into your lungs. You'll soon be all right."

"I'm all right now," he insisted. "But you—" suddenly a note of horror crept into his voice—"there's blood on your face! You're hurt! My God, I've killed you after all!"

"Bit my lip," she retorted, and dabbed at it with a scrap of handkerchief. "Get hold of yourself, can't you? I loathe hysterics."

The word jerked him upright as perhaps it had been intended to do. After a moment he said in a controlled tone: "Sorry! Never acted like this before in my life, give you my word! It was only the idea that I couldn't control the car—and you so little, looking like a child with that red scarf on . . . we'll skip it!" he assured her with a wan smile. "Unless you want to have me arrested? I'm in entire agreement with you if you do."

She shook her head absently, her eyes on the jammed cars.

“This is the dickens of a mess,” she announced finally. “I can’t get out until your car is moved, and I don’t seem to care for the idea of your starting it.”

“It’ll hold in reverse.”

“Maybe—and again maybe not. According to your own tale, you don’t know much about what it will or will not do. I think we’d better walk down to the nearest telephone and call for a man from a garage. It’s beginning to get dark, you see.”

“I’ll walk, you mean.” He stood up again, this time purposefully and strongly. “You sit down here—unless you want to get into your car and wait —”

“No, I think I won’t do that!”

“Don’t blame you! I won’t be ten minutes. I think I remember a little store at the foot of the hill. I’ll call from there, if you’ll give me the name of a good garage. Stranger in your town, you see!”

She snapped out the information he asked for, and seated herself on one of the great rocks. Lights were beginning to prick through the dusk. She shivered a little, partly from the chill in the air, partly from reaction after her fright. To divert her mind she speculated idly as to the sort of young man this was who had been too greatly occupied with his own thoughts to inspect his car, so terrified by the nearness of a fatal accident that he had wellnigh collapsed, but withal brisk, decisive, even authoritative when confronted by the need for action.

He was tall, broad-shouldered and blue-eyed; that much she remembered. For the rest she had received an impression of superlative good clothes worn just to the right degree of shabbiness, thick blond hair uncovered, a pleasant voice.

It lacked only a few minutes of the dinner hour when she let herself quietly into the apartment. She had her own reasons for wishing to escape Allen’s notice. She was relieved to have Maggie inform her that her brother had telephoned; he would not be home for dinner and Miss Sue was not to wait for him if he had not returned in time for Barbara Webb’s party.

“And I must say,” Maggie added reproachfully, “you don’t look like you ought to be going out till all hours yourself, Miss Sue! You passed me your word you’d get home in time to lie down for an hour or so before dinner.”

“I’m all right,” Sue told her shortly. “I’ll rest after I’ve eaten. Loads of time. Don’t fuss, old dear!”

It was a good party, lasting until four, and she slept until nearly noon the next day, oblivious to Allen’s tiptoed visit to her door before he left for his office, to Maggie’s anxious peeps into the darkened room. She was sitting up in bed, yawning and relaxed, when the servant rapped decisively.

“Well, you have had a good rest and no mistake, Miss Sue! Here’s a box just come for you.”

“A box! A packing case, don’t you mean?” The girl gasped at its proportions. James Kettle was the current donor of floral offerings; and James’ flowers invariably appeared in a neat square box, as tidy and conservative as he was himself. Maggie was having some difficulty maneuvering this huge affair through the door in spite of its lack of weight.

In another moment they were both gasping, young mistress and the old woman.

“He must have bought up an entire rose house! Dozens and dozens of ’em, Maggie! Who on earth!”

Her gay evening, the long hours of sound sleep had erased the recollection of yesterday’s adventure. Now it returned to her sharply. Something in the extravagant profusion of the gift recalled the man who had so nearly killed her the day before. He was a person to go from one extreme to another, she thought, smiling.

She examined his card with interest. “Mr. Robert Trenton”, it read; and below in very black and firm script: “Thank God they’re not for your funeral!”

She began to laugh, softly at first and then so whole-heartedly that she laid her cheek down on her bunched knees. What a—what a black and white sort of person this was! No subtleties to him, no shades of meaning! Something rather fine about his absolute acceptance of the seriousness of the affair. Sue liked that.

She deflected Maggie’s inquisitive questions by sending her after receptacles for the blossoms.

“Every vase we have in the house—and I doubt if they will be enough! Line ’em up on the kitchen table, Mag darlin’, and fill ’em with water. I’ll be out to arrange these beauties by then.”

She was trailing about the livingroom in her bathrobe when the telephone rang.

“For you,” Maggie said briefly.

“I’ve waited just as long as I can!” exclaimed an impatient voice. “I’ve been sitting here gnawing my nails down to the quick until I thought you were up. How are you?” It was no polite inquiry but an anxious demand for news.

“All right, thank you—but nearly smothered in roses. Are there any at all left in town?”

“Bother the roses! Tell me about you. Not stiff, not the least bit bruised? How is your lip?”

“Perfectly all right. Praise be to lipstick, it didn’t show at all last night.” Then the lateness of the hour occurred to her and she said curiously: “It’s noon. Why did you think you’d have to wait so long to call me? You couldn’t have known I went to a party last night!”

“I did though. I’m staying at the Benton Club, and they were talking of a Miss Webb’s affair; mentioned you as a friend of hers.”

“But how did you know who—”

“Looked up your license number, of course! Sue, dear, when may I come up and see for myself how—”

“Hey!” she said aggrievedly. “You’re not to call me Sue, with or without descriptive adjectives. We haven’t met—socially. I’m sure that—”

His disgusted voice interrupted her protest. “What the dickens does either of us care about the social end of it? I all but murdered you yesterday. If that doesn’t give me a right to call on you, I don’t know what does!”

She began to laugh helplessly. What a precipitant young man this was!

“I’m tempted to quote a popular book title and say ‘Stay Out of My Life!’ You’re a violent sort of person.”

“Are you dressed? Had your breakfast—lunch? I’ll ring your bell on the stroke of three,” he told her, said goodbye and hung up before she could refuse her consent if she had been minded to.

It was, however, two and not three o’clock when Maggie admitted him.

“Thought you might give me the slip,” he informed her coolly, handing the openly disapproving old woman his hat and gloves. “There was not the

forgiving note in your voice I craved to hear. I take it you're still simmering with wrath toward me?"

She shook her head. "I wasn't—until you barged in here just now. How do you know I haven't a weak heart? One shock right after another like this —"

"Don't joke," he bade her sternly. "I tell you I didn't sleep a wink all night! Every time I shut my eyes I saw that confounded river crawling below—so terribly far below!—and you, a little thing with a bit of scarlet silk around your neck, curled up like a kitten in your car!" Without waiting for permission, he pulled forward a chair close to where she sat, and subsided heavily into it. "I've had some scares in my time, but never anything like that! If you'd gone over that bluff I'd have sent my car after you, give you my word!"

Sue frowned. Maggie was, she knew perfectly, hovering close to the kitchen door. She had been Sue's nurse years ago and still preserved an attitude of authority toward the girl. She would report this to Allen, and Allen would be annoyed, and there would be an end to the solitary visits she paid to Wyeth Hill.

"That would have been most sensible!" she said biting. "And now may we forget the whole affair? You see for yourself I'm whole and unscathed. You've apologized adequately, not to say profusely! with roses." Her eyes roved about the flower bedecked room. "I take it for granted you're merely passing through the town—"

He shook his head, the seriousness of his manner already gone. "Never take anything for granted in this day and age, Sue darling! Far from passing through I'm about to become one of your most promising young business men. Hadn't you heard? Does the name Trenton mean nothing to you? I'll wager it does to your brother. 'Trenton's *Treadons*.' Do I make myself clear?"

"The new shoe factory!"

"A bull's-eye, no less. I'm it!"

"The whole factory?"

"Practically—now." His face sobered. "My father died several months ago. He was president of the concern. I'm more or less stepping into his shoes—no pun intended. I was in England—and then I was busy settling Dad's affairs in the East—and that's how I happened to lend my car to this guy who wanted to do some folklore research in the Ozarks." He leaned

back as though he felt he had completed a detailed autobiography in these few jerky sentences.

“Okay, Miss Davenport?”

They surveyed each other frankly, slim, dark-eyed girl and blue-eyed stalwart man. A forgiving grin began to twitch at the corners of Sue’s lips. There was an endearing frankness about this Trenton person; a trustful belief in the goodwill of the world toward his appreciative self which was hard to resist.

“That’s right!” he encouraged her. “In the words of the song: ‘smile, smile, smile!’ You look much, much nicer when you smile. All dark people do. There’s a touch of grimness in knitted black brows, did you know it? And I have no intention of beginning what is going to be one of the most charming friendships that ever came into my life with grimness.”

“You take a lot for granted, Mr. Trenton!”

“Bob,” he corrected. “It’s one of the easiest of all names to pronounce. Even a baby can say it. Sue now is harder. The sibilant sound presents certain difficulties which do not appear to be surmounted before the second or third year—or so my married friends tell me. Not that I’ve ever known any girl named Sue; but I had an Aunt Susan—”

She was too young not to chuckle at his blithe audacity. Encouraged by the sound, he beamed at her.

“Now we’re getting some place!”

## CHAPTER THREE

ALMOST before his roses were faded, Bob Trenton had become an intimate of the little household. It was accomplished with the effortless ease characteristic of him.

“Met a peach of a guy today,” Allen had announced that first night. He interrupted himself amazedly. “Golly, look at the flowers! You and Kettle settled it between you?”

She dimpled at him as she unfolded her napkin. “Jim? Jim would regard such a display as in the worst possible taste. It’s a new man.” A sudden thought occurred to her. “Maybe it’s your man, Allen—your ‘peach of a guy.’ This town’s not so large that he could remain undiscovered long; not a shrinking violet like Bob Trenton, anyway!”

“Trenton! That’s the name! Trenton’s *Treadon Shoes*, you know. But he’s only been here a day or so, he tells me. How come the lavish floral offering?”

“He bumped into me yesterday afternoon,” she answered, prudently suppressing the details. “No harm done, but the roses are a peace offering.”

“I asked him out to dinner tomorrow night. All right?”

“All right,” she said demurely.

She was young enough to enjoy meeting this personable young man before her friends did. The town’s social set was small and closely knit. It would not be long before Trenton was a part of it. And as the days went on, she was amused and a little startled at his whirlwind attentions to herself. He had behaved from the first as though he had some claim upon her. If he had not informed himself of her activities for the day before he left the previous evening, his telephone call caught her before she could leave the house in the morning.

He made no secret of his devotion; rather invited attention to it. If she appeared at some function with Jim Kettle, or Forest Webb, or any other of the men who had known her for years, Bob was always to be found hovering near the door, awaiting her entrance. He would join her as matter-of-factly as though it had been arranged for him to relieve her escort of all responsibility toward her.

“Who does he think he is, anyhow?” Forest would growl. “Just because he’s Trenton of *Treadons*, with a Harvard accent and Londonmade clothes, doesn’t give him the right to monopolize you all evening, Sue. Unless you’re engaged?” he demanded.

She shook her head. “He’s just giving me a rush. And why on earth do you let him bluff you, Forest? He asked me to come with him tonight and I told him I’d already promised you. Why don’t you stand up for yourself?”

He grinned in frank defeat. “He’s the white-headed boy of the Chamber of Commerce, and Dad and his friends won’t have him scared away; not while he’s negotiating for a branch factory here, at all events.”

“It’s love you, love your job, is it, Forest?”

“You bet! I hope to get married one of these fine days, honey chile, and I don’t see old Allen turning you over to a jobless husband. Besides, this Eastern guy will be on his way pretty soon—I hope and trust! Just sit tight, and don’t get your head turned by all this crown prince stuff.”

“You think he’s amusing himself with me?” she asked in a voice sweet enough to have warned him.

“What else? You’re tops here all right, Sue darlin’, but still and all St. Joseph isn’t exactly metropolitan, you have to admit. It’s my guess Trenton picks the village belle wherever his business takes him; and has himself a hefty good time—while it lasts. You said he was only giving you a rush!”

The black curls bobbed assentingly against his shoulder, but her eyes flung a welcome to the tall young man who was skating across the floor toward her. She smiled mockingly at Forest’s disgruntlement as he surrendered her to the newcomer.

“Cheer up!” she called as Trenton swept her away. “Remember the Chamber of Commerce!”

“What about the Chamber of Commerce?” Bob demanded. “No, you don’t, Kettle! I just now took her away from Webb. Go on, Sue, tell me! Can’t you and Forest find any more interesting things to talk about than business?”

“You,” she told him.

“Me? Oh, I see!” His agile mind made the connection at once. “The branch factory, eh? And Webb’s father a director of the Chamber of Commerce. Plain as a pikestaff. Well,” he dismissed the subject comfortably. “The factory’s going through all right. They can stop worrying about it.” He

evaded an approaching stag skillfully. “I like this town, Sue! Shall we live here—for a time at least?”

“I shall,” she said, emphasizing the pronoun significantly. “You must do as you think best, of course.”

He sighed with exaggerated relief. “That’s settled then! I’ll close the deal tomorrow.”

“What deal? The factory?”

“No, the house. A darned nice house it is, too, let me tell you! Swimming pool, landscaped grounds, everything. The poor chap that built it died in an airplane smash last winter—”

“Oh, you mean the Wilmington place out beyond the Country Club? It is a nice place, Bob. But a trifle large for a bachelor?”

“Bachelor, my Aunt Emma! Seriously, Sue, I think it’s high time you were setting the date. We’ve known each other ages and ages—”

“Three long weeks, in fact,” she said dryly.

“Three weeks, or three years—what does it matter? I love you and you love me—”

“But I don’t!”

“Don’t love me? Nonsense!” He stopped abruptly, opened a door and propelled her through it with a gentle hand on her shoulder. “I came early and scouted around to find this. Inhospitable soul, our hostess; not a light on.” He pressed a button and Sue discovered they were in a small, book-lined room, clearly not intended to be used tonight. Somebody’s reading glasses were on the desk, there was a comfortable litter of magazines and papers on the narrow table.

“Bob, we have no business in here!”

“Your mistake, sweet! We have very important business, if you ask me. Here—tuck your little self on this couch while I turn off the high light and switch on this nice low lamp. If I move this high-backed chair—so! between us and the door, we’re fairly safe from discovery.”

In spite of herself her heart beats quickened a little.

“It’s too early in the evening for us to disappear like this,” she protested. “Ever so many people will be looking for us both. Let’s go back, Bob!”

“No.” He spoke with finality. “We have things to talk about—important matters to decide. When will you marry me, Sue?”

She colored, more with annoyance than embarrassment.

“I won’t. I don’t love you, Bob. I just finished telling you so.”

“I didn’t hear you. I’ll never hear you—when you talk nonsense like that. Of course you love me! How could you help it when I’m so utterly mad about you?”

She clasped her hands about her knees, rocking herself sideways to look at him through mischievously lowered lashes.

“You say that with suspicious glibness, my man! With practised ease, in fact. ‘Utterly mad’ about me, ha! You talk like a man in a smart play.”

His pleasant face grew a little hard. “I can do more than talk, Sue! Don’t tempt me too far. I’m putting a lot of restraint on myself as it is!”

She had a moment of something like fear. The men she knew, the men she had grown up among, did not talk like this, look like this. She contrasted Forest Webb’s cheerful wooing, Jim Kettle’s dignified attentions, with this reckless young man’s manner, and wished she were back among the dancers. But it would never do to let him see she was impressed! Forest’s remark about the village belle and crown prince stuff still rankled. If Bob Trenton thought he could breeze into town with his stunning looking clothes, and his stunning looking car, and his carloads of flowers sent to any girl who momentarily attracted him, he was due for a jolt, that was all! She held her head a little higher and advised him lightly: “Keep on restraining yourself, my dear boy! It’s good for you.”

“Sue, please! We’re wasting time. I know what you’re thinking just as well as if you said it, and it’s rot, sheer rot! Some of Webb’s provincialism, I’d be willing to bet. I lost my heart to you the first time I saw you: that day on the river bluff, with the sunset behind you, and the darling little scowl on your darling little queer face. I knew then that I was going to marry you! It wouldn’t have mattered if you’d been Mrs. Somebody-or-other even then. I always get what I want—always! And I want you more than anything in the whole world. I’ll get you, sweet! Make no mistake about that. Of course you can make difficulties, tantalize me with a cat-and-mouse sort of game—”

“Bob, you’re so conceited!” The accusation burst from her youthfully. “You talk as if any girl would give her eyeteeth to get you. You talk as if I were already in love with you! Well, I’m not! It wouldn’t amuse me in the slightest to ‘make difficulties’, as you call it. I like my life as it is. I don’t

want to get married for a long, long time; and even if I did, it wouldn't be you."

"Jim Kettle perhaps?"

She was silent for a moment. When she spoke it was with an air of dignity which impressed even Trenton's impatience.

"That is a question you have no right to ask, Bob! I doubt if you have the right even to talk to me at all on such a subject—after so brief an acquaintance. Please don't do it again!" She rose and moved toward the door, and perforce he followed her.

He avoided her for the rest of the evening, a fact which did not escape Barbara Webb's sharp eyes.

"Quarrelled?" she formed the word over Allen's shoulder as they swept near Sue and the contentedly hopping Jim Kettle. Sue shook her head. It was more than a quarrel, she told herself. She had lost Bob Trenton for good. No more telephone calls, no more conversational audacities, no more spur-of-the-moment plans, carried out with a lavishness of time and money impossible to the other men she knew. The quickening tempo of the last three weeks would slow to every-day pace.

She was half glad and half sorry. Going about with Bob Trenton had been like driving a high-powered racing car; thrilling but very dangerous. The slightest carelessness, the merest obstacle in the road, and one would find one's self metaphorically with a broken neck.

"Still, it was fun while it lasted," she sighed as she prepared for bed that night. "And much as I hate to admit it, I suppose Forest was right: Bob was amusing himself with me! He pushed it pretty far, though. I wonder what he'd have done if I'd taken him up tonight? Found some way to squirm out of it, of course. He must have had loads of experience at it!"

She concentrated at the resentfulness this idea aroused, knowing that only anger would drive out a certain feeling of hollowness, of blankness which overcame her at the realization there would be no more Bob Trenton in her life.

## CHAPTER FOUR

SUE DAVENPORT was a person of character. Having decided during what, to her fury, had proved to be sleepless hours of the night, that all thought of Bob Trenton was to be put out of her mind, she promptly made gay plans at the breakfast table.

Allen listened somewhat absently. When the telephone rang, he sprang to answer it before Maggie could reach the hall.

“For you!” he told his sister. “Trenton again. Starts the day rather early, doesn’t he?”

Sue’s hand shook a little as she picked up the receiver.

“Yes?”

“Oh, darling, don’t say it so icily! It’s a grand morning; had you noticed? And I’ve got such a nice plan for today. Wait—let me tell you! A hundred mile drive to the north—a picnic with a fire and coffee and everything—an October picnic Sue!”

“Sorry,” she said firmly. “I’m busy all day. Tonight, too,” she added hastily.

“Then you do remember!” There was reproach in his voice. “You have a date with me tonight, and try to break it if you dare!”

“It doesn’t take much daring. It’s broken now—was broken last night, in fact. I should think you’d have known that, Bob.”

“But why?” He was honestly puzzled. “Just because I couldn’t make you see things my way the first time? I didn’t really expect to, to tell you the truth. But I will! In the meantime—”

“In the meantime,” Sue snapped, “I’m very busy this morning. ’Bye!”

Allen was struggling into his topcoat when she re-entered.

“Seems to me Trenton calls you pretty often and early, Sis!”

“He won’t after today,” she said serenely. “That young man is far too used to having things his own way. As I was saying, Allen, about the fencing lessons—”

“Arrange for them, of course, if you like; but don’t keep me now, Sue. Be seeing you!”

She did arrange for the fencing lessons, first persuading Barbara to join her. The two girls lunched downtown, saw a movie, shopped until it was time to hurry home to dinner. Sue congratulated herself that one day had gone by without Bob. It was a trifle disconcerting to find him in the livingroom, very much at home, smoking and lounging in Allen’s big chair.

She stood gazing at him in speechless anger, her cheeks faintly colored by the crisp air, her dark eyes bright with emotion.

“Is this fair? Is this right?” she demanded. “You know I can’t put you out of my own home!”

“Allen’s home, too, sweet,” he reminded her. “I’m here to dinner—at his invitation.”

“Then you asked for it!”

“Of course I did! Nice guy, your brother! I ran into him at the Chamber of Commerce this morning and dropped a hint—oh, the merest hint, of course!—that home cooking tastes mighty good to a stranger in a strange land. We poor single men who have no nice little sisters have to depend on our friends for a bit of home now and then.”

She closed the door, stood with her back to it, one hand on the knob.

“Bob, you’re acting very silly about this; making it hard for both of us. Or,” she interrupted herself swiftly, “perhaps you’ve changed your mind? About last night, I mean? Perhaps you’re willing for us just to be good friends, you and Allen and I—”

“Allen and I, by all means. You and I, no! I’ve a different relationship in mind for us, sweet.”

“Is it going to be—warfare between us then?”

“Warfare? Now it’s you who are silly, darling.” He took a step toward her. “I told you last night, and I tell you again now: it’s no use for you to hold out against me; you’ll marry me in the end.”

“Whether I love you or not?”

“Gosh, no! Loving me as madly, as irrationally, as wholly and entirely as I love you this minute.”

She shook her head stubbornly. “I don’t even like you now! I did—at first. You’ve spoiled it all now.”

A sudden reckless look crossed his handsome young face. He was across the room in two strides; had caught her to him and was pressing his mouth against her own in hard, burning kisses. Even through the thick tweed of her coat she could feel the thump, thump of his heart.

“Don’t *dare* to tell me I’ve spoiled it!” he said fiercely. “Don’t *dare* to deny you’re beginning to love me, Sue, my Sue! Why, you’re my share of the world, the one perfect thing in this whole upsidedown existence we call life! We were made for each other, you and I! Don’t you know it, can’t you see it, Sue mine? You for me, and I for you—our home, our children, our everything against the world!”

She was shaken by the force of the most violent emotion she had ever known. The passion in his voice made her tremble, the touch of his hard lips on hers turned her heart to water. But clear above all other feelings rose anger, poignant and white hot.

“You’re taking advantage of me, Bob! It’s unfair of you to surprise me like this—pin me against the door where I can’t move!”

He stepped back, folded his arms.

“You’re free,” he said briefly.

Her breast rose and fell sharply. “For the time being! But must I always be on guard against you? Must I reconnoiter before I come into my own home, ask for the guest list before I accept an invitation to a party? If I can’t feel safe from you, Bob—”

“With me; not from me,” he corrected. “Oh, my little love, can’t you see, can’t you understand that I love you, want you, must have you?”

“I understand that you’re a very self-willed and badly spoiled person.” Her voice shook a bit on the words but she faced him proudly. “I have no doubt that heretofore you have had only to say ‘must’ and what you’ve wanted has dropped into your lap. But there’s no ‘must’ about this, I assure you! I don’t love you, I won’t marry you, I wish you’d go away and let me alone!” Her own ear caught the childish note in the last words, and she flushed again, hating him anew at this fresh evidence of her unsophistication. She flung herself across the room and fairly ran into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

“If he has the slightest decency he’ll scribble a note to Allen, and leave at once,” she thought, her hands against her hot cheeks. “If he stays, I’ll make some excuse; say I have a headache. No, I won’t! That’s as good as admitting that he has upset me.”

She got out of her day things as swiftly as possible; bundled her curls into a rubber cap and had a shower; dressed frantically, trying to listen for sounds from the livingroom. She was settling her favorite velvet frock about her slim hips when she heard her brother’s voice, heard the two men laughing quietly at something Allen had said.

Hateful, hateful situation! How could she open her door and walk out there, meet Bob’s amused eyes searching her face?

It had to be done, however, unless she wanted Allen to come in search of her. She summoned all her pride and made a dignified entrance, tiptoeing up to kiss her brother with more than her usual warmth.

“Here’s Trenton, Sue!”

“Yes. He was here when I came in a while ago. I hope Maggie has something nice for dinner. Allen should have called me so I could—”

“Oh, he’ll be content with potluck,” Allen said calmly. “I’ll brush up a bit, you two, and be right out!”

“Sue, I’m sorry—”

She had had time to gain control of herself. “You’re not, of course,” she informed him serenely, “but it doesn’t matter at all. I shall know what to expect from now on, and take pains to guard myself against a repetition of such a scene.” She realized with youthful satisfaction that he was puzzled by her new composure. That was the right note, she thought exultantly: poise, calmness, an air of quiet superiority. He would not know how to combat that.

All through dinner she felt she had the upper hand. A glance from beneath the long fringe of her lashes would halt his ready speech, make him stumble and turn red. Or, if he boldly essayed the part of aggressor and plied her with questions a trifle too personal for her taste, she turned them aside with gentle dignity. Allen grew amused and was content to watch the little comedy played with himself as sole spectator.

“Date tonight, Sis?” he asked when the table had been cleared and the two men had lighted their cigarettes.

Trenton said quickly: “Yes. She promised me several days ago to see the new picture at *The Missouri*. Any time you’re ready, Sue!”

She leaned back, crossing her silken ankles with an air of infinite leisure.

“I’m so terribly sorry, Bob! D’you know I completely forgot I’d promised to see that with you. Barbara and I went this afternoon. And—” she was quick to forestall the words she knew hovered on his lips—“it tired my eyes a bit, too. In fact—” her guileless smile included both men— “I’m so sleepy I can hardly keep my eyes open! I was just thinking how lucky it is that you’re Allen’s guest tonight.” One small hand came up to pat back a most convincing yawn. “Up late four nights in succession! I’m going to have to reform, or else stop getting up to have breakfast with you, Buddy!”

Allen half closed one eye against the thin spiral of blue smoke.

“You don’t look sleepy, Sue. You look—scintillating; doesn’t she, Bob? Your eyes sparkle like the decorations on a Christmas tree.”

“Appearances are deceitful, then.” She rose sedately, and nodded toward them both. “Don’t bother to keep your voices down, if you want to talk business. I could sleep on a railroad track, I think. Goodnight!”

## CHAPTER FIVE

THE weeks, the months, fled gaily for Sue Davenport. Never had she packed into them so many activities. She would not admit that Bob Trenton's unflagging pursuit of her gave spice to her days.

He was no more to be snubbed than the sunshine, to be discouraged than the approaching winter. He arrived cheerfully with Allen several times a month for dinner. He called Sue daily, varying the time so that she never knew when to expect his gay "Hello, Sue!" He cut in regularly wherever she danced, he "happened" to be parked before her door when she set forth for a solitary walk, his flowers came on every possible occasion.

Since he insisted on more or less public reference to his intentions, she adopted the protective measure of making a joke of the whole affair.

"Here's your intended, Sue!" a girl's voice would hail her gaily from the group about the fire at the Country Club.

"Yes, here I am, Sue darling!" Bob would unfold his long length and advance with outstretched hands to meet her.

"'Lo, Bob!" She always gave one hand—the right hand—a significant shake: friendly but definitely casual. She had merely a fleeting smile for the crowd's gibing comments. And as time went on, and Christmas plans were in the air, and the expected announcement of the engagement was not forthcoming people ceased to take the matter seriously. It became one of the stock jokes, one of the poses which went to the making of a more or less stable foundation for the town's social structure.

"When's the wedding to be, Sue?" some one might demand when a lull fell in a hectic evening.

"At the full of the next blue moon!"

"Bought a house yet, Bob?"

"Oh, sure! The Wilmington place. I told you that ages ago."

"By golly, I did see somebody working out there the other day!" Forest Webb exclaimed, struck. "Tying up shrubs, raking the leaves—that sort of thing."

“Of course you did!” It was Bob again, easy and assured. “Getting everything ready for a spring wedding, aren’t we, sweet?”

And Sue’s scornful: “Forest, you idiot! Ted Wilmington’s father has a caretaker out there.”

Once Barbara attempted to probe her friend’s state of mind.

“I do really think Bob’s serious, Sue, under all that razzing of his about being engaged to you. Hasn’t it ever occurred to you that he might be?”

The corners of the other girl’s mouth curled in a secret smile.

“Now that you mention it—”

“Sue Davenport! He really is, then! I speak to be your maid of honor!”

“You’re not very complimentary, Babs! Does it follow that I’m serious, too?”

“N-no; I suppose not. But he’s marvelous, Sue; you must admit that! Rich, good-looking, sweet-tempered . . . For Pete’s sake, what more do you want in a man?”

“The ability to make me love him, perhaps,” Sue replied soberly.

Barbara stared at her thoughtfully. “You’re an odd little thing, aren’t you, my lamb? Never been in love in your life, so far as I know. I’ve always heard that if a man was crazy about a girl he could make her love him; but there’s Forest, and poor old Jim Kettle, and now Bob . . . Don’t you want to be married, Sue? Don’t you want a home of your own? Babies?”

“I have a home, right here. As for babies—” bright color stained her cheeks—“I’m romantic enough to want to be deliriously in love with their father, Barbara Webb, whoever he turns out to be.”

“M’m, I suppose so. Still and all, I could yield my maidenly heart to Bob Trenton without undue difficulty.”

“I’ll tell him.”

Barbara shook her head. “You won’t get a rise out of me on that! Bob wouldn’t even hear you. I have reason to know,” she said more seriously. “I—deliberately—set my cap for him, as our grandmothers so quaintly phrased it. He can be,” she mused, “the most pleasantly irresponsive person I ever met. I suppose he’s had girls after him since he donned long trousers. When he grins at you—shows those big white teeth in his brown face—”

“Barbara Webb! You sound like a High School girl!”

“I suppose I do,” she admitted. “But don’t you ever get a thrill yourself, Sue? Having him always leap to his feet when you come in sight, always knowing where you are and what you want, no eyes for anyone but you—that sort of thing? You wouldn’t be human if you didn’t,” she finished reproachfully.

Sue replied with characteristic honesty. “I suppose I do, Babs—get a thrill out of it. He’s the new man in town, he’s traveled, his clothes and his accent and even his manners are just a little bit different from those of the men we know . . . yes, really thrilling. But that’s not being in love with him by a long way. I can’t imagine myself leaving Allen—leaving the apartment—for Bob Trenton or any other man.”

“And that, my dear child,” Barbara told herself, “is the whole answer to Sue’s indifference. She’s got a brother complex. Allen has always been her hero. He was the big brother who took her skating and coasting and picnicking when she was a child. He was the wise and strong person who stood between her and everything strange when their father died. He fills her whole world. But when he marries—” She knitted her brow thoughtfully. She felt for the younger girl the same devotion that Forest did. And Forest had hinted lately. . . .

Allen had hinted lately, too, old Maggie thought. If only Miss Sue would listen, could see what he was driving at!

“Getting on, Sis! Your old brother’s approaching senility. Thirty-one next time. Better be feathering your nest against the day he brings a wife home.”

“I’ll worry about that unlikely event when it comes,” she retorted gaily. “No, honestly, Allen, I used to cry myself sick a few years ago at the thought of your being married. I’m a jealous little pig, I suppose. It was when we first took this apartment and I was too young to go to parties, or to know much about your friends. Every time you’d be out for dinner, or for the evening, I’d picture you with some girl . . .” She shuddered reminiscently. “I’d torment myself with a scene we’d go through at breakfast the next morning: you telling me you planned to bring a strange girl here as your wife, I trying to keep my chin up and take the news with a smile.”

She laid down her book, smiled up at him.

“But I know all your friends now, Allen; know the girls you like, and don’t like. I used to hope that if it had to be anyone at all, it would be Barbara. But you don’t care for her at all, do you, Buddy?”

He lighted a cigarette deliberately, squinted his eyes against the rising smoke in a way dear to her through long familiarity.

“Not Barbara. No, I don’t care at all for Barbara Webb. Known her too long, I expect; as you have Forest.”

“And there was that young widow who visited here last winter,” Sue went on, unheeding. “For a while I got a little scared about her, if you’ll believe me! You did hover around her a bit, you know, Allen!”

“Scared, Sis? Why should you have been scared—if I’d hovered to some purpose? Fellows do get married, you know; even fellows with sisters.”

“I know; and some day you will, too, of course. But not just yet, Buddy dear! Not when we’re so happy together, and life’s such a lot of fun for both of us, and Maggie takes care of us, and you’re forging ahead so fast in your work.”

“Had you set a definite date for me to marry, Sue?”

Usually her ear was quick to detect every shade of feeling in the beloved voice; but tonight she lay back in her big chair, dreaming eyes on the fire, her happy thoughts only partly on what she and Allen were saying.

“Thirty-five’s a nice age, don’t you think, Buddy? That’d make me twenty-nine. I want to be married before I’m thirty; but *only* before I’m thirty. I don’t want to settle down too soon, and miss all the fun.”

“It might be fun having your own home, Sis; having kids, you know—being young with ’em yourself.”

But it was of no use. She only nodded and smiled, presently spoke of something else. And so Bob Trenton’s news the week before Christmas almost shattered her very soul.

She and Barbara had been shopping all day, lunching downtown, coming home through the early dusk with packages they could not wait to have delivered.

“Coming in, Babs? I’ll give you a cup of tea!”

“No, thanks! Early dinner tonight, as it happens. Going with the parents to a concert like the dutiful daughter I am.”

So Sue, her arms piled high with gaily wrapped bundles and unable to get at her latchkey, rang the bell for Maggie to open the door.

“Mr. Bob’s here,” the old servant said briefly. “Want I should bring in some tea?”

“Hello, Bob! Been here long? Maggie wants to know if you’d like tea.”

“No tea, thank you. Only a few minutes to stay, sweet.”

“You’re not to call me ‘sweet’.” The protest was purely automatic, unheeded, almost unheard by them both. “Oh, me, I’m tired! The shops are simply jammed. It’s fun, though, Christmas shopping. Everybody’s so friendly, you overhear so many odds and ends of interesting bits about what people want for themselves and what they are buying for others . . . I adore Christmas! Everything about it, from the first wreath that goes up to the last holiday party! Want a light on, Bob, or shall we just ruminate in the firelight for a while?”

“Firelight, by all means. I want to talk to you, Sue.”

“Bob, you solemnly promised—”

“It’s not about us, sweet; at least it’s not about me. It’s about—Allen.”

“Allen?” She started up in alarm. “He’s not ill, Bob? There’s not been an accident?”

“He was in the best of health when I saw him last—some two hours ago. Sit down, Sue. It’s nothing to do with accidents—illness of any kind. But the old boy’s in sort of a jam, and I promised to try my hand at—well, at making you get his point of view.”

“Jam? Allen?” Vague thoughts of defunct banks carrying away their funds, of a loss of her brother’s position, of all the things of which she had heard which were commonly referred to as “jams” for men, floated through her mind. “Tell me at once, Bob!” she commanded sharply.

He shook his head. “The idea was that I work tactfully up to it,” he explained. “In fact, I promised Allen I’d do just that. He says he’s tried it himself, time and again, but you’re so darned unconscious, you change the subject so innocently but with such finality, that he never gets anywhere with it.” He cleared his throat with the first trace of embarrassment she had ever seen in him. “I know I’m a pretty new friend to be doing this—anything so intimate as this—for the old boy. Webb ought to, or Bill Seaton—half a dozen others. But it just happened that I—”

“Bob, will you stop babbling and tell me what is wrong with my brother Allen?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” he replied doggedly. “You certainly can’t call it wrong when a guy marries the girl he loves!”

An electrified silence fell upon them both. Sue sat gripping the arms of her chair as if they only could support her in the face of this devastating news. Bob, with a worried glance at her pale face and big dark eyes, bent to lay a fresh log on the fire.

“M-married?” The word came out in the merest essence of Sue’s charming voice. “Allen married—and without telling me?”

“It’s your own fault, Sue,” he said bracingly. “You wouldn’t *let* him tell you. Why, I’ve heard him trying to myself,” he went on. “I’ve heard him rag you about his getting on in years and needing a wife—”

“Ragging—yes! He’s done that for years. But meaning it . . . oh! you’re ragging yourself, Bob! It’s your funny idea of a joke to come in here and give me a scare!” Her piteous glance begged him to admit it was intended for a joke. When he merely eyed her sympathetically, the back of her hand crept up to her mouth. Broken sounds came from behind it.

“Now, Sue, now, Sue! Pull yourself together, sweet! It had to come, you know. Allen was bound to marry one of these days, you must know that! And it seemed to him—I don’t agree with him, but he claims he knows you better than anyone else does—it seemed to him easier to get the whole thing over with before he told you.”

The tears ran unheeded down her small face. “But he didn’t tell me! He—he sent you to do it! Oh, Buddy, Buddy! To think you’d do this to me!”

He knelt beside her, wiping her eyes with his own big white handkerchief.

“He didn’t send me at all, Sue. It just happened that I—that I was in his office this afternoon when they—when he came back. He was happy as a kid, and at the same time all shot to pieces about how you’d take the news—if you know what I mean. And, confound it! it seemed sort of a shame to spoil things for him right off the bat. So I offered—I said I was on my way here anyway and I’d take the edge off the news for him . . .”

She held her head very high but he could see her swallowing rapid sobs.

“Sue, get hold of yourself!” he urged. “They’ll be here any minute now. You don’t want Allen—you don’t want her to find you like this!”

“J—just a minute, Bob!” For one breathless moment she leaned against him, the dear little dark head he loved pressed close to his heart. He

tightened an arm about her comfortingly. “Give me just a minute!”

Presently she freed herself, mopped valiantly at her wet eyes.

“Who—who is it, Bob? Babs? No, it can’t be Babs. She’s been with me all afternoon. Ellen Massey? Who, Bob?”

“It’s a girl in his office, Sue; a pretty girl, an awfully nice girl, I expect, or Allen wouldn’t be so keen on her. It’s . . . Patsy Murray, dear!”

## CHAPTER SIX

**P**ATSY MURRAY!

The name brought to Sue's mind a blurred recollection of a tall, somewhat striking looking girl, one of the several secretaries employed by Allen's firm. Sue seemed to remember a good deal of lipstick and of manner, and little else.

"Married her?" she asked in bewilderment. "But why any Patsy Murray, Bob? Why not Barbara, or Ellen—someone of our own set?"

He shook his head. He had in truth been perplexed by a sight of the new Mrs. Allen Davenport. And yet in a way he could understand that to staid and conventional Allen, a girl like Patsy Murray might be provocative in her very difference from the groomed and polished sisters and young daughters of his set.

"No one ever knows why one person marries another," he offered. "The point is, Sue, that they went to Kansas City and were married this morning; that he's bringing her for dinner—and mighty soon, too," he concluded warningly.

"Oh—no!" The protest came on a long sigh. "Not so soon, Bob! Not for a while—not until I can get a little used to the idea."

"In—" he glanced at his watch—"about fifteen or twenty minutes, I should say. Brace up, sweet! Go bathe your eyes in cold water—you don't want her to know you've been crying about it, do you? Or Allen either?—and get into something a trifle more festive than that suit, and be all ready to welcome them. Want me to stay?" he offered a trifle reluctantly.

"No—oh, Bob, yes, I do—yes, I do, too! If you will! Bob, I cannot—I cannot—" Her chin was quivering like a grieved baby's.

He put his hands on her shoulders and gripped them close.

"You can—of course you can, Sue! If you let Allen down now, you'll never forgive yourself. Think how good he's been to you all these years! Think how he must dread this first meeting between you and his wife—far more than you are dreading it, sweet, believe me! Anyway, it's got to be gone through whether you like it or not. It's up to you to make it a flop or— or something old Allen has a right to expect when he brings his bride home."

She was still for a long moment, her small shoulders lax and drooping in his grasp. Then she freed herself, said with quiet dignity: "Thank you, Bob! I'll behave now."

A quarter of an hour later she left her bedroom at the sound of the opening door. She had changed to a trailing frock of dull red silk whose brief puffed sleeves and round neck exposed her white arms and throat. Bright color burned in her cheeks, and her eyes were very dark and starry.

"Sue, this is my wife!" Allen said quietly. If there was something like genuine panic in his thoughts his manner did not betray it. Bob mentally applauded both the young Davenports. It took real breeding to face a situation like this with such poise.

"My dear!" Sue's hands were held out in welcome to the newcomer, Sue's kiss was given to both bride and groom with nothing but laughing protest at the surprise of it all. "A sister for a Christmas present, Allen dear! And such a pretty sister, too!"

She was panting a little, the slenderly rounded breast rising and falling in an effort to keep herself in hand. Patsy saw nothing, Allen saw nothing; only Bob, momentarily forgotten, realized what iron control she was exerting; realized and felt his heart almost bursting with admiration for the gallant young creature.

Allen, relieved of his acute apprehensions, relaxed; grew visibly fatuous and pleased with himself and his unannounced marriage.

"I told you so, Patsy! I knew all along it was the best way to do it! Action first and explanations afterwards! Cavalry tactics, eh, Trenton?"

Bob muttered pleasantly if incoherently. Patsy's long gray eyes were roaming swiftly about the firelit room.

"How about having some light in here?" she inquired. "I can hardly see my hand before my face."

Bob obligingly pressed a button and several lamps bloomed forth. In the sudden illumination Sue got her first real look at her brother's wife. Patsy wore a long fur coat with a matching cap which was perched jauntily on masses of ash-blond hair. Her makeup was a trifle heavy, her silk gown a bit too elaborate, but she was undeniably attractive in an odd, exotic sort of way. She was as tall as Allen, far too thin, and the scent of a cluster of gardenias pinned to her coat warred with the expensive French perfume she wore.

All this Sue took in with a sinking heart. This Allen's wife! Allen who should have the best, the finest, the most genuine.

But it couldn't be helped now—it couldn't be helped now, her quick thoughts ran. As Bob had reminded her, such a lot depended on what was said and done this first evening. She exerted herself to throw additional warmth into her voice.

“Make her comfortable, Allen, while I go tell Maggie to add a frill or two in honor of the occasion!” She hurried away, glad of the moment's respite. She was queerly oblivious of the old woman's lack of surprise at the announcement; hardly realized the elaborate meal which was ready and waiting. In a daze she helped set the table, congratulated herself that Bob's velvety red roses were perfect for the occasion, sparkled gaily all through the meal, aided by Bob. The new Mrs. Davenport was very quiet, Allen radiated an almost boyish joy.

When dinner was over Bob took easy command of the situation.

“Go pack a bag with whatever you'll need for a couple of days, Sue. Babs wants you to pay her a little visit while these honeymooners are settling in.”

The girl started, caught her breath. It was the first time she had given any thought to the future. This was Allen's house, of course; his money ran it, his wife must come first here. Wave after wave of desolation rolled over her. She felt homeless, unwanted. She glanced at Allen, expecting him to veto Bob's plan, but Allen smiled approvingly.

“Good idea, Trenton! Sue, you don't mind, do you, lamb? A man doesn't bring his wife home every day!”

“I don't mind,” she answered dully.

Presently she was beside Bob in the car.

“Drive about a bit and get your bearings?”

She assented, almost wordlessly. She did not even realize when the man stopped his car and went into a drugstore, “for cigarettes, Sue!” that there had been no telephone call from Barbara; that Bob was in there talking to her now, explaining, preparing her for Sue's coming. She was wrapped in a dream of misery and loneliness from which she could not awaken.

The day before Christmas she returned to her brother's house. Allen had insisted that she be there for the holidays.

“It’s your home just as much as it ever was, Sis,” he told her kindly. “Patsy feels about it as I do, bless her! Lucky the rooms are so big. We’ve put twin beds in the front room, and moved you in back. You don’t mind, do you?”

No, she didn’t mind, of course. She didn’t mind anything: not Patsy’s absurd assumption of haughty superiority, not Allen’s infatuated eyes which saw only Patsy, his ears which heard only her somewhat thin and nasal voice; not Maggie’s growing irritability at the “bossiness” of her new mistress; not the continual disorder of the lovely big livingroom, the reek of strong perfume from the bedroom of the newlyweds. These were all minor hurts which were swallowed up in the major pain which tore her heart. Allen, her brother, her hero, had deceived her. He had been in love with this Patsy person for more than a year.

Worse than that, he had not had the courage to tell his sister himself, but had delegated the duty to one who was not even an old friend.

Somehow she lived through Christmas Day, the week that followed. All her merry plans were forgotten, pushed aside by Patsy’s own. Patsy had sisters, it appeared; three of them; rather common looking girls, younger than herself and without her striking good looks. They took possession of the apartment with glad cries of appreciation. They teased Allen, laughed at him, borrowed small sums of money from him when Patsy happened to be out.

They came to dinner so frequently that Maggie announced she must have a second girl or she’d “quit.” Sue let herself in quietly one afternoon to find Marie, the youngest, trying on Sue’s own prettiest evening gown.

“Fits like it was made for me!” she said, unabashed by the owner’s arrival. “You’re going to let me borrow it for tomorrow night, aren’t you, Sue?”

“I am not,” was the decisive reply. “You ruined the chiffon you wore last week, my dear, and I told you then never again. Take it off, and be careful how you handle it, Marie, won’t you? It’s my very most expensive frock for the winter.”

“If only Patsy were not so tall,” sighed Marie.

“Patsy’s thanking her lucky stars she is,” was that person’s comment. “Not that I’d let you wear anything of mine, any more than Sue will, Marie. A good grade of corduroy is what you need in evening wear.” She yawned

and stretched her arms above her head. "Clear out now, girls, I want to talk to Sue."

"Listen," she began when they had gone. "You and I have got to talk, Sue."

The younger girl's eyes widened. "What about?"

"This." She indicated the room they were in. "We need a guest room, Allen and I. I'd like my sisters to spend the night occasionally, Allen ought to be able to entertain an out-of-town friend if he wants to." Her long eyes narrowed speculatively as they saw Sue flush. "Now don't go off at half-cock," she warned. "I'm not trying to get rid of you. What I want you to do —" her voice took on a coaxing note—"is to persuade Allen to move; to take a house instead of this apartment. He told me weeks ago that most of the furniture of your old home is eating its head off in storage. Isn't it simply good sense to use it? There's a divine stucco on Ashland—I got the key and went through it yesterday. It would be better to buy it, of course, but Allen won't hear to that. But we could take a long lease."

Sue held on to the arms of her chair. She had a feeling that the very walls of the room were whirling about her.

"What—what does Allen say?"

Patsy's shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Oh, you know what men always say! That he can't possibly afford it; that the whole company is shaving estimates to the bone to meet competition."

"That's true, isn't it?"

"Of course it's true. I ought to know, as Mr. Featherstone's private secretary. But Allen carries heavy insurance. He could borrow on that. And there's your money —"

"Mine?"

"Your share of the sale of your father's house," she said impatiently. "I suppose you know Allen invested that money for you?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Well! Sue, for heaven's sake wake up and try to realize the situation. Allen's a family man now. His first duty is to me, not to you. If you are going on living with us —"

A cold hand closed on Sue's heart, that heart which had seemed to its owner to have been bruised into insensibility long before this. It was no

longer Sue and Allen Davenport; it was Mr. and Mrs. Allen Davenport, with a superfluous unmarried sister on their hands! She said chokingly:

“But I’m not! I’m moving at once, Patsy. I’ll take an apartment somewhere—furnish it—”

“And bring down Allen’s wrath on my head! I’m married to him, Sue, whether you like it or not, whether you like me or not. Do you want to make trouble between us the very first thing?”

“It needn’t make trouble,” she said miserably. “I can explain to Allen that it’s crowded here—that I need more room—that Maggie wants to leave—it’ll all be quite simple, Patsy, truly it will!”

The older girl shrugged and walked away. She disdained to give further warning, she seemed to imply. If Sue loved her brother then of course she wanted him to be happy; and bringing about a difference of opinion with his wife was the surest way of troubling him.

Sue was mindful of this when she broached the subject of a change that evening. For a wonder the three Davenports were alone, Marie’s party keeping her sisters at home, Bob out of town for the weekend.

Allen, finishing his paper, laid it down with a smile of pleasure.

“Nice—being by ourselves like this, isn’t it? My wife and my sister! We’re getting to be a real family, Sue!”

It was not an auspicious beginning for what she had to say but such as it was, the girl seized it eagerly.

“Perhaps one too many for this small apartment, though, Buddy! I’ve been thinking. You know when we moved here, we regarded it as more or less temporary. How—how would it be if I—if I took a little place of my own? With Maggie, I mean,” she added hurriedly, seeing Allen’s quick frown. “Not even you could worry about me if I had Maggie.”

He rose from his chair and stood before the fire, staring down at her sharply.

“What’s all this, Sue? Do you mind so much the change of room? It’s really a pleasanter one than your old one; you’ve always said so. Is it too small for you? You’re not such a large person that—”

“The room is well enough.” She spoke with unusual shortness. “It’s—well, Allen, it’s the whole arrangement. Think,” she went on reasonably. “We’ve just this one place to sit in, to entertain our friends. If people drop in

to see me, you and Patsy are at a loss. If you want your friends for bridge, say, I must—”

“My friends and your friends! Sue, you must be crazy! Since when have we made a difference between them? We both know the same people. We’ve managed all right up to now. Why—”

“But, Allen, it isn’t the same! You were a bachelor, you went out even more than I did. Now . . . you and Patsy will be entertaining, having her friends as well as . . . yours and mine. It’s her home, too, you know. We must both remember that.”

The man glanced perplexedly from one girl to the other. Patsy sat relaxed in a blue velvet chair, a faintly indolent smile on her lips. Sue, scarlet-cheeked and breathing a little rapidly, was bolt upright in her favorite corner of the couch.

“Pats, what do you think about all this?” he appealed to his wife.

“I think we should take a house,” she replied promptly. “It’s nonsense—three people all jammed up in a small place like this. Sue is talking sense. There’s a perfectly dandy place on Ashland—”

“The stucco house—I know. But that’s out, Pats dear. I told you so when you first spoke of it. It’s too far from the office, the rent’s too high, it would cost a lot to furnish it, I’m sorry, darling, but I can’t afford it just now. I explained all that to you when—before we were married.”

“I know,” she murmured. “I do understand, truly, Allen. But . . . after all, if Sue is to make her home with us, it’s only fair that she share expenses, isn’t it? She has a car, and we don’t. She has an income which she practically never touches. If we divided the rent and the heat—all our living expenses, lover, we could manage nicely. Sue’s willing, aren’t you, Sue?”

He shook his head. “Divide three ways, you mean? Even then I couldn’t swing it; couldn’t afford a car. You know how things at the office are, Pats: that to meet competition with the Kansas City firms we’re working at an actual loss, in money at least. We’re building up a reputation which will make us a firm to be reckoned with when the tide turns. Luckily for us all, we each have a small but adequate income. I’ve been living on that. Sue’s is big enough to run to the little car.”

“But, Allen!” It was Sue herself who broke in eagerly. “I’m just realizing! It’s because you have supported us both that I was able to buy the car. I honestly didn’t know that before. I simply took it for granted that there

was enough money for us both, and let it go at that. It's you who should have the car!"

"Now listen, Sis," he said firmly. "The arrangement has not been as one-sided as you think. You've paid your share of expenses right along. As a matter of fact, I couldn't have kept up this apartment just at first if I hadn't deducted your share from your quarterly check. The last year or so I've been able to swing it alone. I shouldn't have dared ask Patsy to marry me, if I hadn't; knowing that a girl as pretty and attractive as you will in the nature of things marry soon and leave us. But until that time—" his face grew troubled—"can't you stick it, Sis? I—I don't want you to leave your brother's roof until you go to your husband's. Pats, tell her she's not to think of leaving us! Why, gosh!" he exclaimed. "I look forward all day to coming home to my two girls at night! I'm going to hate the fellow who takes my little sister away!"

He was so genuinely in earnest, his voice was so full of distress that Sue could only let the subject drop. She stole a glance at her sister-in-law and found that inscrutable person staring into the fire, her lip caught beneath her white teeth.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“I’M GOING out,” Sue Davenport declared one afternoon in late February. “Rain or no rain, I’ve got to get some fresh air. I’ve been cooped up here long enough.” She wore a thin red rubber cape over her tweed suit, her small-brimmed hat was water-proof.

Patsy looked up lazily. “And I was just thanking my lucky stars I didn’t have to trudge down to the office! I hate wet weather. Driving, Sue?”

“Walking. I need a good tramp.” She resisted an impulse to close the door violently behind her. The livingroom was stuffy since Patsy objected to the hour’s airing Maggie had been in the habit of giving it after breakfast. It smelled faintly of food, of stale perfume and cigarette smoke. Patsy had become a chain-smoker since she had no working hours, lighting one from another, and being none too careful about where she flung her ashes.

Her sister-in-law’s capacity for immobility had surprised the active Sue. At first she had thought Patsy resting from her long years of secretarial work. But January went by, February was ready to merge into March, and still Allen’s wife spent most of her time curled into a deep chair or on the couch, not reading, not sleeping; just smoking and relaxing utterly, like a pretty Persian cat.

There were times when Sue forgot she was there; when Barbara Webb dropped in, and after a polite exchange of greeting with Allen’s wife, she and Sue were off in a gale of lively chatter. Bob Trenton, at first acutely conscious of that languid silent figure, himself learned to ignore, if not to forget it. Patsy woke up only when Allen came home, or her sisters dropped in. Then she came to life with a rush of animation, a sparkle of talk which never ceased to astonish her small sister-in-law.

“I can’t stand it any longer—I can’t,” muttered Sue today, as her face wet with the drizzling rain and her lungs welcoming the clean air, she walked briskly along. “Allen thinks she is like that all day; that I’m lucky to have such a charming companion from morning till night. And if he knew that she spends the whole time smoking and brooding in that chair—or whatever she is doing when she narrows her eyes like that—he’d say that at least she doesn’t interfere with my own life. But I have no life, that’s the truth of the matter. I don’t like to ask people in for the evening because I

know it's the only time Allen has with Pats. And I'm tired, tired, tired! of movies, and parties—anything to get away!”

“Hey, slow up, you small tornado!” a cheerful voice bade her. “Where's the fire this dampish day?”

“Hello, Bob! I was rather tearing along, I suppose. I'm so *darned* glad,” she said childishly, “to get outdoors for a while. Isn't this simply poisonous weather? A good snowstorm, or really cold clear days that make your blood tingle . . . but this! D'you think we're ever going to see the sun again?”

“Tomorrow,” he prophesied. “It's clearing, and there's some color in the west. Where are you bound for, Sue? Any place in particular? If not, may I come along?” He added aggrievedly: “You might say you're glad to see me after my being gone a whole week!”

“I am; ever so glad!” She realized with a little start of surprise that this was true. Without knowing, Bob's absence had been part of the discontent of the last few days. She stopped suddenly, narrowly missing a collision with an old gentleman who carried an umbrella. “Bob, I've missed you terribly! I thought it was just the rain, and being cooped up so long with Patsy, but I believe your being away had a lot to do with it!”

His downward glance was rueful. “You don't add perceptibly to a man's good opinion of himself, do you, sweet? Have to have it pointed out to you that you've missed him! Well—I suppose I'm making progress, but it seems blamed slow. Maybe by the time we're both gray-headed you'll decide you love me, and then a decade later we can rush into marriage.”

“You don't have to wait, you know, Bob! In fact, I've rather begged you not to. If you're so keen on getting married, there are plenty of girls—”

“Yeah—plenty of girls. I've met 'em, I've even loved a few of 'em—experimentally. But there's only one Sue Davenport, and it's my bad luck to want her and nobody else. Listen, sweet! Let's get my car and drive out to the house. I want to see how the work has gone while I've been East. I want to ask you where you want all the roses put I've ordered.”

“You've really bought that place then? I thought you were bluffing.”

“Telling the simple and unadorned truth is one of the neatest ways of fooling the public there is—ever know that? I've talked so much about buying that house that nobody believes me. They think the caretaker's in old Wilmington's employ.

“As a matter of fact,” he went on, striving to adapt his long strides to her shorter steps, “I bought it just when I told you I did—less than a month after I came here. I thought then you and I’d be married by Christmas time. It’s not my fault that we aren’t, Sue!”

“You won’t lose on it,” she said primly. “It’s a good investment. Property is going up out there.”

“Investment be hanged! I’m moving out there, sweet! With or without you. This spring.”

“You are!” The dark eyes came swiftly up, their lashes beaded with moisture beneath the thin scarlet brim of her hat.

“I am. I’ve always wanted a home.”

“But—surely you had one? In New York?”

“It wasn’t what I called a home,” he assured her. “It was a sort of cross between a museum, a baronial castle and an office building. And at that, I didn’t live in it very long at a time. School, and being sent to England to help them sell out the English branch, and establishing a few factories over here . . . it’s kept me on the jump.”

“Funny that you’d want to live here. I thought you Easterners despised the Middle West.”

“Not this one! I love this country. A fellow can breathe with all this land about him. I don’t care for the plains, but your hills are beautiful. And,” he added significantly, “even if it was the Sahara, there are other attractions.”

“It’s getting dark, Bob. We’d better turn back.”

“You won’t drive out to the house? It’s warm, you know—the lights are on. We can be back before dinner time.”

She was about to refuse when suddenly an acute distaste for the room she had left swept over her: the stale air, the faint disorderly look where all had been dainty order months before, Patsy’s vaguely hostile gaze meeting her own.

“If you’ll surely have me back before Allen comes!” she stipulated.

Her heart lightened as he drove swiftly to the city limits; on even beyond the clustered houses of the Country Club district. It was the first time she had really inspected the Ted Wilmington house. It had been an extravagant gesture on the part of a rich man’s son, an aviation enthusiast who had crashed less than a month before his intended marriage. The house was too

rambling and a trifle too isolated for the average purchaser, so Sue had taken it for granted it had not been sold.

“It’s a heavenly site for it, Bob,” she said as they entered the curving drive. “All these magnificent trees, and so high up . . . I believe you’ll be able to see the river on clear days!”

“That’s one of the reasons I bought it,” he said simply. “I remembered where I saw you first. I knew you’d want a glimpse of your beloved river. Wait till I unlock the door. There! Will you walk into your parlor, Sue? Or your hall, anyway?”

He touched a button by the door and the square entrance with its fireplace and its beautiful staircase, bloomed with soft light.

“It’s furnished!” she gasped. “I didn’t know Ted Wilmington had it all ready.”

“Pretty nearly. There were gaps here and there which I’ve been filling in. Not that I know anything about such things, but there’s a friend of mine in Kansas City who does. She’s been picking up odds and ends for me all winter. Like it, Sue? Here’s the livingroom. Runs the length of the house, d’you see? These long windows open onto a formal garden—that is, it’s going to be formal when it’s finished. And you can see the river from here, too!”

Hardly giving her time to take in the lovely room with its rugs like faintly gleaming jewels, its white marble fireplace, its deep, comfortable couches and big armchairs, he put a hand beneath her elbow and urged her along.

“Across the hall, you see, is a reception room. That’s so you won’t have to take strangers, or bores into the intimacy of the other one. And here’s the diningroom. Big enough to have all our friends to dine, eh? You love flowers so, Sue, that I got the architect to design this alcove affair. It can be shut off to be kept at the proper temperature or it can stand open—look!”

He flung open the wide doors with a flourish and the girl gasped. The glassed-in nook was already sweet with blossoming plants and even as she looked, a tiny fountain rose under the pressure of his finger on a concealed button.

“Pretty keen, Sue? About what you’d have fixed yourself, if you’d been consulted?”

“Bob, I never, never could have thought of such a lovely thing! It’s perfect! It’s a real winter garden, isn’t it, with gravel paths and flowers growing right out of the ground, and all! It’s magic, Bob!”

“The flowers are frauds in a way,” he chuckled. “I mean—growing so casually in the ground. They’re still in their pots, you know. Maybe they’d do all right if they were out, but I was taking no chances on having them at their best when you first saw them. Want to inspect the culinary regions?”

Her heart was beating a little fast as she nodded. It touched her, his careful thought for what would or would not please her. Who but Bob would remember how she loved the river, how great a part in her life flowers had always played?

“Oh, why can’t I just let myself go and marry him?” she asked herself despairingly. “I’ll be twenty-five next month, and I like him—I come nearer loving him than any man I’ve known in my life. I can’t go on much longer with Allen and Patsy. I want a home—and this is such a beautiful one! I want children. Bob’s everything that most girls dream of. Why can’t I get all thrilled and excited about him? Want him to kiss me—hold me in his arms? Maybe I’m not capable of feeling like that toward any man. Maybe I’m one of these fundamentally cold women you read about. If I could be sure of that—if I didn’t think there’d be danger of meeting the right man after I was married, I’d take a chance!”

“What are you thinking, standing there in the middle of the kitchen, and not hearing one word I say?” he demanded. “Is anything wrong, Sue? I mean—would you like any changes made? Make ’em in a minute, you know. You’ve only to say the word!”

“It’s perfect!” she repeated. “It’s only—I was only—wishing I cared enough for you to—to share it with you, Bob dear!”

His face fell like a grieved child’s. “And don’t you, Sue? Don’t you, my darling? I thought—it seems perfectly incomprehensible to me that I can love you so—so utterly, and you not feel as I do. Perhaps you’re not the passionately loving kind, Sue. Perhaps you love me now as much as you can. You said—you did say you’d missed me this last week!” He sounded very young and touching as he spoke; very far removed from the arrogant man who had light-heartedly proposed to her the first time they had danced together.

She looked at him with troubled eyes.

“Maybe I’m not a very loving person, Bob—that way! It’s because I don’t really know about myself that I’m afraid—afraid to marry you. What if I’m just—emotionally unawakened? What if—you’re not the right man? I love Allen so dearly, you know, that it makes me think—”

“Allen!” He swept the name aside superbly. “What a child you are, sweet, to compare that kind of love with marriage! And if you’re emotionally unawakened, I’ll take mighty good care that I’m the one to rouse you from your slumbers!” he concluded grimly. “Promise me, Sue, now—this minute! Promise you’ll marry me at once. You see—you’ll find that it will be all right. I’ll make you happier than any woman ever was. We’ll travel, we’ll do every delightful thing you ever dreamed of . . . and we’ll have this house, and the river, and your garden to come back to when we’re tired of racing about. Sue, little Sue, promise!”

Almost she yielded. He was very strong and masterful and appealingly male as he stood there, holding her hands in his. His thick hair was rumpled by the rapid drive, his eyes looked demandingly into her own.

She liked all the things she knew about him: his quick generosity, his boyish friendliness, his refusal, in spite of both those qualities, to allow himself to be taken advantage of. Allen had told her admiringly of Trenton’s business shrewdness. It pleased her to know that he was not the usual rich man’s son, careless of inherited money.

“Bob, I can’t,” she faltered at last. “I think I will, I open my lips to tell you so, and something inside me holds me back. Perhaps—perhaps I don’t know you well enough yet. You see, I’ve grown up with all the men I go about with; I know their background, their families. Maybe I feel a little strange with you at times.”

He dropped her hands, walked to the window and stood staring at the rain which was racing down the glass. The brief respite had ceased and the storm had returned.

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know about myself, Sue,” he said at last. “I’ve led about the usual sort of life, I suppose—usual to a fellow who’s had a bit too much money, and precious little family life. There are plenty of things I’d like to have blotted out; plenty I’m ashamed of; but after all, it’s something that I am ashamed, isn’t it? It means that I’ve outgrown any desire I’d had to—well, to be otherwise than a decent sort of guy, a—as good a husband and—and father as I can!”

“It isn’t that, Bob! Whatever you were before I knew you, belongs to you; it doesn’t concern me. I’ve always said I’d never require my husband to

unfold any chapter of his past. If it was unworthy of him, it would hurt me to hear about it. And most people grow by making mistakes, I think.”

“And what mistakes have you made, sweet Sue?” He turned to her, his novel expression of seriousness wiped from his face as though it had never been. “What hideous and world-shaking mistakes have you made, my darling?”

“That’s just it, Bob! I’ve made lots of them, but they haven’t been especially important. That’s why I’m so awfully young inside. That—and because Allen always shielded me; protected me.”

“Thank heaven he did! I’d loathe having a lacquered little sophisticated wife. If you—”

She interrupted him nervously. “Bob, it’s simply pouring again! And we’ll have to leave this minute if I’m to be home by the time Allen comes!”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

WITH the first days of spring, Patsy's lethargy left her. She began to shop day after day. Maggie, her mouth pursed disapprovingly, would take in dress boxes at the door; gather up the paper and string Mrs. Davenport scattered about when she opened her recent purchases.

Allen came in one afternoon to find the livingroom strewn with lingerie, with frocks dangling by their hangers from the central chandelier, with satin sandals and white sports shoes spilling out of their cardboard boxes.

"Whew!" he whistled. "What's all this? Been buying the stores out, Pats?"

She looked up from the silk robe she was trying on.

"Been getting myself something decent to wear! Do you realize, Allen, I haven't had a new rag to my name since we were married? It's nearly April, and time I was outfitting myself for summer."

He looked a little uneasy. "I suppose it's all right? I suppose we can afford all this? It seems a little—er—excessive to me, but no doubt everything gave out at once. You—you paid for everything, Pats?"

She looked honestly surprised. "Paid for them? Using what for money, lover?"

"Using your allowance for money!" It was the first time Sue had heard him speak sharply to his wife. "We settled all that at the time we were married. If you really haven't bought anything since then, you should have plenty in the bank—even for all this."

Patsy laughed. "You're funny, Allen! This is my whole spring outfit, don't you understand? I couldn't possibly pay for it with what I've saved. Besides," she went on easily. "I haven't saved to any conspicuous extent. There've been things I needed—perfume and powder and things—"

"I should think you could buy a good deal of powder and perfume on sixty-five dollars a month, Pats! That's your dress allowance. Do I understand that you've charged all this?"

"Why, yes! I have to have something to wear. I'm your wife, Allen; I have to do you credit."

He was collecting the carbon expense slips from the waste basket, from where they had fallen on the floor.

“Great guns! Here’s one for a hundred and forty-seven dollars and twenty-eight cents—at one fell swoop! And this—Pats! this must be a mistake: seven hats at one place, the total being sixty-five dollars! Will you tell me what you need of seven hats at one and the same time?”

Sue, her cheeks burning, slipped from the room, closing the door silently behind her. She had known that Patsy was on a spending spree; that she had lost her head, was buying right and left without regard to her needs or Allen’s income. She had remonstrated in vain. Pats had simply gone off without her and continued her mad career.

And there was far more to it than Allen knew. Certain boxes had been delivered to her sisters; suits, hats, absurdly sheer stockings, jewelry and scent even.

“If Allen can buy his sister a car, I guess I can get mine a few things!”

She repeated this to her husband a few days later when the monthly bills arrived, and he questioned her in astonishment.

“Oh, that was a spring coat I got for Marie,” she said composedly. “And, Letty, poor child, was almost barefooted. I outfitted her with shoes.”

“Your sisters have positions; they earn salaries of their own!”

“Which is more than yours does, Allen darling!”

“Pats, I’m sorry to seem ungenerous, but you must never do this again. It will take me all summer to clean up these bills. As a matter of fact, I’ll have to forego our vacation this year. Sorry, dear. I know you’d counted on that trip. But no traveling for us now!”

She cried out protestingly. “Allen Davenport! Not to go to Canada as we planned! But it was to be our wedding trip. We never even stayed away over night when we were married. You said you’d make it up to me this summer. You asked me whether I’d rather have a used car or a month in Canada, and I said Canada. You can’t go back on your word like this!”

“But, darling, figure it out for yourself! I have just so much money—you knew that. If it has to be used to pay for outfits for you and your sisters, it’s a dead sure thing it can’t be used to take us to Canada. You’ve been a business woman. You know that a dollar can’t be spent twice.”

Her reddened mouth closed with soft viciousness.

“Your dollars can’t! But there’s Sue’s. I think it’s time we had a showdown on Sue, Allen. Are we to support her the rest of her life—since she seems determined not to get married? She’s twenty-five, and she’s never earned a cent that’s been spent on her. I’m your wife and I have a right—”

Allen was very pale. “Just a minute, Pats! Sue’s earned her way, even if she never contributed part of her own income—which she has. For years she kept my house, ran the kitchen on a budget, left me free to concentrate on my work without giving a thought to domestic problems.”

“Which is more than I do? Well, I never pretended to be domestic, Allen. I warned you of that when we were married.”

“Why did you take the housekeeping out of Sue’s hands then? Our grocery bills are frightful; and at that, we don’t seem to have very good meals.” He pulled himself up abruptly. “Pats dear, we’re actually quarrelling! I’m sorry. Kiss your husband, and tell him you’ll stay within your allowance after this.”

She kissed him amiably enough but she made no promise; and the next month brought a fresh shower of bills. This time Allen reproached her in no uncertain terms.

“I’m not going to have you charging things, Pats! I increased your allowance last month—though you’d said you had laid in your whole season’s outfit; and yet here is a perfect sheaf of bills. It would hurt the firm if I got behind with my payments. Even if I could square it with my conscience—with my sense of the fitness of things—to let you squander money like this, I couldn’t let people think business was so bad for Monroe, Davenport and Long that one of the firm couldn’t pay cash for his wife’s clothes. Unless you give me your word—and keep it! that you’ll not charge another thing, I shall be compelled to go around to the various shops and explain that I will not be responsible for what you buy.”

“Allen Davenport, you wouldn’t think of it!”

He gave her glance for glance, and her eyes drooped beneath his steady gaze.

“I would—I will, if you make it necessary for me, Pats!”

She shrugged, and the subject dropped. There were no more bills charged at the store, and for a time life flowed along smoothly for Allen. Then a new order of things set in.

“Sue, honey, you won’t mind sleeping on the couch for a night or two, will you?” Patsy said coaxingly one evening at the dinner table. “There’s a friend of mine coming from Chicago and there isn’t a place in the house for her.”

“Take her in with you, Pats,” Allen said quickly. “I’ll sleep on the couch. I don’t mind a bit, and it’s asking a lot of Sue to leave her own room.”

His sister told him affectionately that she was glad enough to do it, and the matter seemed to end there. Grace Griffith, a plump woman somewhat older than Pats, arrived that night and took calm possession of Sue’s room. Two nights passed, a third, a fourth, and Grace made no suggestion of terminating her visit. Sue was obliged to sit up until all hours, since Patsy had people in to meet her friend. She dressed in the bathroom, sighed at the litter of spilled powder, smeared lipstick and rolls of blond hair on her dressingtable. She was taking advantage of the guest’s absence late one afternoon to tidy her possessions when her brother came in.

“Where’s Pats?”

Sue looked up from the fresh cover she was putting on her table.

“Taking Grace for a drive.”

“Your car?”

She nodded. “I was glad to let her have it, Allen, truly I was.”

“Even after crumpling both fenders the other day?”

Sue sighed a little. The car was a constant source of friction in the little family. Patsy drove very badly, but was bitterly resentful of the slightest criticism. Sue was proud of her little car and hated to have its beauty marred. But she had learned that anything was better than to be the cause of a quarrel between her brother and his wife.

“Pats say anything about Grace leaving soon?”

“Not a word. I think she’ll stay another week anyhow. I know they plan to go to Barbara’s lunch and that’s not until next Thursday.”

He began to pace the small room, his head bent, his hands in his pockets.

“Sue, this is terribly hard on you. Not just having Grace keep you out of your room, I mean: everything—the whole arrangement. Would it help if we took a larger apartment—a house?”

She folded her hands on the edge of the table, looked down at them to hide gathering tears. Allen, her adored brother, was unhappy. In less than six months after his marriage he was tacitly admitting it was a mistake.

“I think—” she said when she was sure of her voice—“that the only thing that will—help at all, Buddy, is for me—to live by myself. All—all the things that upset you are done—done to make you see I’m in the way. Even the bills last March; Pats didn’t really want those clothes—not enough to make you angry about them, at any rate. She wanted you to see that there isn’t enough—enough of anything, Allen dear, for her and me both: enough money, enough room, enough . . . love.”

Two months, even two weeks ago, he would have denied this; sharply and with resentment. It made her young heart sick for him that he nodded quietly now.

“She’s jealous of you, Sis. Has been from the first, I think. Because you’re . . . because you have qualities and advantages she hasn’t; she’ll never have. Sue, what is to be done?” he finished hopelessly.

## CHAPTER NINE

ON an evening in late June, Bob Trenton, about to descend from his car across the street from where the young Davenports lived, was astonished to see Sue come out, suitcase in hand, and move toward a taxicab which stood in front of the entrance. Bob was just in time to halt the driver as his car began to move.

“Hi!” the young man yelled breathlessly. And to Sue: “What on earth? Have you forgotten you have a date for me this evening?”

Sue, he noticed, was white and troubled.

“I did forget, Bob. I’m terribly sorry.”

“Going out of town?”

She shook her head, sending a warning glance at the patently listening driver.

“Then hop out and I’ll take you where you want to go.” He paid the interested man, tipping him liberally; helped Sue out and swung her suitcase after her. Not until they were moving smoothly down the street in his own car, did he speak.

“Where were you going, sweet? To a hotel?”

She opened her lips to answer him, but her chin quivered and she took out her handkerchief and put it quickly to her eyes.

“Don’t, my darling,” he said huskily. “And don’t think you have to explain. The situation got too much for you at home, didn’t it? Patsy went a little too far this time and you thought it best to get out.”

“How—how do you know, Bob?”

“How do I know anything about you, Sue? I do—that’s all. And it doesn’t take much of a detective to know that Pats has been determined to get you out of the place since the actual day Allen brought her home. I suppose she put the poor old lad on the spot today? Tried to force him to choose between his wife and his sister—that sort of thing?”

She nodded, still mopping at wet eyes.

“And you took matters in your hands and left without forcing a decision upon your brother? You would, of course. What puzzles me is that Allen actually let you go!”

“He didn’t know,” she said in a strangled voice. “I slipped out while he and Patsy were still arguing about it. I couldn’t endure another word. I couldn’t, Bob!”

“Of course you couldn’t. The marvel is you’ve endured it so long. No other girl would, you may be sure of that. But what now, sweet?”

She struggled for a return to composure. “The hotel at present; after that, a little apartment somewhere, I suppose. Maggie will come with me, of course—luckily she was in her room tonight and didn’t hear the row.”

Bob had headed his car away from town and now they were bowling along the boulevard which led to the Lovers’ Lane of Eugene Field fame. As they turned into the “leafy aisles where Cupid smiles”, he said: “Sue, I don’t want to take advantage of the situation, but—aren’t you ever going to marry me? You do care for me, you know—a little, anyway!”

She smiled at him, laid a small cold hand over his on the wheel.

“More than a little, Bob dear! A great deal, in fact. But not enough—enough to—”

“To marry me? But if I think it is enough, Sue—if I’m willing to take any risk you may think there is. . . . Sue, I’ve waited a long time now. Long enough, at any rate, for you to discount your idea that it was a sentimental impulse with me, that it wouldn’t last. Long enough, too, to get ahead of any other men you might—might have cared for. Won’t you marry me, sweet, and come to the home that’s all ready for you?”

“It’s a temptation, Bob,” she admitted. “I feel so terribly forlorn tonight, so homeless.” The tears started again and she wiped them away patiently. “But that’s really why I mustn’t decide—tonight, at least. It would be the circumstances which influenced me, not—not my feeling toward you.”

He was silent so long that she presently stole a glance at him. He looked almost grim, for Bob, stern and a little angry, she thought, with something like fright in her bewildered thoughts. Was she going to lose Bob, too? Was he going to force a choice on her tonight—as Patsy had done? She gripped her hands tightly in her lap.

But at last he turned and smiled at her, the gay understanding smile he kept just for her.

“It’s all right, dear. Of course you mustn’t decide tonight. We’ll drive a bit and then I’ll take you to the hotel, and tomorrow or the next day—whenever you feel up to it—we’ll talk about the future.”

The exquisite relief of it told her how great had been the crisis. That momentary glimpse of a life without this kindest and closest of friends unconsciously pleaded Bob’s cause far more than any words of his could have done.

He went on: “Have you had any dinner, Sue? I’ll bet you haven’t! Patsy is just the sort of woman to start something before a meal. Poor old Allen! I’ll bet he’s rueing the day he ever met her. Maybe,” he said cheerfully, “this will bust up their marriage.”

“Oh, no! It was to prevent that I came away tonight. Maybe without me—without everything I do or say getting on Patsy’s nerves, she’ll be nicer to Allen. That’s all they ever quarrel over; my car, and where I go and how I spend my money . . . Oh!” She gave him a remorseful look. “I didn’t mean to tell you that, Bob, truly I didn’t. Please forget it, will you?”

He replied comfortably: “If you say so; but of course I knew all that months ago. Pats isn’t exactly reticent as to what she considers her wrongs. By the way, where is your car, that you were calling a taxi?”

She colored and shook her head. “I’d rather not tell you, Bob. It’s all part—part of the unpleasantness tonight. Where are we going? We’re getting pretty far out from town. I don’t want to have to register at the hotel too late.”

“Have you back before ten,” he promised. “Just now I’m going to feed you. Be a good child and ask no questions.”

It was restful to lean back in the seat and leave the next hour or two to him. The cool air fanned her tear-stained face, and she had a delicious sense of being taken care of. When presently they halted in front of a farmhouse set back from the highway, she alighted from the car with no more than a questioning smile at him.

“Grand place I found to eat. It’s probably too late for the regular dinner, but we can get sandwiches and milk, or something.” To the plump woman who sat in a railed enclosure, he explained: “Here are two starving pilgrims, Mrs. Steiner. Think you could find us something to save our young lives?”

She returned his smile.

“Sure, sure, Mr. Trenton. Plenty in the kitchen. Just you wait!”

And in an incredibly short time, a generous meal was set before them: fried chicken still warm, rolls which were none the worse for a second heating, lettuce from the garden in back of the house; and to finish, homegrown strawberries with thick yellow cream.

Sue was surprised to find herself eating with appetite. A great sense of peace had succeeded the anger, despair and desolation which had shaken her, one emotion after another, since five o'clock. It was all decided in her mind. She had struggled long enough against Bob's love. She was twenty-five years old, she had known more men than the average girl in her position, and she had cared for none of them as much as she cared for Bob Trenton. To be sure, the kind of love she had waited for, the burning ecstasy, the mad, sad, sweet possession of her senses that the poets sang of had never touched her.

"But perhaps it never will," she mused, finishing the last drops of her iced tea. "Evidently I'm not the sort of woman to love . . . like that. Or maybe it will come after marriage. I've heard it does sometimes."

"What are you thinking of, with your dear little face all scowled up like that?"

"Thinking that I'm awfully fond of you, Bob! Thinking that if you'll wait until tomorrow . . . but we'll not talk of it now. Do you know you've hardly touched this delicious dinner?"

He grinned. "Are you just noticing the fact? At that, I think I've made a pretty good bluff at eating two dinners in one evening."

"Oh! Oh, yes, of course! How stupid of me. I'd lost track of things, with all that's happened since—since Allen came home." She laid down her napkin and looked sober. "Poor old Buddy! I feel as though I'd deserted him. But it was the only thing to do." She started up. "I must telephone him, though! I intended to the minute I reached the hotel. He might miss me, and get an awful scare."

The telephone was of the rural variety, and it took some struggles with the crank to get Allen's number. Sue had to tiptoe up to speak into the mouthpiece.

"It's Sue, dear," she said at last. "I just want to tell you I'm all right—you're not to worry about me!"

"Had he discovered you'd gone?" Bob asked when, the brief conversation concluded, they were once more back in his car and headed toward the city.

“No, luckily enough. I think he’d been out. His voice sounded sort of dull and tired. He—he didn’t say a word about my staying at a hotel for tonight. That shows that things are desperate with him, don’t you think?”

“Sue, I’ve been turning this matter over in my mind. You can’t register at either the Robidoux or the St. Francis without being recognized. There’d be talk; everybody would know you’d quarrelled with Patsy, left on an impulse. Why don’t you go to Barbara Webb for the night? Then you could rent a furnished apartment for a week or so—until you make up your mind what you want to do—”

The long June evening was drawing to a close. Dusk had fallen on the countryside. There was a good smell of sun-warmed grass, of blossoming locust and linden trees. A few fireflies were darting across the fields. Sue laid her hand on his arm.

“Pull in at the side road, Bob dear, and we’ll talk,” she said.

An hour later, a somewhat disheveled young lady and a radiant young man climbed the flight of steps which led to the Webb home, and paused before ringing the bell. Through the screen door they could see the daughter of the house, drowsing over a book in the livingroom beyond.

“Babs!” Sue called softly. “Will you give sanctuary and shelter to a bride of tomorrow?”

At five o’clock the next afternoon, Sue Davenport, in the presence of the excited Webbs, and with her brother, very pale and oddly silent, to give her away, was married to Robert Trenton, and after as elaborate a wedding dinner as Mrs. Webb could have prepared at such short notice, the newlyweds departed in Bob’s car for the honeymoon.

## CHAPTER TEN

SUE TRENTON, settled for a month in her new home, had only amused scorn for the misgivings of Sue Davenport.

“Wasn’t I a little fool to be so long making up my mind?” she demanded of her husband one evening.

They were in the garden, the late August evening cool enough to make the gorgeous Spanish silk shawl which was one of Bob’s gifts a pleasant necessity. He had just finished wrapping it about her, and stooped for his reward.

“I love to have you kiss me, Bob!”

The faint surprise in her voice had made him shout with laughter. She had answered it with her own rueful comment on herself.

“You were!” he assured her promptly. “And I suppose I’ll never know whether you’d have taken me at last if it hadn’t been for Patsy. Poor old Allen! His loss has been my gain. If she hadn’t forced his hand that last night, you’d probably be living with them yet—holding me at arms’ length.” He let himself down on the glider where she sat, and drew her close to him. “Happy, sweet Sue?”

“Happier than I ever knew I could be,” she assured him. “I sort of hated to give up our trip and come home; but now we’re here, I wonder why we didn’t come sooner. I love keeping house.”

“You do it darned well!”

“Oh, well! With four servants, and money enough for anything I want! Anybody could do that. Which reminds me, Bob. We ought to begin to think of entertaining. Dinner parties—a couple of luncheons for the women who’ve been throwing parties for us.”

“Let’s not!” he said promptly. “Not for a while yet, anyhow. It’s so grand having you to myself like this—when I do have you to myself! Seems to me we’ve had to spend a lot of time away from home since we got back. Gosh, sweet, you don’t know what it means to me—knowing that at the end of a long hot day I can whiz out here in less than half an hour, and find you waiting for me, cool and sweet and mine! I can’t get used to it! They were guying me about it at the office today. Seems I go off into a sort of trance

every now and then, just thinking about my wife and my home and my garden.” He stopped abruptly, laughed a little. “Sentimental kind of cuss, eh, Sue? Maybe it’s because I never had a real home before. Sure you’re happy, sweet? Sure there’s nothing you’d like to change—enlarge?”

“Not a thing. It’s perfect as it is.” She spoke dreamily. Her head was against his shoulder, both her hands were in one of his. “I haven’t a cloud in my sky, Bob dear. Or, yes—perhaps a tiny one.”

“Allen?”

“Allen. It seems so unfair that I should have so much and he so little.”

“If you ask me, he’s the one who has too much. Patsy would be more than a sufficiency to anybody,” he remarked dryly.

“I mean—so little happiness. He comes out here, you know—usually just before you get home. He never stays; just says he wants to see for himself how happy I am.”

“Patsy never comes?”

“Never. I’ve not seen her since—that last night.”

“She’ll divorce him one of these days,” he predicted cheerfully. “She married him for what she could get out of him, and it hasn’t proved to be as much as she counted on. Don’t worry about him, sweet. By this time next year he’ll be free; married to Barbara, maybe.”

There was a little silence and then Sue said, a pained note in her voice:

“I’d hate to believe that, Bob!”

“But why?” He was honestly surprised. “You don’t want the poor guy tied to her for life, do you? There might be children some day, and then he’d hate the idea of losing them. Allen’s brimful of paternal instinct.”

“He is tied to her, whether he likes it or not; whether there are children or not, Bob.”

“Oh, come now! You don’t believe that—not in this day and age. An unhappy marriage is like a bad promise: better broken than kept.”

“But it needn’t be unhappy—always, Bob. I mean—bad marriages can be made into good ones, if people just try hard enough. I mean—in most cases. Of course if a man is unfaithful—deliberately and repeatedly unfaithful—or a wife is not fit to bring up any children there might be . . .

but even then there ought to be years and years of effort before they admit failure.”

“You surprise me, Sue! Repeated infidelity! D’you mean me to understand that you—that any woman could forgive infidelity in her husband?”

“I didn’t say ‘forgive’ it, Bob,” she answered thoughtfully. “I don’t know whether she could or not. I suppose it would depend on many things: herself, him, the other woman, the circumstances. But forgiving it is beside the point.

“It’s—it’s like any other contract, it seems to me,” she went on slowly, thinking it out as she talked. “If you enter into a partnership you agree to certain things. It may turn out that you don’t like the relationship as much as you expected to, or even your partner, for that matter; but that doesn’t release you from your agreement—at least until the time is up. And the time never is up in marriage—not till death do you part, anyhow.”

“Great Scott! I didn’t know I’d married such a little Puritan! There are mighty few people who feel like that, Sue,” he went on gravely. “It surprises me that you do. Why, lots of your friends have been divorced—remarried, even. How does it happen that you—”

“Our parents, I suppose; Allen’s and mine. I was only twelve when Mother died but even then I remember her saying that marriage took a lot of bearing and forebearing to make it a success. And Dad . . . he was ill a long time, you know. He—talked to us. He told us that no two people had ever been more in love than he and Mother were when they were married but they’d had their stormy times, too. He impressed it on us that a successful marriage has to be built up patiently, a day at a time.”

“Sweet, this is queer talk for—us!”

She went on as if he had not spoken.

“And those people you mentioned just now, Bob—those friends of mine who made a failure of their first marriage and hurried into a second. I’ve watched them. They don’t seem to me to be making a conspicuous success of the next one, either. I suppose if you’re a quitter once you will be again—always, in fact.

“D’you know, I’m awfully glad we had this talk? It’s clarified something for me.”

He laughed a little uneasily. “Your thoughts about our marriage, Sue? Your determination to make the best of it?”

But she was too much in earnest to share his mood.

“About Patsy—Patsy and Allen. I’m going to do my best to help Patsy succeed in her marriage, Bob! Allen—I can count on Allen. I’m going to have Pats out here, give her as happy a time as I can, encourage her to make the best sort of wife to Allen—that sort of thing!”

His arms tightened about her. “Who but my wife could be so forgiving to the girl that practically turned her out of her own home? If you want my honest opinion, it won’t do the slightest good. Pats is a gold-digger if I ever saw one. But I’ll back you up in whatever you try to do, sweet Sue!”

She pulled his face down to hers, rubbing her soft cheek affectionately against his.

“That’s what keeps my heart singing all day long,” she informed him. “Knowing that whatever I do, whatever silly mistakes I’ll make—and I’m bound to make some, Bob!—you’ll be there always, backing me up in what I try to do!”

Patsy responded with alacrity to the overtures of her young sister-in-law. She was enthusiastic over the house, inclined to presume on its generous hospitality. But Sue gave no signs of resenting her frequent calls. Patsy was asked to many of the charming luncheons the bride gave in the fall, Patsy and Allen were guests at the nicest of the dinner parties.

“Look here, Sue, you don’t have to do this, you know,” Allen urged. “Ask us every time you entertain, I mean. It’s—it’s mighty forgiving of you to ask us at all, considering—well, considering all things! Patsy, of course, is thrilled to death every time she comes here; quotes you, tries to fix her table like yours—that sort of thing!”

If Sue remembered how the older girl had scorned those same ideas and decorations when they were put forth in her brother’s home, she gave no sign.

“I’m glad, Allen,” she replied simply, and she was glad. She thought that Allen was looking better, less careworn these days. She seized every opportunity to talk to Patsy as though his happiness were paramount in his wife’s mind as Bob’s was in her own.

Pats was apt to listen with rather a fixed smile.

“Oh, come now, Sue,” she drawled one day when she and Barbara Webb were the only guests. “You must admit that a man who gives you what Bob does deserves more from a woman than—well, Allen, does, for example. Look at this room—” they had finished luncheon and were back in the big livingroom which ran the length of the house. “There’s not a prettier place in town than this is. And it’s not just what Ted Wilmington chose, either. You told me yourself that most of the furniture—the pieces that give it an air, the most expensive pieces—Bob picked out himself. When a man lavishes hand-carved Italian chairs on his wife, and tapestry worth several thousand dollars a foot, he’ll never lack for the right kind of appreciation.”

Allen’s sister flushed resentfully. “It happens that Bob is a comparatively rich man and can afford such things. Allen can’t. You know nothing would give him more pleasure than to buy you anything you want if he could, Patsy! And surely a wife doesn’t measure her love for her husband by his income. I hate to have you even imply such a thing.”

Patsy ran an appreciative hand over the brocade of her chair.

“The income helps, my dear! I could condone a lot of faults in a man who gave me a house like this.”

Sue did not answer. It was Barbara who said hotly: “Allen’s a million times too good for you, Pats! And you have exactly the home that Sue came from, you know. I guess if it was good enough for her, it ought to satisfy you!”

The long gray eyes narrowed maliciously. “It would satisfy you, Babs dear; is that what I’m expected to understand? Too bad Allen had the bad taste to fall in love with a mere secretary instead of the socially prominent Miss Webb! Sorry, Sue. It’s just my plebian bad manners.”

Sue said tactfully: “Barbara and Forest and Allen and I all grew up together, you know. Naturally she wants Allen to be happy. How is Marie?” She changed the subject decisively. “I’ve not seen her for a long time.”

“There’s an easy enough way to remedy that!” But immediately her tone became more conciliatory. It was no part of her plan to offend young Mrs. Trenton. Sue, from a liability, had become an asset. If the withdrawal of her share of the housekeeping expenses had left a larger gap than Patsy liked to think of, Sue’s evident desire to be friendly with her brother’s wife was not to be under-rated. There were gifts in Sue’s power now: gifts of new gowns, expensive perfumes, even of a car if she chose to buy one for her brother.

Not just yet, of course, she reflected; not while Sue could hardly escape the recollection of that June day when Patsy had taken out the girl's coupe without her knowledge and practically wrecked it. One must give her time to forget that incident, and the quarrel that had followed.

So now she hastened to erase the impression of her acid little speech about Marie.

"As a matter of fact, Marie has a new man in tow. Don't ask me who he is for I don't know myself! I only know," she went on shrewdly, "that she's forever borrowing my best clothes without asking me. It's a nuisance, too. I'm taller than Marie and the little rascal actually had the nerve to shorten a dress of mine last week. She explained it was a dire emergency and she simply had to rifle my wardrobe." She added with a careless air: "Allen will have to buy me another, that's all. He says he can't afford it because his insurance comes due this month. But I tell him he can hardly expect me to go in rags because of that!"

There was an embarrassed little silence. Sue's cheeks burned; not because of the broadness of the hint but because Barbara had heard it.

"We'll go shopping soon, Patsy, and see what can be done about the gaps in your wardrobe," she promised.

After Patsy had departed, Barbara reproached her friend.

"That means, I suppose, that you'll take her downtown and outfit her completely! Sue, why do you let yourself be imposed on like that?"

"Oh, I shan't buy her much. Allen would be hurt if I did. An evening gown to take the place of the one Marie appropriated, and maybe something smart for afternoons."

"Well—" Barbara shrugged—"considering the way she treated you while you lived with Allen, I do think you're an angel to her."

Sue yielded to an impulse to confide in this sympathetic listener.

"I don't like her a bit better than I did, Babs! In fact, there are times when it takes all the self-control I have merely to endure her selfishness, her greed; but I can always stop myself from saying horrid things to her by remembering that Allen's happiness is in her hands. If I can make something of her in the end, it is Allen who will benefit."

Babs murmured something about a silk purse. Her young hostess, secretly convinced that her task was futile but stubbornly determined to keep at it, sighed and changed the subject.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE first winter of her marriage passed rapidly and pleasantly for Sue Trenton. If the passionate love she had hoped to feel for Bob as his wife did not develop, a very real and warm affection did.

It was impossible not to be fond of a person who was as generous, as light-hearted, as concerned with the happiness of others as was Bob, she thought contentedly. Believing herself to be fundamentally cold, she urged herself to the greatest possible response to his caresses, to a wifely care for his comfort, an interest in his business affairs which deceived Bob utterly. Again and again he reminded her triumphantly of her earlier fears.

“You see, you did fall in love with me after all!” His wide smile disclosed his big white teeth. “I believe you were just fooling me all along, you little fraud! Tantalizing me, weren’t you—just to increase my idiotic madness over you? Well, you succeeded! I’m the world’s most besotted husband.”

She would smile at this, and return his deep kisses with a warmth she did her best to feel. It was a small price she paid for the happiness of her life. She loved her big, beautiful house. She was youthfully proud of her dignity and importance as the wife of one of the town’s richest men. It was fun to be able to dash down to Kansas City for a new evening coat, if she could not find anything in the shops at home to please her.

She had always been interested in helping those less fortunate than she was, and now she could buy season concert tickets for impoverished young musicians, send flowers lavishly to the frail old ladies who hungered for them, slip a hundred dollar bill into a plain envelop and mail it anonymously to a young mother just out of the hospital and worrying about how the bills were to be paid.

Bob aided and abetted her in these pleasant charities. He turned a generous sum over to her every month for the purpose. It was Sue, as a matter of fact, who imposed a definite limit on their expenditures.

“We mustn’t overdo it, dear. It’s as bad to err one way as another. Besides, in these precarious days who knows what might happen? The business might fail—”

“Not it!” was the careless answer. “I’ve got sense enough to stick to the policy which built it up in the first place. That’s the reason that most rich men’s sons fail, I think, Sue; they get swelled heads, think their dads were too conservative, and begin to splurge; and first thing they know they’re bankrupt. Not I! I figure Dad was a good psychologist to appraise the needs of the average man and woman when it comes to footwear; and I’m going right along as he started the *Treadons*.”

“The stock-holders would like me to move East to live,” he continued thoughtfully. “I suppose we shall have to—sometime. But not yet, Sue! I love this town, I’m crazy about the house. I’m always afraid somebody else will like our location so well that a building boom will start up out here. Never mind, they can’t come very close to us, I’ve seen to that. We own enough land all around us to keep our precious isolation.”

Maggie had taken it for granted that she was to live with the young Trentons. Sue, however, had been unwilling for Allen to be left to Patsy’s bad management, the mercies of an untrained servant. It had required much coaxing to induce the old woman to stay on in the apartment; and every so often on her day off she came to see her beloved Miss Sue, grumbling and complaining with the privilege of one who considered herself part of the family.

“Pretty goings on these days,” she announced darkly on one of these visits. “I bet Mr. Allen don’t know about the drinkin’ an’ smokin’ that we have most every afternoon. I been waitin’ for the first time Mrs. Allen asks me to fix up them little drinks she calls cocktails. I’d right quick tell her I ain’t nobody’s bar-tender! But if she don’t do ’em herself, the men do. All she asks of me is to put the glasses on a tray and get out the ice-cubes.”

“Never mind, Mag dear,” Sue said coaxingly. “Lots of people serve cocktails now instead of tea. Mrs. Allen is just keeping up with the rest.”

Maggie looked over the rims of her spectacles.

“Whyn’t she ever have any ladies in to help drink ’em, then? It’s men—two or three men every afternoon she’s home. Your father would turn in his grave if he knew it.”

“Better three men than one, Mag dear. Safety in numbers, you know.”

But these talks invariably left Sue with a sense of unease about her brother. He was working too hard, she knew, making more money for Pats to spend on foolish clothes, and the occasional elaborate dinner party she gave; and now on liquor, it seemed—unless her guests furnished their own drinks.

Allen was nobody's fool. He must know almost to the last detail what was going on. Sue knew his long patience; knew too that when it was finally exhausted Allen would be through. He never threatened nor made a scene; but when the moment came that he could stand no more, it would be physically impossible for him to continue in the role of indulgent husband.

Toward spring, Sue determined to try stern remonstrance with her sister-in-law. If the privileges of the Trenton hospitality were withdrawn from the luxury-loving Pats, she might reform for selfish reasons when an appeal to her duty toward her husband left her cold.

"Come out and spend the day with me, Patsy," she telephoned one morning. "That is, unless you're all dated up. I thought last night I might have a cold coming on. I think I've headed it off, but Bob wanted me to stay in all day."

"I had a halfway engagement—" Pats hesitated. "But I'll break it, of course. Glad to do anything I can for you, Sue. I know it must be deadly dull so far out from town!"

Sue smiled but let the challenge pass unnoticed. "I'll send the car in for you then, and telephone Bob to bring Allen out to dinner."

"Let's go up into my own sitting room," she proposed, after she had greeted her caller. She knew Pats would like that. It was not everyone who was allowed in what Sue called her private retreat. It was a sunny room adjoining her bedroom, filled with flowering plants and just now especially inviting with a small fire of applewood snapping on the old brass andirons. Bob was forever discovering some attractive addition to its furnishings. Today Sue had a new Dresden group to show, the arch expression of the small lady ridiculously evident on the tiny face.

"Isn't she darling? And don't you love the man's air of conceited protectiveness? As if without him she couldn't exist a single hour? Bob's agent in New York got it at an auction. It came yesterday, packed as carefully as if it were blown eggshells."

"How much longer is the honeymoon going to last?" Pats inquired disagreeably. "Bob Trenton spoils you to death, Sue. Wait till the kids begin to come, and he'll change all that."

"I wish they would come!" Sue sighed a little. "Twenty-six next time, and my bad little boys and girls obstinately refuse to send out announcement cards."

“All very well for you, my dear! You won’t have to get up nights with them, or fix their bottles, and change their horrid smelly clothes. You’ll have a smart English nurse, and the babies will be brought down to show callers, and that’s all motherhood will mean to you!”

The bitterness in her tone caused Sue to glance at her quickly.

“Yes, it’s true! I thought Allen would have told you by now. When you telephoned this morning I thought you wanted to lecture me about taking better care of myself. Heaven knows that’s the burden of Allen’s song these days!”

“Why, Patsy! Why, my blessed child! I hadn’t an idea. I’m so glad! A baby of your own. When, Pats, when?”

“In September. And if you’re glad, let me tell you I’m not! I could die every time I remember what a fool I was for telling Allen! If I hadn’t, it would all be over with by this time, and he’d never have known a thing about it. There’s a place in Kansas City—”

“Pats, you wouldn’t!”

“Wouldn’t I? In a minute, I assure you. I know what having kids around is like—you don’t. There was one younger even than Marie. I haven’t forgotten the way she howled with colic, the mess the house was in with her wet clothes everywhere, the time my mother had finding the right formula for her—it was one long nightmare. I was in High School, and Mom would hand her over to me the minute I got home. Ugh!” She shuddered unaffectedly.

“What became of her?”

“Died,” Pats said briefly. “And that was bad, too. Mom never seemed to get over it. She sort of moped around for another year and then the girls and I were on our own in good earnest.”

“But, Pats, it needn’t be like that! I mean babies don’t have to be sick, and cross, there is no real reason why their laundry shouldn’t be kept out of sight. Oh, honey, think of a little Allen, or a little Patricia! If it’s just the work you’re afraid of, Bob and I—I’m sure Allen would let us provide a good nurse. Oh, I do envy you!”

The long eyes narrowed in the way Sue hated.

“I assure you I’d change places with you with all the pleasure in life! Just when I’m beginning to get somewhere socially in this town, just when Allen is making enough money for me to entertain once in a coon’s age,

then this had to happen! And I feel like the devil, Sue! Limp as a wet string when I'm not actually down sick."

Sue thought dryly that there had been little evidence of ill health in her brother's wife. Patsy had whisked about with almost feverish gayety since Christmas. On the strength of her connection with the Trentons, she had managed to get herself included in most of the smarter parties which had been given. Allen had had to be out of town a good deal lately but that had not curbed his wife's activities.

"Well, say it!" Sue was not conscious that she had been sitting staring into space until the other girl snapped out the advice. "Go on and tell me that the touch of little hands will draw Allen and me together; that our new responsibilities will cement a stronger bond between us. You know, that's what you're thinking, Sue!"

"Hoping," Sue corrected, smilingly. "I think you do yourself an injustice, my dear. It simply isn't possible for you to be so indifferent to this important event as you would have me think. What does Allen say? Isn't he almost out of his mind with joy?"

"He's sending me almost out of mine with his everlasting fussing—I know that! The latest is that I'm to give up cigarettes and cocktails. He had a talk with Dr. Van Ness last week and the old tyrant laid down the law. As if I'd pay any attention to what either of them say!" She lighted her third cigarette since her arrival. "Gosh!" she exclaimed, inhaling the smoke greedily and letting it go on a long, reluctant breath. "It's all that makes life bearable to me now; that and my friends."

"What friends, Patsy?" Sue asked pleasantly.

"My friends, Sue dear, and none of your business," she replied quite as pleasantly.

The younger woman took refuge in a disapproving silence. She had learned by experience that Patsy could stand any amount of verbal reproach better than she could endure no speech at all. She presently burst out:

"I've got to have some distraction, Sue! Allen away all day, out of town three days in the week . . . I'd go raving mad if people didn't drop in every afternoon for—tea."

Still Sue said nothing. She realized perfectly Patsy was glibly ready with her defense of the last word.

“Aren’t you human at all, Sue? You used to be prim enough before you were married but you’re worse now, if possible. Bob’s no angel, let me tell you! I mean—” she added quickly as Sue’s dark eyes flashed—“you can be mighty certain he hasn’t been always! A man as stunning looking as he is, and with all the money he has . . . I’ll bet he could make us all sit up and take notice if he wanted to write his memoirs. I suppose he got it all out of his system early in life. It’s hard to account for his settling down so early otherwise.”

“You make us sound very stodgy and Darby-and-Joanish, Pats!” Sue tried for a lighter note. “We’re not really; we’re as giddy a pair of young married people as you’d find anywhere. We dance until a scandalously late hour, we leave the business to worry along without us while we go to Chicago for a week, we live far too extravagantly—”

Patsy rose and flung out her arms resentfully. “Don’t!” she said sharply. “Don’t tantalize me by describing the sort of life I’d like to live—the sort of life I thought I was going to live,” she went on with a sullen note in her voice. “Allen Davenport, the youngest member of the firm, the son of one of the town’s most distinguished judges. Why, I used to hear him called ‘the debutante’s delight’, over and over again. Everybody knew Babs Webb was crazy about him! She used to telephone him at the office . . . I took the calls, made excuses for him. I’d see his name in the papers—

“Deacon Davenport! I might as well have married a deacon and been done with it,” she finished wearily.

“That’s not fair, Pats! Allen’s always been the nicest playfellow in the world. It’s only because you go to extremes in everything, overdo the social end of life—” She pulled herself up sharply. Nothing was to be gained by antagonizing Allen’s wife, she reminded herself for the thousandth time. “A nice hostess I am! Inviting you out here and then rowing with you. Let’s talk of pleasanter things, honey. Personally I can’t get your grand news out of my mind. Aunt Sue—I’ll be Aunt Sue! What fun! Pats, will you let me buy the layette?”

“And some new clothes for me, and some stunning negligees to wear in the hospital, and a new permanent in June,” was the prompt reply. “Well, I’m glad you and Allen are pleased, anyway. Goodness knows I’m not!”

Later in the day, she reminded Sue again of her offer to provide a nurse.

“I want a really smart one, with one of those English uniforms. I’ll teach the kid to call her ‘Nanny’, and me ‘Mummy’. If I’ve got to go through with it, I’ll have the affair as smart as possible. And,” she finished triumphantly,

“there’s one real gain, anyhow. Allen at last consents to look for a house. He says the baby must have a backyard to play in.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“SOME one to see you, Mrs. Trenton!”

Milly, the maid, presented a small silver salver and Sue turned from her garden labors to examine the card upon it.

### MRS. MEADE TRENTON

“Trenton! Why, this must be a relative of Bob’s!” she thought, pleased. “Perhaps the wife of one of those cousins he’s told me of. Sam,” she said aloud to her gardener, “you finish setting those asters out and then weed as much of the hardy border as you can. We’ll let the rest of the transplanting go until tomorrow.”

She glanced down at her morning frock as she walked rapidly to the house. It was of old-fashioned flowered dimity, made with quaint puffed sleeves and a round neck. Bob had told her she looked like a Kate Greenaway little girl in it.

In the formal reception room a woman rose to meet her. She was charming to look at, Sue decided in that first glance: tall, slender, with masses of fair hair dressed low in her neck, and large blue eyes. She was smartly dressed, and her makeup was skillfully chosen to bring out her best points.

She stretched out both hands to Sue.

“You don’t mind my coming? I called Bob’s office but they said he was out of town for the day.”

“Yes, he’s in Kansas City.” Sue smiled at her caller and motioned her back to her chair. “Mind? I’m delighted, of course! You’re—a cousin? I ought to know,” she apologized, “but I don’t.”

A pair of dimples dipped into the smooth cheeks of Mrs. Meade Trenton.

“Cousin?” she said, and laughed outright, a pretty tinkling laugh like the ringing of small silver bells. “Cousin? My word! Didn’t you see my card? I’m your predecessor, my lamb!”

“Pre—?”

“Bob’s first wife,” she explained simply.

The room began to revolve about Sue in slow circles. There was a buzzing in her ears, a feeling of dryness in her throat. She put her hand to it without knowing it.

“Good heavens, don’t faint! Is it such a shock to see me? I never thought about it—that it might be, you know. Shall I call somebody? Get you some water, or something?”

“No—no,” Sue whispered. “I’m—all right. Just let me take this in. Bob—you say Bob has been—married before?”

The blue eyes widened to an incredulous stare.

“Great Allah! D’you mean you didn’t know?”

Sue shook her head. “No,” she said dully. “I—didn’t know.”

“But—how long have you and Bob been married? I thought—I heard—”

“Nearly a year. A year next month.”

“And he actually hasn’t told you?” Her eyes began to sparkle with mirth; mirth and excitement. “This is simply incredible; like a play, isn’t it? Why, I thought of course you knew! I never dreamed—well, leave it to Bob Trenton to do the unexpected!”

She took charge of the situation briskly. “Buck up, my dear! There’s really nothing to go all limp and white about. It wasn’t much of a marriage, any way you look at it. I suppose that’s why Bob didn’t bother to mention it. Still—I’m not so terribly flattered, you know—that he has forgotten me! Or perhaps—” she prudently suppressed the alternative. “Look here. What’s your name? I can’t go on calling you ‘you’; and I simply can’t say ‘Mrs. Trenton’, now can I?”

“Sue.” The word barely escaped her dry lips.

“Sue! Cute little name. You’re cute, too, in your queer dark way. Hope you don’t mind the personalities.” She chuckled suddenly. “If ever two women had a right to talk personalities, it’s you and I, it seems to me.” She laid her hands on the arms of the chair and leaned forward. “Now, Sue, don’t look so tragic about this. We’ve lots to talk about and I can’t be my own irresistible self with you huddling there as if you’d just had news of Bob’s death.

“Tell me,” she asked in a businesslike tone, “why do you think he hasn’t told you about me?”

Again Sue shook her head. Little waves of faintness were rolling over her. She wished the silvery voice would stop, she wished the woman who had done this thing to her would go. The air of the room seemed to her polluted though the sweet May breeze mingled with an elusive scent from the other woman's garments. Sue put up her hand and pushed her hair from her forehead.

"Ache?" inquired the silvery voice. "You're horribly pale. Oughtn't you to lie down, or something?"

It was the right note. Pride cleared Sue's brain as if by magic. She sat up in her chair, even managed a bright smile at her caller.

"I'm all right. I've been out in the sun too long, I expect. Overseeing some garden work. And I was—rather surprised at your news—at seeing you." She folded her hands composedly. "Are you visiting in St. Joseph, Mrs.—ah—Trenton?"

"Cecily. Let's don't be formal with each other, my lamb. That would be too ridiculous. Visiting here? That depends. I've been in California all winter. I'm on my way back East now. There was some business I wanted to ask Bob about, so I stopped off."

"You knew then—where he was? That he—is married?"

"Yes, I knew. Not through Bob though. The old meanie hasn't condescended to keep me informed about himself. I had to write to his lawyers."

Sue made another effort. "How long—how long ago—?"

"I'll tell you the whole story," said the pleased silvery voice. "No—you must listen! You'll see it isn't so bad—nothing whatever to be upset about. Why, we were perfect infants when we married, Bob and I. He was just past his twenty-second birthday, I was only nineteen. Ages and ages ago, you see.

"And—it's no wonder the poor boy didn't bother to tell you! Our marriage lasted just four months. Practically no marriage at all, you see! It was a flop from the first," she went on cheerfully. "A sort of extemporaneous affair, you might call it. We met at a house party the week after his graduation. It was a glamorous sort of party; my first, too. A full moon, dances and dinner parties, and masses of flowers everywhere. . . . We fixed it up one morning—in the swimming pool, if you'll believe me!

"Bob said: 'Why don't we get married, Cecily?' And I said it seemed a sound idea to me. So we hurried to get dressed, and slipped away from the

others, and drove to a town about forty miles away. You should have heard them all howl when we came back with a wedding ring, and a certificate, and everything! They were thrilled at the elopement, but simply furious because we hadn't taken everybody along."

Sue's bewilderment had passed. Her mind was crystal clear, leaping ahead of the sweet, drawling voice. She could see the merry young guests, hear their shouted reproaches and congratulations. She could see—ah, so plainly!—Bob and the tall young Cecily! both so fair, both so slender and magically young!

"Go on," she urged.

"My folks were pleased. So was Bob's father. No trouble there, at all. Mother had announcements sent out as quick as she could get them engraved, and Bob and I went off for two weeks to Canada, on a camping trip."

"And—"

Cecily shrugged. "It was a mistake. I hated camping. It was too early for Canada. It rained practically every day we were there. Bob and I were hardly on speaking terms by the time we got back."

She paused, consciously heightening the suspense of her narrative. This dark-eyed girl huddled in the chair before her was hanging on every word.

"That's about all, I expect. We simply got on each other's nerves until I couldn't stand it another minute. His father was set on our living with him. My dear, if you could have seen that old mausoleum! I told Bob I'd let him take me there after I'd died, but not before! So I went back to my own home—"

"Wait! You mean at the end of the four months?"

"I mean at the end of three weeks," was the amused reply. "Bob and I stayed in a New York hotel for a week after that terrible camping trip. Then I went home—my people live on Long Island—and Bob moved in with his father. And three months later I went to Reno and got my divorce. Now you have it all. It wasn't really a marriage, when you come to think about it. Just an error of judgment, as Bob said himself." Again the dimples dipped.

"And—and since then?"

"What do you mean—since then? You know more about what has happened to Bob than I do. I haven't laid eyes on him for five years. If you mean what have I done . . . I've had a good time, I can tell you!"

“You—remarried?”

“Would I be Mrs. Meade Trenton if I had? No, that camping trip is still too vivid in my memory. I’ve traveled, I’ve been an extra in the movies just for the fun of it, I own a house in California and my people visit me a lot . . . I tell you, I’ve had a good time!”

“What—what do you want with Bob?”

The delicately pencilled eyebrows went up.

“Want with him? What should I want with Bob Trenton? Nothing but a little business advice—and to see him. We had a property settlement at the time of the divorce. He gave me some shares in the *Treadon Company*—or rather his father did. I’m thinking of selling them, and it seemed only fair to offer them to Bob first. Besides—” she leaned forward gleefully—“I’m human, my dear! I wanted to see the kind of girl Bob had married. Mother wrote me that he’d settled down this time; that the second inoculation had taken, so to speak.”

Sue’s dark eyes met the mischievous blue ones.

“Very well, you’ve seen me!”

“‘Now go!’ Is that the rest of it? What an inhospitable little thing you are! I suppose you take divorce more seriously in a backwoods town like this than we do in California. It’s the usual thing there. I was hoping,” she said, notes of laughter sprinkling the words, “I was hoping you’d ask me to stay with you—for a few days anyway. Such a nice surprise for Bob when he comes back, don’t you think? No? Well—” She sighed and rose. “I’ve a taxi eating its head off out in front. I suppose I’d better go back to my hotel. When do you expect Bob?”

“Tonight—probably late—I don’t know. I . . . I suppose I do seem to you not—not hospitable. But I’d like to talk to Bob first—”

“Of course you would. I quite understand.” She held out a small gloved hand with unaffected cordiality. “I do hope my coming hasn’t been too much of a shock. I’d take an aspirin and lie down for a while if I were you. But honestly, my dear, honestly! There’s nothing at all for you to be troubled about. You can’t call a three weeks—a two weeks matrimonial interlude a real marriage, now can you?”

Sue, her heart beating wildly with sudden hope, asked: “Then you—you weren’t really his wife at all?”

The younger woman stared, and sighed a little. What a child this was, she thought, in spite of her pretty dignity. "I could lie to her, I suppose," ran her swift thoughts. "It would really be the decent thing to do. If I could get hold of Bob to back me up, I'd do it. But she'll ask him, and he'll blurt out the truth." Aloud she said: "Sue, it was a divorce I got, not an annulment. I was Bob Trenton's wife for exactly two weeks, and that was five whole years ago. What does it matter now?"

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WHAT did it matter now?

The question tolled in Sue's mind all that long day; that endless day when she paced through her rooms feverishly, or lay face down on her bed; when she forced herself to speak gayly to her friends on the telephone, breaking an engagement to lunch with Barbara, explaining to Pats that she couldn't shop with her as she had promised later in the afternoon; when she sat at the table and forgot her untouched plate, rose and wandered upstairs under the impression she had eaten a meal; what did it matter now?

It mattered to this extent: she was married to a stranger! She had thought she knew Bob; realized his faults, appreciated his virtues, respected him, trusted him, loved him; not loved him as she had always hoped to love the man she married, but warmly, genuinely. A simple person, the man she had believed she knew, incapable of the sort of deceit which had been practised upon her; incapable—oh, completely incapable of exposing her to the shock of this casual discovery of Cecily—of a former marriage!

“What to do? What to do?” She found herself whispering the words. The sound aroused her from a trance of thought. She looked down at her shaking hands. They held a pair of smart little oxfords. “What am I doing with these?” she wondered dazedly. Dressing, of course; dressing to go away—somewhere, anywhere—before Bob came home.

“A suitcase—I could pack a suitcase with what I'd need for a few days. Chicago—that train goes at eight-thirty; Bob might get home before then. But I could say I was going out to dinner—drive around somewhere until it was time—”

She was on her feet, quivering with the joy of a trapped creature at the thought of escape. Then she sank wearily back into her chair.

Of what use to run away? She and Bob must talk; must plan. If not tonight, then next week, a month from now; eventually they must discuss this hideous thing. Bob must explain . . . but how could Bob explain the unexplainable; any more than she could forgive the unpardonable? Or no—it wasn't a question of forgiveness. She could have forgiven the man she thought she had married—anything; but this stranger . . .

She tried to call up Bob's face before her mind: the laughing blue eyes, the thick blond hair, the lean jaw with its crease which in a girl would have been a dimple.

Cecily had dimples, but not that kind. Hers were little dents that twinkled in and out of the fair flesh. A silvery, starlike, twinkling person, Cecily, for all her tall slenderness! How could Bob have loved a small black-eyed girl like herself after Cecily?

The sweet spring afternoon crawled by; flew by. When she remembered that evening would bring Bob, the hours passed like so many minutes. When her tired brain tried to grapple with her problem, the minutes were like hours.

Suddenly there was the sound of rapid feet on the stairs. Bob! Her dazed eyes went to her watch, that dainty, jewelled trifle Bob had given her last Christmas. It was . . . it couldn't be six o'clock already!

"Sue! Where are you, sweet! I got home in time for dinner after all, I drove like the devil. . . . Sue!" He whispered her name in a terrified voice. "What's happened? Oh, my God, darling, are you ill? Have you hurt yourself? Have you had bad news?" He was across the room, he was kneeling beside her chair, his arms drawing her toward him. "Tell Bob, darlin' heart! Tell your husband what's making you look like that?"

Her long tired sigh seemed torn out of her body. For a moment she leaned against him, feeling the whole affair to have been a nightmare from which she had just awakened. The dear familiar presence reassured her for a few blissful seconds; the good smell of mingled tobacco, shaving cream and the faint peatlike odor of his coat; the feel of his firm cheek, the tender clasp of his arms.

It was Bob himself who broke the spell. The fright he had felt at sight of her ravaged face jerked at his nerves.

"Sue! What has happened?"

She moved away from him, back as far as her chair and the length of his arms would allow.

"There was a woman here today, Bob. She says her name is Cecily Meade Trenton. She says she was married to you."

There was a long silence. Slowly he loosed his clasp, let his arms fall to his sides.

"Cecily! Good heavens, Cecily!" His voice came in a rasping undertone.

“You know her, then? What she said is—true?”

He nodded almost irritably, as if she were a child who failed to understand the obvious.

“It’s true, all right. If you mean that she and I were married a long time ago. Or if marriage can mean a brief three weeks’ madness.”

She huddled in the low chair, her eyes dark pools of misery.

“Why didn’t you tell me, Bob? Why did you let me hear it—from her?”

He walked to the window and stood looking down on the garden for a long moment before he answered. Even when he began to speak, tiredly, he kept his face turned away.

“I know you won’t believe me when I tell you that I forgot it; I honestly forgot it, the day you and I were married. I’d waited so long for you, Sue, our wedding was so sudden—there was simply no room in my mind for anything except you; you and the happiness that possessed me. When I did remember, I . . . was afraid. Nothing could be altered anyhow. You and I were man and wife.

“You’d told me more than once that you’d never expect to claim your husband’s past when you married. I knew that was foolishness, I knew that only an unawakened girl could talk like that. But I tried to justify my silence by remembering you had said that.

“No one here knew I’d been married before. I could hardly believe it myself. It was more than five years ago, it was all so vague, almost dreamlike. I hadn’t an idea where Cecily was; married, probably, and as anxious to forget me as I’d forgotten her.”

He turned then and came to drop before her on one knee, not touching her but bringing his face on a level with hers that he might look into her eyes.

“My darling, try to understand! The man who married you is no more the untried, hot-headed, foolish boy who dashed into marriage with a girl he’d known only a few days—who romped into marriage, as a good joke!—than the leaves on this oak outside are last year’s leaves—the leaves of five years ago. They may look the same, but they’re entirely different leaves. Why, I can hardly remember that boy now: how he felt or what he thought; certainly nothing of his attitude toward Cecily Meade. Can you understand that, Sue?”

She shook her head. “About anything else I could perhaps; not about marriage; not about the most important, the most vital thing that can come into one’s life!”

“But it wasn’t important, it wasn’t vital to me! That’s the whole point. It was just a lark; just something to do to startle the house party; just a passing fancy for a pretty girl. We’d not been married three days before we both knew we’d made a mistake. We’d gone on a camping trip to Canada—”

“Yes, she told me.”

He shrugged. “It would be interesting to know how much of the truth she told you, how much pure fabrication.”

“Oh, I think she is truthful. She told me just what you are telling me now.”

“Why is she here?” he demanded.

“Something about her stock in the business, I believe.”

“A personal interview being necessary after five years, I suppose?”

Strangely enough the bitterness in his manner hurt her afresh. If he could lash out at one woman so, why not at all women, at herself?

“She said very frankly that she was curious to see—me, too! She’s on her way East—”

He interrupted her sharply. “Is she here? In this house?”

“She wanted me to ask her to stay, but—I couldn’t, Bob!”

“Good grief, I should hope not! But that’s Cecily Meade all over. Anything for a thrill. Hasn’t she married in all these years?”

“No, she says not.”

“Sue, darling, can’t we forget her? I’d give my right hand if this hadn’t happened. I don’t mean my marrying her; that’s all so unreal to me I can hardly make it clear enough for regret; but my not telling you! My deceiving you about it. Sweet, it breaks my heart to see your little face so tired and white. Come now, come now! It isn’t a crime to have been married before. I was only a kid, a senseless kid who couldn’t see an inch before his silly young nose. Just a boy of twenty-two!”

“But you weren’t a boy when you married me,” she reminded him.

“Would you have married me—if you had known about Cecily?”

She shook her head. “No, Bob!”

“Then, in spite of what you may feel about it now, Sue, I’m glad you didn’t know,” he said almost savagely. “You’re mine, my wife—and after a while you’ll understand. We’ll put the whole thing out of our minds. Sweet, you’ve been happy with me? Our marriage has been a success?”

“Nothing is a success that’s founded on deceit, Bob. Don’t you see—can’t you see? I—I—you’re a stranger to me; not my husband at all. The man I thought I was marrying would be incapable of this terrible thing. Ours—in the real sense—isn’t a marriage at all!”

“That’s nonsense, Sue! You’re talking like a silly, idealistic school girl. I’m exactly what you believed me to be last June—what I’ve been since you first saw me. It’s the boy who married Cecily who’s the stranger; as much a stranger to me as he could possibly be to you! Snap out of it, darling! We’re both making tragedy out of the flimsiest kind of farce. It’s all in the past, anyhow. Give your husband a kiss, and let Cecily slip back into the oblivion from which she should never have emerged.”

His bracing tone did her good. It was true that what was done was done, she reminded herself. Nothing she could say, or feel, or even do would alter the situation in the slightest. Her job was to make of her marriage the best relationship possible. Heaping reproaches on Bob’s head would help nobody. She could never feel quite the same toward him, he would never be to her the wise and splendid young man with whom she had been first, but that was her own private trial to be borne.

“It’s all been smooth sailing so far,” she mused. “Bob’s given me everything and I’ve accepted it because I’m his wife. I must accept this—this distasteful knowledge for the same reason. I’ve preached a lot to Allen about overlooking the things in Pats he dislikes. I’d better do a little practising for a change now.”

She leaned forward docilely and kissed him.

“I expect I have been making a mountain out of a molehill, Bob; or not that quite! It’s a blow—knowing you’ve been married before, knowing you’ve kept the fact to yourself all this time. But I agree that being angry about it won’t undo it.”

Incredulous joy shone in his face.

“You forgive me, sweet?”

She rested her cheek against his wearily. “Not forgive so much, as try to forget!”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

She walked with him to the car the next morning, her hand in his arm down the long flagged walk that led to the street. She was cheerful though her eyes were shadowed and she had not regained her own healthy color. Bob, seated at the wheel, leaned down for a last word.

“Cecily will probably come to the office this morning, sweet. You realize that, don’t you?”

She nodded. It seemed to her of supreme unimportance what Cecily did now. Yesterday’s devastation had been too great to permit of additional hurt.

But she as well as Bob was puzzled by Cecily’s behavior in the days, the actual weeks and months that followed.

For the former Mrs. Robert Trenton did not resume her interrupted journey Eastward, but lingered on in St. Joseph. She stayed at her hotel for a week or two, then moved into a small apartment, and eventually to a furnished house which she stocked with servants.

“Because I like it here!” she said gaily in answer to Bob’s annoyed questions. “This is a charming town. I don’t wonder you decided to settle here.” And as he scowled his disapproval: “It’s a free country, my dear,” she reminded him.

He knew by this time that a fundamental mischief actuated her. Only twenty-four years old, she had traveled too much, lived too hard, known too many undisciplined men and women among the moving picture folk in California. The sedate placidity of this old Southern town tempted her to gamin-like experiment.

She had been deeply amused at the ripple her very presence here had caused among Bob’s friends. She wired various intimates in the East and in California for letters of introduction and soon the Country Club set was calling on her; and not only calling on her but entertaining her, somewhat to their own surprise.

She was pretty, she was amusing, her clothes were new and exciting. There were always dramatic possibilities when she and the young Trentons were invited to the same affairs.

Sue faced the situation with the pretty dignity which was innate with her. They called each other "Cecily" and "Sue", exchanged amiable remarks when they found themselves together; but not even Barbara Webb had the temerity to discuss Bob's first wife with his second.

"Sue, I'm getting any punishment that was coming to me for deceiving you about her," Bob said one evening. It was significant that he never referred to Cecily by name. Nor did Sue need to ask whom he meant by "she" and "her". "You'd think she'd have better taste than to select this one town out of all America to stay in; live in, so far as I know. She's bought a car!"

"She'll tire of it after a while," Sue told him quietly. They were driving to the Club where, they both knew, it was more than likely they would encounter Cecily. "It's a thrill to her, that's all, being here with you—and me. No one pays any attention to divorce or remarriage in California, you know, so I suppose the mild shock she causes here entertains her. She'll get tired of it and leave pretty soon. Meanwhile—"

"Meanwhile she's putting you through a devilishly hard time!" he said hotly. "Don't think I don't realize how difficult it is for you, sweet! I do. That's why I say I'm getting mine for concealing the truth from you. She can't hurt me except through you, and she knows it, darn her!"

"Oh, no, Bob! She's not in the least malicious. She probably thinks I'm as amused as she is. If it wasn't for Patsy—" she stopped abruptly.

"What's Patsy got to do with it? She doesn't even know her, does she?"

"They've—met," she replied slowly. "Pats is terribly taken with her."

"Pats would be! I'll drop a word to Allen—"

She clutched his arm. "Bob, you shan't! Think what a perfect weapon it would give Pats against me!"

He was puzzled. "Why on earth should Pats need a weapon against you? Everybody knows what an angel you've been to her. And I'll say for Pats," he went on with masculine blindness, "that at last she's begun to appreciate you! She told me not long ago that you were more like a sister to her than her own are. No, if Pats is having anything to do with—her, it's because she's got some distorted idea of loyalty to you and me. Better put her right on the subject, sweet."

Sue was silent. Patsy had hailed Mrs. Meade Trenton's advent with—figuratively speaking—loud cries of joy and delight. Finding that Cecily's

careless generosity was even more lavish than Sue's own, the allegiance of Allen's wife had instantly been transferred to the newcomer.

Maggie was increasingly indignant at the cocktail parties which were daily affairs now in the apartment. It required all Sue's influence over the old woman to prevent her leaving at once. Men flocked to the amusing Mrs. Trenton's side, who had remained aloofly indifferent to Pats.

Allen was helpless. "It seems so blamed disloyal to you, Sis," he told her late one afternoon, sitting in the garden, his head in his hands. He had driven out early to talk to her before Bob's arrival. "In her present condition, I can't say much. She goes into hysterics at the least hint of disapproval. She's discharged Van Ness and—"

"Discharged Dr. Van Ness! Why, he brought you and me into the world, Allen! He was Dad's doctor. He—"

"I know. She took good care not to say a word about it to me until she'd called in that young pipsqueak, Laif Baker. As a matter of fact, I didn't know it until I telephoned Van Ness myself to see how he thought Pats was coming along, and he told me she'd fired him from the case. I hopped it around to his office as quick as I could get there, but he was pretty cool toward me. Pats must have outdone herself in rudeness to him."

Sue's eyes were stern. "Our dear Dr. Van Ness! I can hardly believe it, Allen!"

"It's a fact! And young Baker gives me thunder if Pats so much as sheds a tear—and gosh, how many she can shed if I cross her about anything! He declares he'll put her in the hospital if she can't have peace at home. So there I am, Sue!" His unhappy voice trailed into silence.

"Never mind, Buddy! The baby's due next month and then things will be different. Cecily can hardly come to the apartment while Patsy's in the hospital and by the time she is home again, Cecily may be gone. Just don't worry about it, Allen!"

"It's a fine note, my wife entertaining my brother-in-law's first wife! And my sister practically clothing Pats herself!"

Again Sue was silent. It seemed to her she was always having to impose silence on herself these days. It was not she, but Cecily who was buying the lace-and-satin negligees, the cobwebby night gowns, the dashing silver and gold mules that Pats exhibited proudly. Sue thought such garments not only unsuitable for the wife of a struggling young engineer, but a little vulgar as

well. They affronted her love for the severely simple, the beauty of texture and line rather than lavishness.

She wondered that her brother, who had been wont to praise her taste in such matters, did not realize that never would she have chosen Pats' present outfit. But Allen, she suspected, if he allowed himself to think of them at all, believed Patsy's wishes had prevailed over her sister-in-law's.

It galled Sue's own pride to know that the woman who had been Bob's wife even for a brief two weeks was bestowing such extravagant gifts on Mrs. Allen Davenport; but, like Allen, she was helpless. The one thing she could do was to spare Allen that knowledge.

Just once had she attempted remonstrance with the triumphant Pats.

"Honey, you oughtn't to let Cecily give you things like these, you know; you oughtn't to let anyone give them to you! I thought we'd arranged it that I was to buy what you need—"

"Yes, I thought so, too!" Pats's long eyes shone with malicious joy. "But since you seem to have forgotten, I've had to rely on dear Cecily."

"Forgotten? I've sent you box after box of clothes, Pats; everything you can possibly need."

"Oh, those tailored crepe and silk things! Just because you like to dress so simply, Sue, it doesn't follow that every one does. Simple things don't suit my style. I showed them to Cecily and she agreed I need trailing, fluffy things. She says I'll be terribly thin after the baby comes, and can wear simply oodles of lace and ribbons."

Sue's hands clenched, but she kept her voice steady.

"And did you return the things I sent, Pats?"

Her sister-in-law looked a trifle embarrassed. "Well, no, I didn't—if you must know, Sue. I gave them to Marie. They were a gift, weren't they? I hope you aren't the sort of person who ties strings to your presents, my dear!"

Sue had allowed herself one grave warning. "Do you think it's wise to antagonize me, Patsy? When Cecily goes away—"

"But she's not going away!" Pats sank triumphantly back against the cushions of the couch, her chin tilted to watch the curling smoke of her cigarette. "She likes it here. She says I'm a real friend. She's been lonely, poor Cecily! I think she came to St. Joseph, hoping she'd find a friend in

you, but you're so prim and old-fashioned in your ideas that she saw right away it was no use. Luckily for us both, I'm more tolerant, I can appreciate a girl like Cecily."

"Putting all that aside, Pats, have you considered how this sort of thing might hurt Allen? He's my brother, he loves me—"

Pats dropped any pretense of civility she might have retained toward her sister-in-law.

"Loves you a darned sight more than he does me!" she exclaimed shrilly. "Don't think I don't know that, Sue! Don't think I've forgotten the first months of my married life. It was Sue, Sue, Sue—all over the place: what Sue liked, and how much Sue's money did for us all, and how low and charming Sue's voice was . . . well, I'm rid of Sue, heaven be thanked! It doesn't matter a hoot in hades what you think of me, you may be interested to know! I've wanted to say this to you for a long time," she went on with deep satisfaction. "And now I've done it; and if you want to go sniveling to Allen about it, go right ahead. I guess even Allen won't take your part against me now!"

Sue, very white, rose without a word and left the room. In the hall she found old Maggie, her hat on, a small suitcase in her hand.

"I couldn't help hearing, Miss Sue. I've had my clo'es packed against this day for a long time. Out of this house I walk and I'll not set foot in it until she—" the gray head was jerked toward the closed door—"goes out of it for good and all."

Sue drew her swiftly into the small bedroom opening off the kitchen.

"Maggie, dear, you mustn't, you can't! Think of Mr. Allen! You're all he's got of—of home. Mrs. Allen isn't herself just now—"

"She's more herself than she's let herself be since she come here," was Mag's cryptic comment.

"And anyway, she'll be going to the hospital soon. Mr. Allen will need you to cook for him, to keep his clothes mended as you've always done. Please, please, forget it, dear! Think of Allen, as I do, and pay no attention to anything that's said. Do it for me, Maggie darling!"

"You're a good little creature, Miss Sue; that I'll say for you. And the way you've learned to keep your temper these days beats me. I can well remember when you'd have scratched out any woman's eyes for less than what Miss Highy-tighty says every time you meet." She put up uncertain

hands to her hat. "I s'pose if you can stand it, I can! But it sure goes against the grain to hear her talk. Lollin' 'round on cushions all day, smokin' an' drinkin'; she that was Mr. Allen's office help not two years ago. Set a beggar on horseback an' —"

"Maggie!"

"All right, all right! But this I have to say, an' say it I will, Miss Sue: after the baby comes, and she's back here again, then I quit, and not you nor nobody else can talk me out of it then!"

She murmured pacifically, trusting to the charms of Allen's tiny son or daughter to modify her old nurse's decision.

For herself, she determined not to visit the apartment for the present. Allen would understand, would put down her absence to a reluctance to meet Cecily. After the baby came . . . well, she would let the future take care of itself. The present held cares enough, heaven knew!

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FOR life, which had been so happy for Sue Trenton in the first months of her marriage, was presenting almost daily problems to her now.

Bob was the sort of person who is at his best when all is well with him; in whom trouble brings out faults hitherto unsuspected.

Cecily's continued presence in the city he now called home was like a burr in his shoe; nothing important enough to make him summon real fortitude to bear it, but a constant annoyance. The men who ventured mild jokes at his expense were met with a scowl and a warning to "drop it!" His light-hearted gayety which had made him so liked suffered a temporary eclipse now. He alternated between a determination to stay away from the Country Club, to give up his daily game of golf, to frequent those places where Cecily was more than likely to be found with a stubborn decision to hold his own ground where she was concerned.

Sue and he might have dressed for some long anticipated party.

"Almost ready, Bob?"

"Let's not go to the confounded thing!"

"Bob, dear, we can't refuse at this late date. Why, Lois knows there's nothing to keep us away. She spoke to me this morning about it. What possible excuse—"

"It's excuse enough that she's invited Cecily!"

"But the Watsons had Cecily there last night, and you didn't refuse to go."

"That's why I don't want to go tonight. I suffered enough humiliation last night with her everlasting 'Bob, do you remember?' and 'Surely, Bob, you recall,' without letting myself in for it again. Great Scott! One would think Cecily and I had lived together for actual years! Remember! What do I remember of that infernal time? What would I want to remember? I should think common decency would make her refrain from such reminders."

"She does it to make you angry, of course," Sue replied calmly. "And she'll stop it soon enough if she finds it doesn't. Perhaps you're right about

not going this evening, Bob. Better stay away, even if it offends Lois, than go and sit glaring at Cecily. I'll telephone Lois and say—”

“No, we'll go!” Bob would fling himself across the room, brush savagely at the hair he had been ruffling. “I won't give her the satisfaction of thinking she can keep me at home.”

“Bob, truly—”

“We'll go, I said, Sue!” He positively snapped the words; but his wife, knowing that his irritation was at the situation and not at her, let it pass.

Another time he might yield and they would pass a happy evening together in the garden, or, if it rained, in the big livingroom which they both liked so much. Bob would be as sunnily gay as the first weeks of their marriage, and Sue's eyes would lose their look of apprehensiveness. Then some chance word of his, a telephone call, or an innocent reference of Sue's own to a subject she regarded as unconnected with Cecily, would bring a scowl back to his young face.

“What do I care if business is good!” he demanded on one of these occasions. “I'm simply piling up more money for Cecily to sling around.”

“Does all her money come from the *Treadons*, Bob?”

“Gosh, no! Her folks are rolling. The old man made her a tidy allowance at the time of the divorce. He wouldn't let me give her a cent.”

“Then how does she happen to have that stock?”

“He doesn't know she has it. Dad offered it to her, and she took it. Cecily has to have all the money she can get her hands on. She spends first and asks the price afterwards. Incidentally that might describe her: she does what she pleases, takes what she pleases from life, and then finds out afterwards what she has to pay.”

“Well, don't let's think of her tonight, dear. We're having such a lovely evening—”

“You may be!” His emphasis on the pronoun definitely accused her of lack of sympathy with him. “I can't get this confounded state of affairs out of my mind. Sue, why do we stay on here anyway? Let's sell the house and go East. They've been wanting me at the home office, you know. Let's shake the dust of this place off our shoes and go find us another house somewhere on Long Island.”

Sue's heart gave a leap at this. Never to see Cecily again, never to hear that silvery voice! But a moment's thought always caused her to negative the move gently.

"You know as well as I do, Bob darling, she'd follow us. Her people are there, she's told everyone that she's going East when she gets tired of St. Joseph. Any day now she'll grow bored with us, she's bound to be! You know that."

Yes, Bob knew that, and after a certain amount of exasperated argument he always agreed with Sue. But not before he had done his best to hurt her, she thought! Oh, not before he had unerringly said those things which set her heart beating with actual pain.

"If you loved me the way I love you, a hundred Cecilys wouldn't bother me. I'd laugh in their faces! It's knowing that down in your heart you despise me for deceiving you—"

"Bob, I don't despise you. Don't be silly!"

"Well, you don't love me! Or," he added with unexpected perspicacity, "you aren't in love with me, Sue—you never have been. You're fond of me, and you graciously allow me to adore the ground you walk on but as for anything else, it's simply not there!"

She grew a little pale. "Bob, that's not fair! I love you as much as I have it in me to love any man. If it's not what you expected, if it doesn't satisfy you, I can't help it. I told you before we were married, I warned you—"

"Sue, Sue, don't cry! I'm a brute, I ought to be taken out and shot. You love me a thousand times more than I deserve. It's only—only that sometimes I feel that I don't really have you at all, Sue; that it's only your body, your—affection I hold in my arms; that the real you is off somewhere I can't follow. It drives me mad—that feeling!" He would have her crushed close to him now, holding her so tightly she could scarcely breathe.

Usually she poured out words of loving reassurance; but one sultry night in August when he had been more than ordinarily irritable, she said:

"Do you think you're taking the best way to find the real me, as you call it? I know this summer has been a trying time for you, Bob, but it's been difficult for me, too. I've done my best to make things easy for you. I've gone out with you when I'd a million times rather have stayed at home, and I've cancelled engagements at the last minute when it meant embarrassing apologies and explanations which didn't explain. After all, why should I

have to be the one to soothe, and be tactful, and suit my life to yours? I'm not responsible for Cecily's being here!"

It was the first time she had allowed her temper, that quick flashing temper which had been the demon of her childhood before she had learned to control it, to burst into words. Bob's jaw sagged ludicrously.

"Sue—why, Sue!"

"You're behaving like a child, Bob!" she went on. "If you hadn't made it perfectly apparent to Cecily that she can bait you successfully, she'd have tired of the game and gone East long ago. When are you going to grow up and meet her as she should be met; with a smoothly impervious surface to her references to a past which, according to you, is wholly non-existent?"

He burst into a shout of laughter.

"Heaven defend the right, hear the child! You're actually scolding me, Sue, you're ragging me like a regular fishwife! Go on! It's great to hear you. I say, did Allen have to put up with much of this sort of thing? No wonder he always seems to handle you with gloves."

She had herself in hand again and gave him smile for smile.

"You never believed me when I told you I had a temper. Now you see for yourself what it's like. I won't say I'm sorry, Bob, because I meant every word I said; but I promise not to fly out at you like that again . . . soon."

The incident proved a salutary lesson to them both. Sue discovered to her astonishment that she had accomplished more in five minutes by this straight speaking than all her tact and soothing had done all summer. Bob knew a surprised respect for his slim young wife. After that he was careful to keep his grumblings about Cecily to himself.

But the first enchantment of the honeymoon had been broken for them both. Sue knew all her husband's faults now. She knew that he was a born procrastinator, congenitally incapable of doing today what he could possibly postpone until next week, next month. Trained by her father to courteous punctuality on all occasions, she chafed at Bob's ignoring of the clock.

Almost fanatically clean about himself, order did not exist for him. His bathroom was a welter of soapsuds, wet towels, discarded garments and capless toothpaste when he had finished with it. He would stand in front of her dressing table, absently fingering her toilet articles, and five minutes later she would gaze ruefully at the wreck he had made of her brushes and bottles and silver jars.

He spent money too freely, too, she considered. His tips left a wake of smiling good humor behind him, but Sue thought they were out of all proportion to the services received.

She spoke to him gently about this, about his other faults, and he looked positively frightened.

“Are you developing into a nagger, Sue?”

That brought her up standing. “Heavens, I hope not!” she replied devoutly. She rubbed her cheek remorsefully against his arm. “I’m truly sorry, Bob! I’ll not say another word, not if you make me lose ten upstairs maids, and tip your caddy enough to buy himself a car!”

She kept that promise, consoling herself that Bob’s faults were all surface ones, masculine ones which a woman who loved him—which the woman who loved him, she corrected herself—found it easy to forgive.

As for Bob, he was still teased by the belief that there were depths and heights in Sue which he had never glimpsed. Despite her tenderness, her real concern for him, he believed her still to be an emotionally unawakened girl. What haunted him was the idea, growing stronger and stronger as the summer neared its close, was that the day might come when Sue would meet the man who held the key to her locked heart.

He knew she was faithful to him with every breath she drew; he even believed that if such a man should come Sue would resist him with every fibre of her being; but more than anything in the world he longed to be that man himself; to enter into the splendor and the glory of knowing his wife’s passionate and entire devotion!

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“SUE! SWEET SUE, wake up!”

It was not yet midnight, and Sue had barely dozed off when Bob’s voice, and his gentle hand on her shoulder, awakened her.

“It’s Allen, darling, calling from the hospital.”

She sat up in bed and pushed the dark curls from her forehead.

“Patsy!”

He nodded. “Allen says if you will, he’d like you to come. You do want to go, sweet?”

“Of course!” She flung back the light cover and began taking clothing from drawer and closet. “You’re all dressed, Bob. Haven’t you been to bed at all?”

“I was just going when the telephone rang. I’ll have the car around by the time you’re dressed. No need to hurry so, I suppose. Pats’ll be lucky if her party is over by morning, Allen says.”

Nevertheless he drove in to the hospital at a smart clip. Allen was in a waiting room, pale and nervous. He greeted his sister unsmilingly.

“I don’t believe that fool of a Baker knows enough to handle a case like this. I’ve a mind to ask Van Ness to come.”

Sue slipped her hand through his arm. “You can’t do that, Allen. After all, Laif Baker has been practising for several years. Does he think Pats is—that her case is unusual?”

“He wouldn’t say so if he did!” Allen’s voice rasped with anxiety. “You know how they all talk: ‘Everything going along nicely, nothing whatever to worry about.’ Just as though I hadn’t the brains God gave a turkey!”

In spite of herself Sue smiled. “Buddy, what would you want him to say? That everything is going wrong—no matter if Pats is right as rain? Sit down, poor old boy. It will probably be hours and hours yet before we have any news.”

“Yes, that’s what he said,” Allen admitted. He relaxed somewhat under her coaxing; permitted her to guide him to a chair. “She hasn’t taken any

care of herself; she hasn't walked, she's smoked too many cigarettes, had too many cocktails."

"I expect she'll come out all right," Bob assured him. "Most women do nowadays."

That was the beginning of a vigil which lasted all night and most of the next day. Patsy was far from doing all right, it appeared. The idle life she had led for months exacted its reckoning now, and when instruments had to be resorted to at five in the afternoon, Allen's son was stillborn.

His grief was a revelation to Sue. She had not dreamed he had so wanted a child. Once he was assured that his wife was no longer in danger, he gave himself up unrestrictedly to his bitter disappointment.

"You mustn't, Buddy, you mustn't! Think of poor Pats, how much harder it's going to be for her!"

He stared at her incredulously. "Pats disappointed! She's hoped for this very thing all along—made no secret about it! But I . . . it's my last hope of fatherhood, Sis. No woman who dislikes children as Pats does will ever give safe birth to one!"

"He's pretty bitter," Bob observed as he drove his tired wife home. "I think he's unjust to Pats, too. No matter how she felt beforehand, she'd have loved her baby after it came."

Sue agreed with him. It seemed beyond the bounds of credibility that any mother could fail to adore her own child. But when she was at last admitted to her sister-in-law's room, and the invalid graciously chose to ignore their last meeting, Sue received enlightenment.

"I suppose you and Allen are mingling your tears these days, aren't you? Well, I'm not going to be a hypocrite about it. I said from the beginning I didn't want a baby, and heaven knows nothing I've gone through with all these months has changed me. I'd have done my best by it, if it had lived; since it didn't, I don't see the sense of looking solemn, and acting as though there'd been a death in the family."

Sue said briefly: "There has been!"

"There hasn't!" Pats' voice was angry. "It never even drew a breath, Dr. Baker told me so! Now, Sue, if you're going to uphold Allen in this foolishness—"

Her nurse slid in quietly from beyond the partly open door.

“You’re getting too excited, Mrs. Davenport. Our doctor will scold us if he finds our pulse fast when he comes this evening. Perhaps Mrs. Trenton had better let you rest now—”

Sue went no more to the hospital. But Cecily went! Allen reported disgustedly that she was there every day; that she kept Pats’ room looking like a florist’s shop; that fruit and candies and mysterious packages which Pats refused gayly to let him open, poured in in a steady stream.

“She asked me the other day if you never came to see Pats,” he said. “She actually had the nerve! ‘Where’s your sister these days, Allen? I’ve been hoping to run across her when she was paying her daily visit to the hospital!’”

Bob came up just in time to hear this.

“I hope you told her it was none of her confounded business!”

“I told her—I don’t know what I said,” he replied, running a tired hand across his forehead. “Something about the number of visitors being limited. I dread to have Pats come home. That Cecily woman will be all over the place.”

Bob looked suddenly truculent. “Look here! I’ll tell her to stay away. I’m responsible—at least I suppose I am—for her being in town. It’s up to me to keep her from annoying you, Allen.”

“Bob, that’s the last thing you must do! You’re the last person to do it, in any case. And it wouldn’t accomplish a thing. Patsy will see Cecily as often as she pleases, whether Allen likes it or not. No, I’ve told you both before: the only thing to do is to wait till she’s tired of St. Joseph and goes her way. It’ll be September next week. Surely she’ll be making her plans for the winter soon. If we just sit tight and keep our dignity a bit longer, this will all blow over.”

Sue proved herself a true prophet. Mrs. Meade Trenton vanished from the city almost as suddenly as she had appeared. Whether she was bored by Patsy’s vacuity, whether she recognized that neither Sue nor Bob intended to allow her to make them angry, or whether, as Sue had said, she had plans which now pressed, the result was the same: she sold her car, gave up her furnished house, and was driven to Kansas City where she took a plane for New York.

Ensued a bad time for Allen’s wife. With returning strength she shed her lacy robes and negligees; had need of a new fall wardrobe. She called Sue sweetly and asked her to come in for lunch. Sue as sweetly refused. The

invitation was repeated, and again refused. Then Pats took the matter up with Allen and he came out to see his sister.

“Aren’t you treating Pats a little badly? You’ve seen her only once since—since the hospital. She told me last night she was trying her best to be friends with you, Sue. I know she’s not your sort, I know she was most disloyal to you, but she’s my wife.” He sighed unconsciously. “I suppose she does the best she knows, Sis. You can’t put a quart into a pint measure.”

“Allen, you keep out of this! I’m disciplining Pats. If I let her get by with this, she’ll be out of hand forever. I know her better than you can ever hope to do—don’t contradict me!—because she’s a woman, and I’m a woman. Trust me, Allen!”

She was a little startled at the long steady look he gave her.

“More to this than I know about, Sue?”

The first really mirthful smile her lips had known for many days deepened their corners now.

“We-ell—in a way, Buddy! But it’s strictly a feminine way, and nothing for you to meddle with.”

She was puzzled at the stark relief in his eyes.

“I’ll leave her in your hands then; they’re kind little hands, Sue, if somewhat apt to box the ears of bad little girls.”

Even Bob reproached her presently.

“Goodness knows I have no love for Pats, but she’s your brother’s wife, Sue. Unless you want a permanent estrangement—”

Sue was exasperated.

“Will you men keep out of this? I warned Pats last summer that she’d have need of me and now she has. That need is going to become a lot more acute than it is at present before I give in. I don’t fool myself that I can make Patsy over; but I do have every intention of making her treat me with ordinary civility.”

“What does she want of you, Sue?”

“Clothes,” was the succinct answer. “Heaps and heaps of new fall clothes. She counted on Cecily to get them for her, and Cecily didn’t. Now I am going to teach that young lady a much needed lesson.”

In this she was cheered on enthusiastically by Barbara Webb who was present one afternoon when Pats, despairing of bringing Sue to her, took herself to Sue. Rain was falling and the two girls were cosily sipping tea beside the fire in Sue's upstairs sanctuary, when Pats came in without being announced.

"Don't scold Nelly," she said gaily. "She did her very best to shunt me into the reception room until she had your august permission to let me come up. How are you, Sue darling?" She enveloped the younger girl in arms which wore last winter's coat. "Look at it," she bade the others gallantly. "Practically threadbare, isn't it?"

"It looks good as new to me," Barbara remarked bluntly. "It was new last Easter. I remember perfectly. I happened to be with you when you coaxed Sue to buy it."

"But it's horribly out of style! The fashions are so different this fall. I felt positively conspicuous in it, wearing it out here."

"Will you have some tea, Patsy?" Sue's tone was expressionless.

"I suppose I'll have to. I suppose there is no hope of a cocktail!"

"Two lumps? Are you sure you were wise to come out in this rain?"

Patsy sighed. "I'm never wise, Sue; I should think you of all people would know that. But I am a good friend," she went on virtuously, stirring her tea. "I said to Allen: 'Allen, I'm afraid I've hurt Sue's feelings. It makes me terribly unhappy to be at outs with people I love,' So—I never even looked to see whether it was raining or not; I didn't turn back even when I found it was coming down in torrents. I just hopped into the car—"

"What does Allen do when you use the car?" Barbara interrupted.

Patsy shot her an angry look. Sue alone was hard enough to bend to her will, but Sue, reinforced by Barbara's presence, was doubly difficult. Nevertheless Pats went brightly on.

"I don't believe you've realized, Sue dear, how long you've neglected me. Allen feels it keenly. 'My two girls,' he's said to me over and over, 'my wife and my sister—it would break my heart if they weren't friends.'"

Her two listeners greeted this pathetic outburst with broad grins.

"I can just hear Allen saying it," Barbara commented.

When Pats, temporarily discouraged in her effort to break down Sue's calm aloofness, had departed, Barbara gave her hostess' hand a

congratulatory squeeze.

“Good for you, honey! That’s putting her in her place. I can’t forgive her for the way she toadied to Cecily all summer.”

On Sue’s small dark face lay a sudden shadow.

“You can’t make people over, Babs dear! I haven’t the slightest hope that my brief period of discipline will do my precious sister-in-law any real good. The most I can accomplish is to teach her to show an outward loyalty to Allen’s family. Poor Allen! If the baby had only lived!”

Her friend said sapiently: “He’d have been more unhappy than ever, my dear. You and I can imagine the sort of mother Pats would make. Either she’d spoil a child till it was unbearable, or she’d be so severe by fits and starts that Allen would protest. They’d quarrel, he and Patsy, and that would be a nice atmosphere for a child to grow up in, wouldn’t it?”

Sue shaded her eyes against the light of the leaping flames.

“It’s best as it is, of course; but oh, Barbara, it’s hard to know Allen’s made such a mess of his marriage!”

A week later she met Patsy downtown by appointment and bought, not the luxurious garments which were the older woman’s choice, but simple, severely cut things of the best material. Only the purchase of two extremely expensive evening gowns consoled their owner for what she called “being bullied into taking the old-maidish sort of clothes Sue wears herself!”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A FEW weeks after this, the thing Sue had been subconsciously dreading all her married life happened: she fell completely, passionately and unreasonably in love with another man.

It came, as such things are so apt to come, just when she felt safest. She and Bob had settled down into a comfortable jog trot of marriage. The crisis of Cecily had been met and conquered. Sue, believing this to be the greatest test which could be exacted of her affection for her husband, relaxed her anxiety about the future.

Ironically enough it was in Patsy's living room, it was through the sister-in-law of whom Sue always more or less disapproved, that she met Eric Farraday.

"She's home, but she's got company," old Maggie had said with the significant emphasis which indicated the sex of Mrs. Davenport's caller.

"Hello, Sue!"

Pats, wearing a hostess gown that had not been one of Sue's purchases for her, and lounging, cocktail in hand before the fire, looked up without rising.

"Mr. Farraday—my husband's sister, Mrs. Trenton," she went on. "Eric, make your prettiest bow to the lady. She's got scads!"

Sue flushed a little at the bad taste of it; liked the way the tall stranger ignored the admonition. He was rather a surprising person to find here, she told herself: lean, almost ascetic looking, with a streak of white running at either temple through his dark hair, gray eyes mildly amused behind their pince-nez.

The name rang a faint bell in her consciousness.

"Eric Farraday—the Mr. Farraday?"

He gave her a formal little bow but before he could reply Patsy said indolently:

"Exactly, my dear! Columnist, essayist, critic! Now ask me how I lured him into my parlor."

Sheer astonishment kept Sue silent. Farraday, as all the world knew, was the author of a volume of essays full of a strange and bitter wisdom. His weekly column was a controversial affair which had torn apart many a literary club, had provoked acrimonious discussion among staid business men. His was the dubious gift of probing the average man's and woman's heart, and voicing their most unworthy sentiments so that only the blindest egotist repudiated them.

Black eyes and gray exchanged a long appraising look.

"I have a cousin here of whom I'm very fond. He's ill—mortally ill, I'm afraid. I'm staying on until there's a change, one way or another."

He gave the explanation quite as though she had a right to it; there was a simple friendliness in his manner which clearly surprised his hostess who said so.

"Look here! Have you and Sue met before? I've never heard you talk so—so simply before, Eric! Usually you seem to be poking fun away down deep in your mind at everything I say."

Neither of the two heard her. They fell into talk at once: earnest, purposeful talk that all the world might have listened to, but which had an odd air of intimacy about it nevertheless. When Sue stood up to go, Eric said quite openly that he'd accompany her on the errand she had mentioned.

Patsy watched them with half-closed eyes. Usually the least perceptive creature alive, she knew that something vital, something important had taken place here in the last quarter of an hour. The promising flirtation into which she and Farraday had been drifting was as if it had never been, she knew. Not that she minded that! The man was too clever for her, she was always slightly uncomfortable under the mocking undertone he used toward her. She had hoped to exhibit him as her captive celebrity; had chafed at his bland refusal to go on display. When a few days before she had privately invited a select group of friends to meet him, he had not scrupled to punish her by turning away at the door when he heard the sound of voices.

"If it was anybody but Sue I'd say they had been—well, pretty good friends sometime in the past," she mused. "But Sue's no actress; she'd never laid eyes on him when she came into this room a little while ago. Highbrow recognizing highbrow, I suppose," she concluded with a contemptuous little shrug of her shoulders.

Down on the street Eric asked abruptly: "Walking or driving?"

"Walking. At least as far as the garage where I left my car."

They fell into step almost silently. It was the man who spoke first.

“Who,” he demanded, “are you? Don’t say Mrs. Davenport’s sister-in-law. That tells me nothing. Who and what are you yourself?”

Her heart was hurrying, the bright color flamed suddenly into her face but she said with composure: “That’s a difficult question to answer, isn’t it? We’re each of us so many persons, a separate one for each of our friends, the people we love.”

“What are you going to be to me?” There was no least trace of flirtatiousness in the question. It was the earnest inquiry of one deeply interested.

“A passing acquaintance perhaps. Tell me more about your cousin. What hospital is he in?”

A rasping note of impatience crept into his voice. “Don’t waste time! As it is, we’ve met too late—or you will probably think so. Mrs. Trenton, Pats said. So you’re married. Have you children?”

She shook her head. She found her thoughts frantically summoning Bob—Allen—Barbara; all the safeguards and foundations on which she had built her life. It was fantastic, she assured herself, it was more than that, it was incredible that a strange voice, the look of a pair of strange eyes should be doing these frightening things to her! She summoned her natural dignity and told him:

“I’m really not a very interesting person. Please don’t make the mistake of over-rating me. It would be so horribly humiliating to have you do so and then find me out!”

He was silent so long that she glanced up at him to find something like real anger in his lean face.

“It’s unworthy of you—that sort of talk! I won’t have it! Must I cross-examine you, or will you tell me about yourself?”

Sue, the high-spirited, Sue who resented the least attempt at familiarity from a stranger, answered him meekly.

“I’m Bob Trenton’s wife—Trenton’s *Treadons*, you know. We live out north of town in a big house with a garden. I . . . I’ve read everything you’ve written, I think; wondered about you, certainly. I never expected to meet you.”

“Did you like what you read?”

“No, nor admired it; but admired your power to read us all like open books and reduce us to the simplest terms of the written word.”

“Yes, it’s a damnable gift—if one can call it a gift! It’s made me the loneliest soul on earth, I think.”

“Why do you exercise it then?”

He gave a wry smile. “What else would you have me do, my dear? Sell *Treadons*? Open a real estate office? Be a dentist? Besides, I suppose I take a rueful delight in making thousands squirm. It’s power, and power is what we all long for, isn’t it?”

She considered. “Men, perhaps. Not many women. Women want . . . love.”

“Another name for the same thing. There is no greater power on earth than love—while it lasts.”

“No; you shan’t do it. Lure me into a discussion in which I’ll come off second best—utterly defeated,” she declared lightly. “And here’s where I left my car.” She extended a small gloved hand. “It’s been delightful—meeting you. I hope your cousin will make a safe recovery!”

If she was vaguely disappointed that he allowed her to go without protest, she fought down the thought. She had the feeling that she had been handling, ignorantly, a current of high voltage. An exciting business but a dangerous one. Better give thanks it did not concern her.

Still, she was far from surprised when his name was brought to her the next afternoon. She glanced down at her floating draperies of chiffon, the color of winter oak leaves. Had she put it on in the expectation of his coming? But when she was home she nearly always dressed for possible tea time callers, she defended herself.

It was the last coherent and self-accusatory thought she was to have for weeks. Day after hectic day arrived, whirling her closer to the hour when she found herself in Eric’s arms, shaken with a deep thrilling passion of which she had come to believe herself temperamentally incapable.

No recollection of Bob reproached her. Conscience was dead or, if it was not, it was drugged into acquiescence by emotion more potent than itself. Duty was a word without meaning, marriage was a half-forgotten dream, the world did not exist. Nothing mattered except love. There was no one on earth but Eric.

Unbelievably, nobody suspected what was happening to her; not Bob, nor Allen, nor Barbara, nor even Patsy. The very openness with which Eric's calls were made disarmed suspicion. The town was delightedly aware of his presence by now. The happy accident of his cousin's illness and the happier one of the great man's charming devotion to his relative were accepted complacently. Dinners were given in his honor. Clubs fought for one of his rarely delivered lectures. His aloofness added to his prestige. The rumor got about that Bob Trenton had known him in New York, and it was taken for granted that the lion should spend much of his time at the house north of town.

Bob said admiringly: "Gosh, Sue, I didn't know you were so all-fired brainy! I'm free to admit I don't know what this Farraday guy's talking about half the time, but it's plain you do." He chuckled dryly. "Everybody wants to entertain him but I notice they're all willing to use you as a shock absorber. Don't you get tired being put next to him most of the time?"

She smiled dreamily and shook her head. Bob was the shadowy person who lived in the house with her, who was so absorbed in business these days that he had little time for anything else, who was proud that she could hold her own with the distinguished visitor and relieved that he could shunt the conversation on her on the rare occasions the two men talked together.

Even the usually clear-sighted Barbara only commented: "Rather you than I, Sue dear! That man gives me cold shivers down my spine. I suppose you know we'll all see ourselves mercilessly analyzed some day in his confounded column?" And added affectionately: "Even an Eric Farraday couldn't find anything that's not fine in you, darling. I suppose that's why you're so fearless with him."

Sue smiled, unheeding. She was feverishly reckoning the number of hours that must pass before she and Eric would meet again.

Her queer little face was full of authentic beauty during these brief weeks. A velvet bloom rested on her cheeks, her lips were tenderly, endearingly curved. There were low notes of music in her young voice that made people glance at her, startled, at times.

Eric, on the contrary, grew thin and haggard. A perpetual frown caught his brows together, darkened his eyes. His forbidding dignity blinded even Allen to what was happening to both man and woman.

Farraday went punctiliously each morning to the hospital to visit his cousin. He sent flowers to the few women at whose homes he consented to dine. He was the reluctant guest of the Chamber of Commerce at luncheon,

and strove to overlay cynicism with courtesy, the result being a cryptic series of sentences at which the members laughed with some uneasiness.

“Clever chap,” they told one another on relieved breaths as the meeting broke up. “My wife says he’s the literary sensation of the decade. Bridge tonight, feller?”

It thrilled everybody to read the Farraday column every Sunday and speculate as to whether it had been written weeks beforehand or actually while the author was in town. There was some talk of paying him honor, formally, in a civic way, but as no one could think of a fitting manner they let the idea slide.

The evening came at last when Eric said:

“Sue, we must decide!”

“Decide?”

They were sitting before the fire, each in a fat armchair covered in peacock blue tapestry. Against the brilliant background Sue’s black head was in startling contrast. It was another of the evenings when Bob, murmuring something about having extra work to do at the office, had fled from what he considered the rather boring society of the columnist. Since his departure the two had sat in silence, Sue’s drowsy content unbroken even by thought.

“Decide, Eric?”

His deliberate glance flicked her into attention.

“When and how you are to leave Trenton.”

“Leave Bob?” She was like a swimmer coming to the surface of warm and pleasant waters; coming reluctantly to the surface. “But, Eric, I can’t—”

“Nonsense! Use your brains, Sue! We love each other, you and I. Trenton is—well, nothing to us. Fond of you undoubtedly, but that can’t be helped. We’re intelligent people. We must decide what’s best to do. Since Art made up his mind to get well instead of die, there’s no excuse for my lingering here any longer. I don’t wish to, in fact. I hate this smug town—any town except New York.” He moved restlessly in his chair, gripping its arms with his thin strong fingers. “I need the stimulus of many people—things happening.”

She sat silent, a troubled look slowly forming on her dreaming face.

“Can’t we go on as we are, Eric—for a while longer anyway?”

“No, we can’t!” He spoke so sharply that she winced. “Use your head, my darling! There is only one possible way out of this situation: divorce. Trenton’s a good fellow in his way. He’ll give it to you. Or if he doesn’t, you can leave him without one. It really doesn’t matter.” He leaned forward, his eyes suddenly alight. “All that matters, my love, my dear little love! is that we two shall be together—always! Oh, Lord God,” he said more in reverence than in profanity, “to think I should find you after all these years! To think that there should be a you and that the mere chance of Art’s illness, the fortuitous element of my meeting your brainless sister-in-law, should have brought us together!

“I tell you,” he continued, sinking his voice and gripping the chair arms still more tightly, “I wake in the night sometimes, sweating with fear to realize how very nearly—by what a narrow margin I failed to know you at all! Pats had ceased to amuse me—two hours in her company turned her soul inside out for me. I intended to avoid recognition here if it was humanly possible; simply see Art through the worst of it, or ease his last hours if it turned out that way, and go back. And then the door opened, and *you* walked into my life!”

He buried his face suddenly in his hands, a gesture which would have seemed womanish in another man but which sharply accentuated his words in Eric.

“I who have always scoffed at love am the most pitiable of its victims, Sue. The day doesn’t begin for me until I hear your voice. There’s magic in your look, the touch of your hand. Whatever you wear seems to me the most beautifully right garment a woman ever assumed. The way your lips part over your teeth is to me a revelation of loveliness. There is no one like you—no one!”

He laughed, a wildness in his mirth that startled her.

“I to talk like that—feel like that! I can’t believe it of myself; but then I can’t believe there’s a woman like you. Sue, do you know you’ve never told me—in words—that you love me?”

She answered rather sadly: “Do I have to tell you—in words? I wish it were not true, Eric!”

“That is,” he said deliberately, “about as wicked a thing as you could say. As well say you wish you’d never breathed; never known hunger and its satisfaction; never opened your eyes on beauty, or inclined your ears to music. Never to have known love, Sue! Just to have been half alive, darling!”

“I know! But . . . Bob,” she said, very low.

“What about Bob?”

“Hurting him—” She swallowed. “Can’t it—possibly—be avoided?”

“How?” he demanded. “Certainly not by staying on with him—living a lie as his wife, my Sue. That would be the real wrong, the greatest wrong you could do him. Besides . . . he’s had the first ecstasy, the first rapture of marriage. By now he’s settled down into a routine of business and home, business and home. Your leaving him will be a shock, of course, but not the devastating one you think it will.”

She smiled. “Will it be that way with you, too, Eric? Will you settle into routine when the first rapture has subsided?”

He crossed his long legs, sank a little more deeply into his chair.

“I’m not Bob Trenton. If I had been, could I have—awakened you, belovedest? I shun routine as I would the plague. I shall cherish our rapture as I cherish, not my own but your life! Oh, you shall see how jealously I shall guard it! When will you come to me, Sue?”

“Eric, I—Eric, I—I don’t mean to be silly about this. I know a man—you—can never be satisfied with what would satisfy me utterly: just this sort of relationship . . . seeing each other daily, talking . . .”

“No!”

“I said you wouldn’t, Eric!” There were desperate little shreds of laughter in her voice. “But—but—need we hurry so? Bob hasn’t the slightest idea . . . if it might be that gradually I could make him see, make him understand that you and I—”

“Sue, do you wish to make me really angry?”

“Eric, of course not!”

“You love me? You trust me?”

“Yes.”

“Then let me plan, let me map out the future for us both!”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ERIC had gone East and for a week Sue moved soberly through her days. They had effected a compromise though Eric had been wildly impatient at the delay it had involved.

Not until Christmas had passed was Sue to broach the subject of a possible divorce. Eric jeered at her sentimentalism and wryly she agreed that the blow could lose none of its force by a postponement of a mere week or ten days; but some instinct forced her to wring the concession from him.

She set herself to the study of her husband, trying to discover to just what degree his happiness was involved in marriage. Eric insisted (and Sue's respect for his ability to read character was greater than she knew) that Bob was one of the persons who valued only the unattainable; whose fervor subsided at possession, settled in a comfortable and rather vague feeling of ownership.

"And I hope with all my heart it's true!" Sue thought, standing at one of the long windows and looking with unseeing eyes toward the river. The bare trees gave her an unobstructed view at this season. When the sun set she could even see the red of sedge on the sandbars, winter fires burning against the dulled metal of the water.

Bob was pre-occupied, unlike himself. She wondered if at last some inner voice spoke to him of Eric. But when she introduced the subject of the departed visitor, he was frankly indifferent.

"Glad he's gone! He was wearing us both out."

"Oh, not me, Bob! He's—distinctly stimulating. I enjoyed knowing him. I . . . liked him tremendously. A—a real friend—" The breathless little sentences were tripping over one another. This was an opportunity to explain to Bob—

"Glad you found him so!" He stood up and yawned. "Poor Sue, you don't get much of that sort of thing, for a fact! Mental companionship, I mean. Farraday must have seemed a gift from heaven to you. Guess I'll turn in. It's been a long day. Coming?"

"Bob, couldn't we talk a little longer? It's not ten yet, you know. We—see each other less and less these days, do you realize it?"

He sat down again obediently. “Sure we’ll talk, honey! What’s on your mind?”

She leaned forward, her dark eyes fixed intently on his tired face.

“Bob, would you say our marriage has been a success? Have I made you a good wife?”

“None better, Sue!”

“I’m not—not asking lightly, Bob. I’ve a—a reason for wanting to know. Have you found anything—lacking in me? You remember that you used to say I . . . didn’t return . . .” The blood dyed her face and she lowered her lids.

“I used to talk a good deal of nonsense, I suppose.” He yawned again. “Queer how tremendously important it seemed at the time, wasn’t it? I mean—whether we both got the proper number of thrills out of our kisses, or not. And in the end it all settles down to the comfortable sort of relationship we have now.” He leaned across the hearth to pat her hand affectionately. “Good old Sue! You see now how perfectly it’s all worked out.”

“But—has it, Bob?” Her fingers locked tightly in her lap. “You said that after we were married I’d learn—I’d come to—care for you as you—you care for me! You said—”

“And haven’t you?” He was not taking the subject seriously, she realized with anger. His tone was the teasing one of an adult for an absurd child. “Don’t break my heart by telling me you’re disappointed in our life together, sweet! Don’t say you prefer a guy like this Eric Whatnot to your lawful wedded husband!”

“If I did?” She looked at him somberly.

“I’d send for an alienist and have your wits examined! No, Sue,” he went on more seriously, “it’s turned out a lot better than even I hoped—our marriage, I mean. It took Cecily and her being here to show me my good luck. You were right; loving is much more important than being in love. Take Allen, now,” he said conversationally. “To this day he’s in and out of hot water because of Pats. She keeps him in a state of emotional upheaval so that he never knows whether he’s on his head or his heels. That’s romance, from his point of view. It used to be from mine, too. I’ll confess to you, Sue dear, that when we were first married I’d torture myself by comparing one day’s response to my kisses to another. I drove to town almost every morning to the tune of: is Sue growing to care for me more, or is her love diminishing? Tommyrot,” he said cheerfully of his own uncertainty. “A relationship like ours is infinitely more satisfying. I know I can always

depend on you; you know the same about me. We're two decently considerate people, warmly devoted but not up in the air all the time about the varying degrees of being in love. And so saying," he concluded, rising, "this station is signing off and going to bed! 'Night, sweet!"

"I'll be up pretty soon," she replied.

But it was hours later before she left the fire. She built it up about midnight, laying fresh logs on the glowing embers.

What had become of the eager young lover whom she had married? Was it really true that Bob, tired and concerned now with whether they were to spend the evening out or whether he could get to bed early, had only a few years ago been the importunate young man who hung on her lightest word, was lifted up or cast down, as the case might be, by her warmth of affection, or lack of it?

Was he suffering by comparison with Eric's perfect understanding of her? Certainly her mind had never rushed toward Bob Trenton, sure of that sympathetic fusion it met when joined to Eric's thoughts! There was both rest and excitement in Eric's companionship; and wordless thrill in his love.

Again and again she jerked her thoughts from Eric to center them on her husband. Either Bob was changed—marriage had changed him as Eric said—or she had over-emphasized the importance of his wooing. If she could—if it were now within her power to give to Bob what he had so wistfully demanded in the beginning, he would without doubt be bored. Certainly surprised and perhaps displeased. He had caught his streetcar. Running had ceased to be an exhilarating exercise and would seem to him undignified. The streetcar itself was expected to keep to its tracks and indulge in no eccentric gyrations hither and yon. It was exactly as Eric had said it would be.

*Would it be like that with Eric himself?*

A cold little doubt began to squirm in her consciousness. She was a woman. Love would never be to her a "thing apart"; something to retire comfortably to the background of the mind as even the amorous Bob had retired it. Were all men like Bob? Was—in particular—Eric?

Her heart said "no"; her mind said "yes". The day would come inevitably when it would be she who would reckon the sum of each day's assurance, each day's caresses, fearfully weighing them against yesterday's, those of the day before; while Eric, if he were too subtle to put it in Bob's

naive words, would nevertheless achieve Bob's comfortable philosophy: that it was more important to love than to be in love.

What then would she gain by leaving Bob for Eric?

The cold clear question for the moment overrode the feverish tumult of her brain.

She would gain . . . rapture, if fleeting; ecstasy, if ephemeral; love, if only a springlike ardor soon to burgeon into lusty and commonplace summer warmth. And oh, she wanted those things! They constituted her woman's birthright. Men were so made that they could love and ride away, love and ride away, the miracle renewing itself perhaps time after time. To a woman it came in all its exquisite freshness but once—if it came at all!

It was hers now for the mere acceptance. She had but to stretch her hand to lay hold of it. Must she relinquish it for duty, barren and astringent handmaid to romance? Would Bob benefit if she waved Eric away, vowed perpetual allegiance to what her husband himself called "a satisfying relationship?" Was it not a feminine zeal for martyrship which kept wives faithful rather than inherent integrity?

"If the cases were reversed how long would Bob stick to me?" she inquired of herself. "Why, when Cecily was here there were times when he seemed actually to reproach me for the inconvenience she caused him! He'd deceived me about her, he'd fallen in love, married, parted from a wife . . . and it was so unimportant to him that he'd never told me!

"I played fair! I warned him before we were married that I might meet the right man, fall in love with him . . . and Bob laughed! Well, let him laugh now! He'll be hurt," she mused more seriously. "He'll be badly upset for days—for weeks. But he'll find consolation in the sympathy of the town. Even if he lets me divorce him, it will come out later that I've married Eric and everyone will know I treated Bob badly. Allen will try his best to make it up to Bob. Barbara will. Maybe Barbara and Bob . . . stranger things have happened!"

She sighed heavily.

"If he'd only suspect—quarrel with me about Eric! If we could bring the subject out in the open, discuss it, even angrily. But Bob's like a trustful child. It has never occurred to him that his wife—his wife!—could be other than faithful with him, anything else but entirely happy! The unconscious egotism of it, the appealing confidence! I'm torn between the two. But there's Eric to think of, as well as Bob. Eric!"

And at that beloved name, her senses swam. Firelighted room, Allen, Barbara, Bob—all were swept away as she imagined herself once again held close in Eric's arms, listening to the pounding of a heart which beat for her alone.

How she knew that to be true, she could not have told, but know it she did. Eric's covering of sophistication hid something shy and sweet and hitherto untouched. It was deep calling to deep, between her and Eric Farraday. It was the traveler in a strange land experiencing the shuddering delight of hearing his own tongue spoken after weary days of dismay, bewilderment. It was discord resolved into harmony, it was voyage-worn ships making harbor at the close of a long season, it was cool water in the desert, flame in the snow, the deliciousness of food after famine.

It might not last, it could not last—for Eric; but even to experience it briefly was an enchantment she had no right to deny herself or Eric.

She, little Sue Davenport, with her odd dark face and her unimportant mind, was a worker of miracles. Out of all the women whom Eric had met—and they had been many, and clever, and beautiful—she had been chosen to turn the key which let love into his being. Oh, marvelous, oh, wonderful! What, in comparison to this, was the keeping up of that “satisfying relationship” of which Bob had spoken?

Nothing! Less than nothing! Tomorrow—or at least the day after Christmas—she would tell Bob so; explain quite kindly and firmly that duty, after all, was not only a personal matter, but a relative matter; that her duty to Eric's genius far outweighed anything she might once have promised Bob Trenton, of the *Treadon Shoes*.

Sue put the screen in front of the fire, snapped off the one lamp she had kept burning, paused by the window for a last look at the river, lighted only by the stars tonight, and took her way up to bed. Bob was fathoms deep in sleep among his own pillows.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

CHRISTMAS EVE found Sue with her plans made. She and Bob would celebrate the holiday as usual, with Pats and Allen coming for dinner the night before and remaining until late Christmas afternoon. And when they had gone, and Bob and Sue were alone, she meant to talk to him quietly, calmly about a divorce.

She had not reached her decision without many heartaches. It was as if two personalities strove within her: the tender, loyal girl who had married her husband, honestly confessing that the sort of love she had for him was not the sort she had dreamed of surrendering as a bride; and the new, slightly ruthless woman, made ruthless by her devouring passion for Eric Farraday.

Eric's letters arrived daily, spurring her to immediate action, steadying her oft-times wavering plans.

She shopped as usual for Christmas gifts: a luxurious evening coat for Pats, who had hinted strongly for it; books and silk socks for Allen; for Bob —she had hesitated over this, disliking the impersonality of such a present yet disliking still more to choose anything more intimate—a carved jade paperweight for his office.

She had never to ask Bob for money for her personal needs. The generous allowance he had made her when they were married not only sufficed her but kept a comfortable surplus in the bank. She was glad of this. It was, she reasoned, her money because she had saved it; therefore she need not scruple to use it for traveling expenses when she left St. Joseph.

As she drove home from a last moment shopping trip late on the afternoon of Christmas Eve, she felt that everything was done she could do to make this occasion a successful one. Holly hung in the windows, a gay wreath of it on the front door. The pantry was stocked with delicacies for tomorrow, the great turkey was ready for its chestnut stuffing. Two of the guest rooms had been prepared for Allen and his wife. The servants had been remembered, the fees for postman, milkman and various others were neatly sealed in their tiny envelopes.

Because snow had fallen that morning, she wore her galoshes. Their rubber soles made no sound as she went upstairs and into her own sitting

room to deposit her last purchases. The door was slightly ajar and from within came the murmur of voices.

“Pats must have come early!” she thought, and with a light hand swung the door gently open. The tableau which met her eye froze her where she stood. Bob was seated in a corner of the couch, his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands. Before him Patsy knelt, her half bare arms pulling his face down to hers.

“Poor, poor boy,” she was crooning. “My poor darling Bob!”

From those spread, desperate fingers came a broken murmur.

“Pats, Pats! There’s only you . . .”

Noiselessly Sue withdrew; gained her bedroom without the absorbed pair at the other end of the room knowing of her presence. Her face was flaming, her palms were icy.

So! While she had been wrestling with her conscience over the coming separation with Bob, he had been indulging in a violent love affair with—this was what hurt, this was what stung her pride!—with Patsy, of all people! Pats, whom Bob had called “cheap”, against whose greediness he had warned Sue, at whose unkindness to Allen he had railed.

And now, in Sue’s own sitting room, dressed in the very gown Sue had bought for her, this scene was being enacted!

As always when in the grip of emotion, she walked to the window and stared out. She stood there a long time, not hearing Allen’s arrival, not even knowing when Patsy and Bob went downstairs. Suddenly she threw back her head with the gesture of one freeing himself of a heavy burden.

“This certainly simplifies things! I was a fool to let it upset me. Why, it makes everything perfect! Bob will give me a divorce, and console himself with Pats. Allen, dear Allen, will be free of her at last! Oh, it couldn’t be better!”

“Sue!” It was Bob shouting below. “We’re all waiting for you! Coming down soon?”

“In five minutes,” she returned composedly.

When she joined them around the fire below, she fairly sparkled. She had run a wet comb through her curls and they framed her face charmingly. Her lips were crimson, her cheeks bore traces of unusual color. Her eyes shone as they had not done in years.

“Golly, Sue, what have you done to yourself?” Allen asked admiringly.

She answered gayly, stole a glance toward Bob. He seemed as usual save for a certain look of strain about his eyes. Perhaps he, too, had been fighting a battle with conscience, she thought a little pityingly. How absurd that she couldn't put an end to the situation now, in a few forthright words.

“You love Pats, Bob, and Allen will be glad to be rid of her. As for me, I'm counting the days, the hours, until I can marry Eric Farraday. Let's all plan, like the sensible persons we are!”

The words very nearly escaped her; would have, she thought later, if it had not been for her brother. Allen's sensitive face, lighted now with happiness in being with his dearly loved sister, checked them almost as they left her lips. No, better do the thing more decorously. The day after Christmas she would quietly leave the house, take a bus to Kansas City, and from there a plane to New York. She would not talk to Bob, she would write. No need now to distress herself or him by the interview she had planned.

It was a queerly hilarious Christmas. Bob seemed in wild spirits though now and then he fell into fits of brooding which, Sue thought, she would not have observed had it not been for what she knew of him. Pats on the contrary was quieter than usual. Only her new attitude of tenderness toward Bob betrayed her. Sue was gayest of them all. If it was a brittle sort of gayety, if her laugh had a feverish note, no one seemed to realize it. Allen as always threw off his habitual look of anxiety when he found himself Sue's guest for any length of time.

They dined alone, but a troop of laughing guests swept in upon them soon afterwards. Rugs were rolled up, the radio turned on, everybody danced. At midnight there was an impromptu but nonetheless adequate supper.

The next day went by like a dream. Sue was conscious of the rustle of tissue paper as gifts were opened, of her voice and Patsy's exclaiming, thanking, admiring, upon the undertone of the men's. There were the usual Christmas odors: fine perfumes, the fragrance of evergreen, the smell of roasting turkey; there were the usual Christmas sounds: *Silent Night*, for about the fiftieth time, over the radio; belated carols sung off key and in nasal voices by a group of sharp-faced men and women who objected whiningly to the sum of money Bob sent out to them; gay greetings over the telephone, and in person from their friends. Another meal, with Pats sharing the men's port and cigarettes while Sue nibbled absently the salted almonds.

When Allen and his wife had finally gone, Bob shut himself in his study. Sue realized with a start that he had done this more and more frequently of late. Poor old Bob, she thought, with a sudden stinging of her eyelids. So it hadn't been easy for him, this yielding to Patsy's lure! He had actually been wrestling with a sense of duty toward his wife even while Sue herself had been seeking the most effective phrases to break her own news to him! She smiled after him tenderly. If he did not so loathe scenes, she would follow him, tell him that only a few hours separated him from the freedom he must be craving.

She kissed him with genuine affection the next morning when he left the house. It hurt her to see him flush, his eyes avoid her own clear gaze. "But never mind, dear old man," she thought. "When you come home tonight you'll find my letter!" She held him—being a woman and therefore sentimental—for a moment, her hands gripping the lapels of his coat.

"Bob, we've had some pretty good times together, haven't we? No matter what happens, we can always remember we did have those!"

He started violently. "Sue, what on earth? You sound like somebody in the third act!"

"It's a hangover from yesterday, maybe," she laughed. "Too many Christmas mottoes and greeting cards. I might add one to the stack of 'em: may your—our next Christmas be twice as happy as the last!"

For a moment he stared at her searchingly, then finding only laughter and amused affection in her dark eyes, he released her.

"Sure!" he flung back. "Sure we will, Sue! And then some!"

When his car had sped away she set about her preparations swiftly. She had so long rehearsed them in her mind that no time was lost in planning. The big wardrobe trunk was brought from the storeroom and filled with practically everything she owned.

"Going East for a little visit," she explained to the maid who helped her.

For the rest she took a well-stocked overnight bag. She would be in New York for a few days only, just until she and Eric could perfect their plans; then Reno and her freedom, and she and Eric meeting in San Francisco where they would be married. After that, the long three months in Honolulu both of them longed for.

She drove her own car into town and parked it at her usual garage.

"Mr. Trenton will call for it tomorrow," she explained.

The bus trip was jolting and uncomfortable but she could make better connection that way than by train. She gazed at the familiar landscape a trifle wistfully. When would she see these rolling hills, these mighty trees, these peaceful farms again? She would come back, of course. Mrs. Eric Farraday would be a personage in a small way; a woman society would welcome, especially when Bob had married Patsy.

Sue winced afresh at the idea. Not only was her sister-in-law Bob's inferior in every way, but Sue herself hated the fact that the timing of this incredible infatuation would provide the best of reasons for her own flight and remarriage. She would have liked to do the thing honestly, she told herself: to pay a price in public disapproval for the reward of Eric's love.

She found to her dismay that the plane schedules had been changed over the holiday and she had hours to wait. She drifted down Petticoat Lane, window shopping, absently noting the bargain prices already affixed to Christmas goods. Newsboys jostled her, bawling unintelligible news.

But suddenly out of their high-keyed yelping a name began to recur insistently: *Treadon, Treadon!* She listened closely and was able to identify another: *failure!* She seized a paper from a startled lad, pressing into his hand the first coin she found in her purse.

## GREAT SHOE FIRM INTO BANKRUPTCY

The noon edition had little news that was spectacular to add to its morning's output. It played up this one item to the limit. Bob's handsome face—handsome even in the blurred reproduction—peered out at her. A mere paragraph sufficed to hold the kernel of the message, but a garbled history of the mushroom growth of the company had been added: the elder Trenton's humble beginning, the typically American rise to popularity of the *Treadon* products, the succession to power of the son, and his—as it now proved—fatal decision to move the headquarters of the business from New York to the Middlewest town. Or so one of the directors was quoted as saying. The Kansas City paper took his statement for a text on which to preach of Eastern arrogance and lack of vision. "The true reason for the failure," wrote a glib reporter, "may be said to lie rather in the fact that young Trenton insisted on running a one-man show."

There was more of it: reference to his marriage to a St. Joseph girl, "the charming Sue Davenport who is well-known to Kansas City hosts"; reference to the Trenton home, "built for a famous young aviator who met a

tragic death . . . was it an omen of the ill-fortune soon to befall its present owner?" but Sue read no more than that first brutal paragraph.

Bob was ruined. The business he gloried in, to which he had devoted more and more time after his marriage, was gone.

Suddenly incidents were whitely illumined for her now: Bob's pre-occupation, his growing distaste for social life, his hours alone in his study while she talked with Eric, or later sat dreaming of him before the fire. He had seen this coming, poor Bob, and had fought his fight alone . . . without his wife's sympathy or support.

But there had been Pats . . . standing still on the crowded sidewalk, Sue struck one hand smartly against the paper. What an idiot she had been! Pats, with her business training, had known Bob's desperate straits. That scene on Christmas Eve—it all came back to Sue now. It had not been a man in the throes of an illicit love who sat there, gripping his head in his hands. Pats' embrace had been one of comfort, surprising enough in Pats but nevertheless unmistakable now to her sister-in-law.

What . . . what was Bob doing now? Had he returned from the office, leaving the wreck of his hopes behind him forever? Had he sought his wife, his home, only to discover that faintly mocking letter which awaited him?

Sue's rigidity left her instantly. She was roweled into action by the thought of her own written words. The bus? She couldn't wait for a bus! She stopped a yellow cab. Could she be taken to St. Joseph? She would pay . . .

Urged equally by his passenger's recklessness and her promise of a generous tip, the driver covered the distance between the two cities in a little more than an hour. Mercifully no state patrolman saw that insanely driven car. To Sue, it seemed to crawl.

She did not think of Eric, she made no plan beyond reaching her own home, snatching that letter before Bob's weary eyes fell on it.

She was thankful for her fat roll of bills when the taxi stopped before the gate. She looked about her anxiously. Bob's car was not in sight; but then he might have put it away in the garage.

She had left her latchkey beside the letter so she was compelled to ring. The maid's surprised face awakened her to a need for caution.

"I changed my mind about going, you see, Nellie," she said. "Mr. Trenton has had bad news. Is he here?"

"No, Mrs. Trenton."

“Hasn’t been?” she asked fearfully.

“No, Mrs. Trenton.”

God be thanked for that! Sue fairly ran up the steps, into her sitting room where she snatched the letter, standing accusingly against its bowl of flowers, and tore it into bits. Not content with this form of destruction, she made a pile of the tiny pieces on the hearth and lighted them. Only when the light ashes floated up the chimney did she rise to her feet and draw a long breath. Now she must plan—act.

She went to the telephone, called Bob’s number. His personal secretary answered.

“Mr. Trenton’s out just now, Mrs. Trenton. I don’t know when he’ll be back. No, he left no message but I got the impression he didn’t intend to return at all today.”

“You have no idea where he went? The Benton Club, perhaps? The Chamber of Commerce?”

“I wish I knew.” Something human and sympathetic crept into the crisp voice. “Neither of those places, I’m afraid. It’s—it’s a terrible blow to him, Mrs. Trenton; but of course you don’t need me to tell you that!”

Sue, her hand still on the instrument, bit her lip. Where should she call, whom should she call next?

Allen! The answer blew gratefully across her hot perplexity.

It was late afternoon before Bob returned to his home. Allen had telephoned his sister several times, reassuring messages for the most part. Bob was tied up in a conference at the bank, Bob would be free presently, Bob was perfectly all right; pretty low in his mind, poor fellow, and dog-tired, but taking the blow like a man.

Sue met him in the hall. Her small face was quite beautiful in its forgetfulness of self, in its sweet sympathy. He stared at her for a moment as though she were a stranger. Then:

“Sue!” he said brokenly. “Oh, Sue, you’re going to stand by me! I knew of course you would, but I didn’t realize all it would mean to me. Sue . . .”

“There, Bob, there!” She drew him into the livingroom with a soothing hand on his arm. “Of course I’ll stand by you. I’m your wife!”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

“**Y**OU need a man to do that, Sue,” Pats said disapprovingly. “That is, if you’re going to bother with it at all. Personally I don’t see why you do!”

Sue, panting a little, ceased her attack on the clods of dirt in the tiny back yard. The area she intended to be a flower garden had been spaded but not raked. Now in the thin April sunshine, she was dressed in old riding clothes and her shabbiest shoes, wrestling with the stubborn clay.

“It’s fun,” she informed her sister-in-law. “This used to be a charming old garden, Barbara’s grandmother tells me. I’m going to try restoring it just as it was in the Academy’s time.”

Pats’ disparaging glance traveled from the tiny brick building which was now the Trentons’ home, to the larger one some fifty yards away.

“Who but you would think of living in an old kitchen!”

“Kitchen! It was the diningroom, I’d have you know! That’s what gives us our lovely big room downstairs. But think of the poor girls having to trail clear over here in wet weather when mealtime came around! I wonder why, when they were building the academy, they didn’t include diningroom and kitchen!”

The other girl shrugged. It seemed to her supremely unimportant. The Young Ladies’ Academy had flourished more than half a century ago. Now the larger place was an apartment house, the smaller had been made modern to the extent of adding plumbing, lights and furnace. Nothing else had been changed.

“You were foolish not to take an apartment,” she rebuked the gardener. “You could have had five nice rooms for the same rent as this shack.”

Sue smiled but said nothing. Her tiny domain had charm, and she knew it. The wide-boarded floors were of walnut, the big old room which, with the exception of the small kitchen constituted the entire first floor, was quaintly panelled.

“You haven’t asked me what I came for,” Pats suggested presently. She was smart in a green wool suit, with gloves, hat and shoes of the same

creamy brown. She had dragged out a chair for herself, careful to see that it was placed on the sidewalk and not on the actual scene of Sue's labors.

"For the pleasure of seeing me, I hope!"

Pats did not smile. Allen's sister was no longer an asset to her save that her popularity in the town seemed undiminished. Mrs. Allen Davenport had to buy her own clothes now, could no longer dine at the beautiful Trenton place, nor rely on a Trenton car to drive her about.

"I came to tell you that your house is sold!"

Sue's smile vanished. How like Pats to wish to be the bearer of bad news! Not that it was bad news, in this case. The sale of the beautiful home north of town had been an occasion of rejoicing to both herself and Bob; but Pats could not know that.

"Aren't you sorry?" Pats demanded. "Heavens, Sue, you're the coolest thing! Think of that lovely place—all its furniture and everything! I should think you'd simply howl at the idea of letting it go. Forest says you needn't have given up the furniture, or your personal things—like your own car, and the pearls Bob gave you. You were an idiot to do it, I think!"

"I'm sure you do, Pats; but Bob and I saw the matter differently. Whew, this clay is stiff!" She dug into a pocket for her handkerchief and wiped her warm face. "As for the sale of the house, I knew about it last week; knew that there was a chance for it, anyway." Her tone dismissed the subject so emphatically that even Pats hesitated about commenting further. However, she had other tiny barbs which she proceeded to throw at Sue, hoping to penetrate that busy young person's calm serenity.

"Forest says they offered you a grand position in that new antique shop," she observed. "Why on earth didn't you take it? You could have kept a maid, then, and still have money of your own. It's far smarter to be a business woman these days, whether you need to or not, than it is to do your own housework."

Sue's ironic gaze rested briefly on the expensive figure of her sister-in-law. This from Pats! When Allen's home was badly run by the servant who had finally succeeded the long suffering Maggie; when Pats' earlier training could have enabled her to take her own advice without difficulty! Sue remembered the last time she and Bob had dined with the Davenports, and Bob's disgusted comment on food and service when they reached home.

"Forest says—"

“Forest has a good deal to say, it seems to me, Pats! What we do, or don’t do is really none of his business. There! I’ve got this pretty smooth, I think. Bob and I are going to put the seeds in tomorrow afternoon.”

“His afternoon off, isn’t it? Doesn’t he feel terribly, working in a retail shoe store? I told Allen I wouldn’t embarrass poor Bob by going in—”

“He isn’t a clerk, you know; he’s a buyer. I doubt if you’d see him. Go in by all means, if that’s where you like to buy your shoes!” There was an edge to her voice. She had had enough of Pats for one morning.

“Well, anyway, I do think it’s been a tragedy for you both! Giving up your membership in the Country Club, losing everything on earth you possess, having people drop you from their lists—”

Sue suddenly lost patience.

“Did you ever hear of Job’s comforters, Pats? You’re a swell imitation of one, anyway. I’m going into the house now. Coming?”

“Y-yes. For a little while, perhaps. I’ve got to meet some of the girls downtown for lunch but there’s an hour yet.” She glanced about the big room they had entered. “I’ll say for you, Sue, you’ve done wonders here!”

The other nodded briefly. At last her share of her mother’s furniture had come out of storage, and beautiful old furniture it was, too. The well-proportioned old room would have satisfied the most exacting taste, its owner thought. Upstairs were two bedrooms and a bath, reached by an almost spiral staircase curving from a narrow hall. This was her entire domain, and she had come to love it already.

She was not unhappy, she realized suddenly. She was, in fact, more nearly content than she had been in years. Perhaps it was because all decisions had been made, the uncertainty ended, the parting with Eric finally effected.

There had been a terrific struggle between them. Looking back, it seemed to Sue incredible that so momentous a situation could have existed for days and none of those near her have realized it.

She had sent Eric a letter on the day of Bob’s catastrophe. She had worded it cautiously but so explicitly that she felt he could not fail to understand. His sole reply had been: “Come at once.”

Telegrams flew back and forth between them for two days; then he called her, flinging discretion to the winds. Sue had taken the call in the living room at the actual moment Bob and his lawyer were discussing the

settlement of his affairs in the library adjoining. Interrupting her eager flow of words, Eric said:

“The failure is beside the point. It has nothing to do with us. For the last time, Sue, will you come?”

“Eric, you must see that I can’t. Not now, at least. When things are better, when Bob gets this mess straightened out—”

“Do you love me, Sue?”

“Oh, Eric, yes!”

“Then put all this nonsense aside and come. Or I’ll come to you, if you’d rather. I’ll take you away. Do you hear me, dearest?”

“Yes.”

“And—your answer?”

“It has to be—no, Eric, I can’t. Not possibly.”

“Pity for Trenton?”

“Perhaps; and not being a quitter when I’m needed.” Her voice grew firmer. “It’s one thing to leave a—ship when the weather’s fair; it’s another to desert it in a storm. I should think you’d be the first to see that, Eric.”

“I see just one thing: that either you love me or you don’t. If you do, nothing else should count. If you don’t, I must know it now.” And then, more tenderly: “My darling, you must come!”

Her throat closed with anguish. That beloved voice had such power over her. Bitter resentment filled her that this calamity of Bob’s should have befallen him just now. She had a cowardly wish that she had been safely in New York, that Bob should have read her letter, before the blow fell.

Perhaps she was being womanish about Bob’s need for her; mawkishly sentimental. It might even be that Bob himself would feel freer if he had only himself to look out for. She dallied for a wildly hopeful minute with that thought, then put it from her. Bob’s sick eyes looked to her for comfort a dozen times a day. Her hand on his arm could make him straighten the broad shoulders which sagged under their unaccustomed load of anxiety.

Bob was a child of the sun. Gay and charming when all went well, his bewilderment in adversity took the form of irascibility. Sue had all she could do to keep him from quarreling with his friends, his business advisers.

Night after night she went to bed bruised in spirit and tired to exhaustion in body. It seemed to her she had a battle on with half the world! With Eric, first of all. He called, he wired, he wrote. In the end he defeated his own cause by arousing her anger. She loved him nonetheless but she resented his assumption that his need for her overruled any moral obligation she might feel toward Bob. She told him so in words so clearcut and decisive that he could not fail to understand. The silence which had enveloped him ever since then sometimes terrified her.

She had Bob to fight, of course, in a score of ways. Willing, even eager to surrender everything of his own to his creditors, he was stubbornly determined to keep every possible luxury for her.

“Either your debts are my debts, and your honor is my honor, Bob, or—they are not, it is not! You can’t have it both ways!”

That eventually silenced him. Then arose the question of his new job, a home for both of them. Allen had offered eagerly to give her old room back to his sister. Bob thought it would be the best plan. Sue folded her lips firmly and set forth to hunt a small house or apartment. When she found the quaint little brick building in which they now lived, Bob had been frantic with rage and humiliation. Even Allen said mildly: “It sort of advertises to the world the poor fellow’s failure, Sis!”

“It does no such thing! It simply tells people—if they happen to be interested!—that we are cutting our garment according to our cloth. And I’m the one who has to live here, Allen. If I prefer it to a stuffy apartment, I suppose it’s my privilege?”

He laughed and put a brotherly arm about her.

“Don’t fly off the handle, little Sue! You may live over a grocery store, for all I care—if it pleases you!”

The final and longest struggle had been, oddly enough, about the position Pats had mentioned. In a town where almost every second house boasted lovely old furniture brought long ago from Virginia, from Kentucky, along with a complement of slaves, the antique business flourished mightily. Shoppers came from Kansas City, even from Chicago. Sue was known to have made a special study of period stuff, in an amateur way.

“It’s the perfect job for you,” Barbara had argued. “Easy hours, good pay; practically your own boss; and you’ve always said you hankered to go into that very business. Now that you need it, you suddenly decide you have

to stay home and cook meals and wash dishes instead. It's not like you, Sue dear," she said reproachfully, "to be so contradictory."

Sue cupped her friend's anxious face in both hands.

"Babs, it seems to me best. Can't we let it go at that?"

She would not explain further; but deep in her soul she knew that for her to go out into the business world and earn her living would be the final straw where Bob was concerned. He must feel that she was dependent upon him. He must be spurred on by that dependence to renewed effort. He was too young, too really clever, to resign himself to his present position. He had it in him to build a new business career for himself, if he were sufficiently pressed by need—her need. Sue intended to see that he felt that need.

It had taken nearly three months to settle, one by one, these vexing questions; but they were settled now, and spring was here, and Sue could draw a long breath and relax.

"Stay to lunch?" she asked Patsy, forgetting the engagement just mentioned.

"Heavens, no! I told you I'm meeting some friends downtown; and anyway I'll bet you eat bread and milk off the kitchen table!"

"You're wrong, my dear. Bob comes home for lunch—or didn't you know? That's another of the advantages of this house: it's almost downtown though it has all that lawn in front, and the garden behind."

"Garden! You're the world's prize optimist if you really see a garden in that backyard. You're funny, Sue. You act as pleased with this silly house as you did with the lovely place Bob gave you when you were married." On her way to the door, she fired a parting shot. "Did you know that it was really Cecily who brought about *Treadon's* failure? It was—Allen told me so. She owned a lot of stock, you know, and she sold it, or something."

Sue pondered this news when she was alone. She had no doubt it was true. Cecily's inborn mischievousness would dictate exactly that sort of thing, if the opportunity arose. That it could not have arisen unless the business was tottering, she realized perfectly; but in all probability Bob could have weathered the emergency if Cecily had helped instead of turning against him.

"That's twice she's come between me and happiness," she thought with sudden rage. "I was really beginning to—well, to love Bob when she came

here and blew everything to bits. And this time . . . I'd have been with Eric by now if she'd not interfered as she did!"

She was glad that Bob called presently to say he could not be home for lunch. It would give her time to get hold of herself. Women, she had often observed, were capable of making the most important sacrifices for others, and then spoiling it all by bitterness and reproach afterwards. She was going to keep herself in hand!

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“SUE, you little fiend, I never know whether you do these things purposely, or whether Fate simply places the chance in your hands!”

“Like what, Bob?” she asked demurely from her low stool in front of the fire.

“Like your springing the news on me that you’re going to have a baby just when this Queen City deal is pending!”

She laughed. “The two things have no connection, lamb!”

He eyed her darkly from his shabby leather chair.

“Oh, haven’t they! You’re a schemer, if there ever was one. You say you saw Dr. Van Ness last week but I take notice you failed to mention the big news until tonight; until I am able to give you the complete details of the Queen City affair.” He filled his pipe thoughtfully. “It’s bound to change my decision in the matter.”

“Which way, Bob?” She clasped her arms about her knees, looking like a child in her red silk dress, with the firelight gleaming on her dark curls. “Will decide you for or against?”

“H’m! You’re asking me? As if you hadn’t it all thought out in that diabolical mind of yours! Would you mind letting me know? Do we rear our son in a small country town, with his dad as owner of the sole shoe store, or do we carry on here as we are?”

“You tell me, Bob!”

He sighed. It was part of Sue’s technique. It was the way she had forced him to make decision after decision. He realized somewhat dimly that his character was strengthening under this process; that the light-hearted young man who had fallen heir to his father’s successful business was a stranger to the Bob Trenton who was picking himself up again after a bad spill.

“I suppose there’s no question about it,” he admitted a little reluctantly. “There’s no future in what I’m doing now. There’s the promise of one in Queen City if old Pearson’s plans go through. But have you thought what life will be like in a country town, Sue? A sort of death-in-life for you, I should think!”

“Why not for you also?”

“Gosh,” he told her simply, “I’ll be too busy to know whether I’m in Queen City or Pekin!”

“I expect to be fairly busy myself,” was her composed reply. “We’ll have to start all over again with a house, you know; a garden, too, perhaps.”

His eyes lingered regretfully on the mellow old room.

“I never expected to hate giving this up! I thought we’d moved into the poorhouse when you picked this out. But you’ve made it mighty comfortable, honey. I should think you’d have a pang or two yourself when you think about leaving it.”

“Oh, I do! I love every board in this funny old floor. I love the garden I literally wrested from the weeds and clods of the back yard. But I can make another garden, and we’ll take this furniture with us, of course. It’s sort of exciting to create things, isn’t it?”

“Sort of. You don’t think the baby will complicate the situation? How about doctors—hospitals? I don’t think Queen City boasts much in either line.”

“It’s only ninety miles from here. I could easily come in beforehand. Are you—are you thrilled about your daughter’s impending arrival, Bob?”

“I’m knocked clean off my feet at the idea of having a son,” he countered promptly. “You know, Sue,” he went on in a rare burst of confidence, “I’ve wanted kids—lately. Not at first. I was all in a ferment about you when we were first married. And then things got bad with the business, and I was worried and upset, and the crash came. I was darned glad then there weren’t children to complicate matters. I suppose we’re really in no position to have them now, for that matter. Still, if we’re ever going to—”

“Exactly!” she agreed. “I’m awfully happy about it, Bob.”

She continued to be happy during the tiring days which followed. A storm of protest greeted the Trentons’ announcement that they were leaving St. Joseph for the small town of Queen City. Allen was seriously disturbed over it.

“Talk about a future! What future can there possibly be for a man in a country store? A shoestore at that! I never even heard of a shoestore in a town of that size. Usually shoes are a sideline in the general stock. Bob’ll find himself out of a job in three months time, you’ll see!”

“Mr. Pearson doesn’t think so, Allen. He was a junior partner with Bob’s father, you know, years ago—before he sold out and started the *Pearson’s Peerless* line. He thinks that with all the good roads and motorcars we have now there is no reason why every town shouldn’t have its shoestore. It isn’t as if it were an experiment either. He’s established these stores in the East and they’ve succeeded. Why not here?”

“Because the country is not so thickly settled; the towns are farther apart. And even if Bob does make a go of this Queen City store, what is to come after that? A slightly bigger town, a slightly bigger store? No percentage in that!”

“But there is, Allen; that’s the point. Pearson isn’t hiring Bob as manager; he’s giving him a half interest. If he adds a store every two years—even every three or even five—he’s piling up an income. Don’t discourage him, Buddy,” she pleaded. “Even if it fails I’d rather have Bob try than stay here working for someone else. He’s got real executive ability. It just needs developing, that’s all.”

He looked at her curiously. “You have a lot of faith in Bob, don’t you, Sis? Goodness knows you’ve stuck by him like a house afire. If he doesn’t get ahead it won’t be for lack of encouragement from his wife.” The bitterness in his tone was significant. Sue winced as she thought of how little encouragement Allen himself received.

The Trentons’ packing was complicated by the delegations of friends who dropped in to protest their departure. Forest and Barbara Webb gave what they called a “donation party” on their last evening in town. The guests brought their own refreshments, their own paper cups and plates and forks, even their own folding chairs, since the furniture had gone by truck that afternoon.

Sue and Bob had expected to dine out and sleep at the hotel, driving directly to Queen City the next morning.

“All we ask is that you keep the house warm,” Forest had telephoned. “We’ll bring everything else.”

So in they had trooped, bearing the most absurd gifts: a hot water bottle in case there was no electricity for Sue’s heating pad; candied fruits, tins of caviar, fat black olives, the specially imported Irish bacon which Bob liked so much; an order on a florist to supply Sue with budded plants of lilies of the valley every other week until Easter; subscriptions to magazines, chief among them being periodicals dealing with farm problems; fruitcake, boxes and boxes of it; two gorgeous Canadian blankets, light and soft; the

collection looked like a cross between an outfit for an Arctic expedition, and supplies being laid in for a house party.

“You’ll see the day you’ll need every bit of it and more,” Forest predicted darkly. “I understand you can’t even buy Cheddar cheese in Queen City!”

“Even then we may be able to worry along,” Bob assured him. “As a matter of fact, I don’t believe we’ve been buying many fancy cheeses in the last year or two, eh, Sue?”

She was dimpling and smiling over the “donations.”

“You’re darlings, every one of you,” she said warmly. “Even if Queen City is all of ninety miles away, I suppose we may hope to see you now and then? Say every five years or so? These will come in handy when you do drop in, at any rate!”

“Plan to come on Saturday and buy your shoes from me,” was Bob’s brazen suggestion. “You’ll get a lot more for your money in Queen City than you will here, let me tell you! My overhead alone will be lower than—”

Barbara extended a satin sandal. “Going to carry these in stock, Bob? I expect not. Boots to plow in will be more in your line.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” was the cool answer. “Small town girls nowadays like chic footgear as well as their city sisters!”

Even Sue was half incredulous of this statement. She had expected, beneath the layers of her conscious mind, to be more or less alone in her new environment. She was punished speedily for this involuntary snobbishness.

The house Bob had rented in Queen City was almost as large as their first home though without most of its conveniences. It had in fact been a farm house until the lusty little city overtook it. It still spread ample skirts of lawn on either side, with lilacs, peonies, spice bush, syringa and iris to form the nucleus of Sue’s new garden. In the back there were three glorious apple trees, a dark-limbed peach which was to glow with the rosiest blossoms its new owner had ever seen, and rows of stately hollyhocks.

Next door in an immaculate white cottage lived three most remarkable women. One was the author of a textbook on calculus, a subject the very mention of which terrified Sue’s very soul. One was co-editor of a well-known garden magazine. The third, perhaps the most interesting of all, was a busy lawyer, her office a single room detached from the cottage, her clients

apparently coming from all over the state to seek her advice. Sue passed through successive stages of astonishment, admiration and delight as far as these neighbors were concerned.

On the other side lived a humbler pair: husband and wife who last year had celebrated their golden wedding anniversary. Their devotion to each other was charming. Sue and Bob both came to adore them.

“I love having all this room again!” said Sue on the second Sunday after their arrival.

“You must—with half of it empty!” he retorted. “Do we buy more furniture Sue, or do we simply shut up some of the rooms?”

“We compromise. That is, we stretch what we have over the downstairs: front and back parlors, sitting room, dining room and kitchen. Upstairs, we furnish what we can: three bedrooms probably. We’ll use the south one for the nursery.”

“What about getting a maid? I’m going to be away a lot, you know; store keeps open late, even on weekdays. And in your condition—”

“My condition’s very satisfactory, thank you! And I doubt if we could get a maid here, Bob; we’d probably have to import her from St. Joseph. Anyway, let’s go along as we are for the present. Thank heaven there’s a furnace! I was afraid with stoves, and your being so busy, we might have to get someone in.”

It was on the whole a pleasant winter though Bob worked too hard, and spent too little time at home. Queen City was proud of its one shoestore, and not only patronized it instead of driving to the city for its footgear, but advertised it liberally through the less fortunate hamlets which had no such store. Business was good and Bob had but one helper. Long after this youth had taken himself home to his hot supper, the owner and manager lingered to attend to his correspondence, to go over his stock, to calculate his next order.

It was during these long days that Sue found reason to bless her neighbors. They had begun their good offices by bringing two hot, delicious meals over on the day of the Trentons’ arrival. The old couple supplied lunch, or “dinner”, as they termed it and as it proved to be. And just before six, after an exhausting afternoon of furniture placing and unpacking of books and clothing, sweet Mary Hampton arrived with a hamper of steaming food.

“What a lot you’ve accomplished!” she exclaimed admiringly. “And what lovely old furniture you have! That Chippendale desk is a beauty.”

Sue’s face mirrored her astonishment. She was still more surprised when a few days later she found in the Hampton home pieces far finer than her own.

She joined the local literary club more to increase Bob’s business than in the expectation of receiving cultural enlightenment; and was jolted out of her citybred complacency by finding most of the members far better informed on such matters than she was herself.

Later she was to come in contact with the petty gossip, the unbearable inquisitiveness, the narrow standards which remain like a sediment in the sparkling waters of most country towns; but for this first winter, everything combined to present Queen City’s most enjoyable side.

Sue had her sewing, that peculiarly charming and touching garment-making of the young mother-to-be. She had the radio, with world-famous voices, world-famous orchestras—and for the first time in years, leisure to listen. She had enough housework to keep her in good health, not enough to tire her unduly. She had her interesting neighbors. She had Bob, and Bob had her.

They grew closer together every day. Bob talked over the store with her, described his customers, asked her advice about the spring orders. Gradually Sue came to know those who bought from him: first by his vivid, if sometimes ridiculous descriptions, later by personal acquaintance.

She knew the Steinhausen girls on the big farm west of town: hard-working daughters of a stingy farmer who would not allow them, grown women as they were, to select their own shoes, but himself came in to feel with fingers hardly less leathery than the article they explored the stout laced oxfords, or thick-soled brogues. Once Sue saw him jerk from the wistful touch of his eldest a satin slipper at least four sizes too small for her foot.

And once Sue’s heart was wrung by a young father who brought out four soiled dollar bills and said briefly they must suffice for shoes for both his children. The oldest, a boy of eleven, turned anguished eyes from the sturdy boots Bob’s assistant took from the pasteboard box.

“Aw, Pop, aw, Pop,” he stammered. “Don’t none of the fellers wear boots to school any more!”

“But you have to wear ’em in the fields, son; and Pop can’t no ways git you two pair!”

They looked long at each other, worried, understanding, harassed father and agonized little boy; then the child gulped and nodded. Sue nearly wept with love of her husband when he came forward, saying pleasantly:

“Did I hear you saying something about needing two pairs of shoes for this young man, Mr. Layton? Well, you’re playing in luck today, you sure are! I’m closing out a couple of lines—his size, too, what d’you think of that?—and this is once in your life when you can buy two pairs for the price of one!”

Because she could not trust herself to say what she thought of this, Sue commented that evening: “Do you have many days when you do business like that, Bob?”

He grinned sheepishly. “Old Pearson would fire me if he’d overheard, wouldn’t he? But—but it might have been our kid, Sue, you know!”

In spite of such incidents, or perhaps because of them, the new store flourished. “Old Pearson” wrote personally and encouragingly of its tiny success. If it held up like that for two years, they might consider starting another in Leighton, twenty-two miles away.

Spring came, and the lilacs and spice bush and syringas burst into fragrant bloom. The grass was emerald beneath the appletrees. The peachtree glowed with rose, with coral. Sue had a maid now, a husky country girl whose muscle was better developed than her brain. It was only by conducting the housekeeping along the simplest lines that Sue managed at all. Pats and Allen, driving out to a late Sunday dinner, were disgusted and amused respectively by the service of the meal.

“You, Sue, of all people to live like this!”

“What’s the matter with the way we live?” she demanded placidly.

Her sister-in-law pointed eloquently to the plate which had just been set on the table. It held squares of butter, each neatly speared with a toothpick. Sue chuckled.

“It’s Mame’s idea of really stylish service,” she said. “I couldn’t imagine why on earth she insisted on running over to the drugstore when she found you were coming. It was to buy the toothpicks. Help yourself, Pats, and butter one of these biscuits. I’ll warrant you never tasted any that were more delicious!”

In June Sue was driven frantically into the hospital, and with less ado than anyone, even Dr. Van Ness had expected, Robert Allen Trenton was

born.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

**A** TRIM maid admitted Allen. His sick eyes had not been quite oblivious to the fact that the Trentons' Atchison home was large and comfortable, tangible evidence of Bob's new prosperity. The maid was another.

Sue came downstairs on swift feet.

"Allen! Oh, Allen, dear!" And then, in a frightened voice: "What is it, Buddy?"

He licked his dry lips. "Pats has left me, Sue. May I—may I spend a few days here with you and Bob? I had to get away."

"Of course, my dear!" She drew him down to the couch, took her place beside him. "How do you mean, Pats has left you?"

"Just that. She's gone—with Forest Webb," he added almost as an afterthought.

Sue was stunned. Forest Webb! It could not be. True, Pats had of late quoted Forest more and more frequently. But Forest was Allen's closest friend, as his sister was Sue's own. It simply could not be that Pats and Forest—!

But it appeared it not only could be, it was. Allen told her about it in brief, dry sentences. Pats had not left a letter—not Pats! She had called him from Kansas City, explaining quite gaily that she and Forest were on their way to New York. (Allen wondered a little at Sue's involuntary shiver as he got this far in his recital.) Forest, it appeared, had severed his connection with his old firm; had made new arrangements with an Eastern one. Pats wanted Allen to divorce her. "You can be decent and call it desertion, or you can name Forest as co-respondent; it doesn't matter to me at all!" she had concluded flippantly.

"But—but I should think she would have wanted it the other way around; that she would go to Reno—"

Allen shook his head. "She knew I'd never consent to that! Lord, Sue," he continued with a hint of irritation, "don't you suppose we've been all over that ground time after time? She was always asking for a divorce. We've hardly had one month's happiness together."

“Why didn’t you give it to her, Allen?”

A look of stubbornness replaced his dulled grief.

“I wouldn’t—I won’t. If there’s to be a legal separation between us, Pats will have to be the one to get it, not I!”

“Even now?” she asked incredulously.

“More than ever now!” Anger flamed in his sunken eyes. “Let Forest Webb see how far he’ll get with Pats hung ’round his neck!”

His sister was silent, stroking the hand she held in both her smooth ones. Allen was unbelievably changed, she thought. He was bitter, unreasonable, quick to anger. Pats had done this to him! She tried to feel anger in her own mind but relief at the other woman’s going was too great. Allen needed rest and a change of scene. Here with her and the children, he would soon be himself again.

She had his bag taken to her charming guest room. She summoned sturdy four-year-old Robert and tiny Susan to greet their uncle; and she presently shut herself upstairs in her sitting room to warn Bob by telephone of the presence of their visitor.

“Fine family, nice house!” Allen said heavily that evening.

Dinner was over and the two men were smoking in the library. The warm March day had ended in a burst of cold rain, and Sue was glad of the excuse for a small fire.

“You’ve made a wonderful comeback, old man!”

“I’m doing pretty well,” Bob admitted. “Thanks to Sue!” He sent her an affectionate smile. “If she hadn’t stood by me like a house afire, I’d have been sunk years ago.” Then remembering guiltily that Allen’s wife had not stood by him, he attempted to change the subject. “Funny—finding ourselves on this side of the river! But since Sue can see it here even better than she could in St. Joseph—”

“Yes, that’s why I chose this house,” she interrupted brightly. “We get such a marvelous view of it here.”

“How many Pearson stores do you own now, Bob?”

“Half own, you mean. Pearson always retains a fifty percent interest, you know.”

He went at length into the number and size of the stores, the territory they covered. Allen listened absently. The Trentons knew he was not hearing a word.

He remained in this half dazed condition for several days; then gradually Sue won him from his bitter musing.

“You say yourself you and Pats haven’t been happy, Allen. You’re free now; free to live your own life. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“I’ll never be free,” was the somber answer. “Pats—Pats is part of me, somehow. I don’t know whether I love her, or not; it doesn’t seem to matter. But her life and mine seem so inextricably joined that it’s like amputating a leg, an arm, to think of her gone.”

“Habit,” she diagnosed cheerfully. “I predict that in three months’ time you’ll be thanking your lucky stars she left you. The thing now for you to do,” she said with a certain firmness she had found helpful in dealing with this new and vague Allen, “is to give up your apartment, store the furniture, and move to the Benton Club. You need a complete change of scene.”

He shrank as though she had struck him.

“Sue, I can’t! I mean that literally: I can’t! There’s something of Pats left in those rooms, I can remember how she looked, words she spoke—”

“Allen!” Sue spoke sharply. “Don’t talk as if she were dead! She’s very much alive—and living with Forest,” she added deliberately. “You’re being morbid about this, Buddy. It’s not like you to act so, speak so. I don’t believe,” she went on with healthy scorn, “that you really loved Pats at all, even from the very first. I grant you there was a strong physical attraction. Pats is that kind of woman. But after that—habit, as I said, a chivalrous feeling of responsibility for her, worry over her extravagance—they’ve all combined to keep her foremost in your thoughts. You miss her just now the way you’d miss an aching tooth. But love her—no!”

He stared at her in bewilderment. “How do I know what love is, Sue? I had—for Pats—” he groped among his thoughts, seeking words—“that tingling awareness that gives meaning to existence. Isn’t that—surely that’s—love?”

If he had not been so absorbed in his own perplexity he would have started at the change in his sister’s face. “The tingling awareness that gives meaning to existence.” Was there ever a better definition of passionate love? That was what she had felt—what she still felt when she permitted herself to

remember—for Eric Farraday. Not for Bob, not for her husband and the father of her children, but for Eric, God help her!

She shrank back in her chair, an old longing possessing her. Eric with his gray eyes and high held head! Eric with his calm mastery of any situation in which he found himself! Eric against whose breast she had leaned, thrilling at the throbbing of his heart beneath her cheek. Eric, Eric!

She had been deeply content with Bob, she had even been happy. She had respected the steady growth of his strength, the courage and good humor with which he had learned to meet adversity. He was a strong man, now; not the gay, light-hearted young husband, untried, and inexperienced whom she had married. Month after month, year after year, he had made himself into a man she could admire whole-heartedly. But there was never any “tingling awareness” of his presence. He did not “give meaning” to her life. They had jogged on comfortably together, proud of their children, making loyal allowance for each other’s faults and weaknesses, considering their marriage eminently successful.

A dreadful blankness of spirit seized her. Allen, the brother she had pitied, the man whose life lay in ruins about him now, had had what she had been denied, the sort of marriage which gave meaning to existence. A cheap and common woman like Pats had the power to give men such happiness. It was the explanation of Forest Webb’s incredible act.

Sue, huddled in her chair, knew that her marriage to Bob, her courageous fight to lift him from his business catastrophe, her summoning of his forces to start all over again, was a far finer thing than Pats could offer any man, or any man give Pats in return. Finer, better, braver; but strangely savorless and empty just now.

The knowledge made her patient with Allen; and it required patience, and all her tenderness, to endure the ten days he spent with her. Every ring of the telephone brought him panting to where the instrument rested. He paced the floor an hour before each expected mail delivery. At least once a day he called his office in St. Joseph to inquire if there had been any “message” for him.

“Pull yourself together, guy,” Bob adjured him, not unkindly. “You’re acting like a lovesick girl, you know.”

“I suppose so.”

Bob shrugged. He considered Allen’s case hopeless indeed if the taunt could wring only that dull assent from him.

Both the Trentons were relieved when he returned to his work. Sue, dearly as she loved her brother, realized that his plight had set an old scar throbbing, had made necessary the re-winning of an old battle.

All during the day she could keep busy, cheerful. Getting Robert off to the kindergarten, seeing to small Susan's nap, her lunch, her airing, listening enraptured to her baby voice experimenting with new combinations of words, filled the waking hours; but at night Eric came back, whether she lay staring with sleepless eyes at the ceiling, or dropped into uneasy slumber.

"Sue, come to me!" said his imperative voice again and again. "If you love me, come to me at once!"

No use to tell herself that she had not the least idea where Eric was now; that for all she knew to the contrary he was married, and the father of children. His column had long ago disappeared from the papers she saw. This might mean everything, or nothing: that he was devoting himself to more serious writing, that he was not writing at all; that he was dead.

Sometimes she pondered the acute influence Pats had had on her own life. If she hadn't married Allen, Sue herself in all probability would not have contracted that hasty marriage with Bob. It had been in Pats' overheated, over-scented room that Sue and Eric had met. And now, in her final exit from the Davenports' lives, she had demolished, for the time being at least, the warm serenity of Sue's present.

"For a light weight, she certainly has left her mark upon us," Sue told herself with a wry twist of her lips in the darkness.

After Allen's departure, she threw herself more energetically into the round of her daily duties. She played an excellent game of bridge, and joined a club which accounted for an afternoon out of each fortnight. She went often to Kansas City to shop. She had Bob's business friends to dinner, devoting herself so closely to the food and service that they—for the most part paunchy old bachelors who had been too cautious to marry in their youth, and were now too fearful of being snapped up for their money—eyed him wistfully.

The children were her best defense against the corroding unhappiness which Allen's words had unsealed.

Baby Susan was an embryo poet.

"She 'lisps in rhyme,'" her mother told Bob proudly.

"Great Scott! Don't let her!" he protested, alarmed.

But tiny Susan went on, as unconscious of the music of her speech as a bird is of the beauty of its song.

“Muvver and bruvver, and love one anovver,” Sue would hear her crooning to herself. “I can’t go out to play, bee-cause it wains today.”

“She honestly can’t help it, Dad,” young Robert said, sharing his father’s masculine distrust of this sort of thing. “She thinks it that way.” And added the encouragement he had heard for his own youthful faults: “Maybe she’ll outgrow it!”

The summer passed, and another winter. Allen had disposed of his apartment and moved into the Benton Club. His eyes were still unhappy, but he was outwardly composed and fairly cheerful. Barbara, to say nothing of Sue and Bob, had prevailed on him to give Pats a divorce. She and Forest were married and living in New York.

And it was to New York that Sue, during the summer that little Susan was four, was summoned by a frantic telephone call from Forest Webb.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

SHE had been dressing for a dinner party when the summons came. The children, as they loved to do, were playing about her room before their early supper. Oddly enough Sue always afterwards remembered the dress she had intended to wear.

It had come home that afternoon, a lovely thing of old-fashioned silk mull, of the clear canary yellow which so became her dark eyes and creamy skin.

“I wish my hair would grow,” she murmured to herself, and was unaware that she had spoken aloud until Robert’s decided voice said:

“I don’t! I like your curls, Mother!”

Susan echoed: “I like your curls, Mother!”

“Do you, darlings? That’s good, because they simply refuse to grow into long hair that I could make into a knot like other people’s. There’s the telephone, Robert. Will you answer it for Mother? If it’s someone calling Dad say he’ll be here any minute.”

“It’s for you,” the small boy told her presently.

Her mind was on Bob’s tardiness as she took up the instrument. When the operator said: “New York City calling Mrs. Robert Trenton,” she hardly understood for a moment.

“This is Mrs. Robert Trenton!”

There were the usual delays and half-understood words; then a voice which was vaguely familiar said: “Is this you, Sue?”

“Yes. Who is—”

“Forest. Forest Webb. Can you hear me?”

“Forest Webb?” For a moment she had a dazed idea that Forest was back in St. Joseph, that something was wrong with Barbara. “What—what is it?”

“Listen, Sue. Pats is ill—dangerously ill. In fact, she’s—never mind. The thing is: she wants you. Will you come—at once?”

“Wants me?” She could only repeat his words, parrotwise.

Forest betrayed some irritation.

“Pay attention, Sue! Pats has set her heart on seeing you before—well, she wants to see you. Isn’t that enough?”

Suddenly Sue heard her own voice answering: “No, it’s not! Why should Pats wish to see me? And why should I go, even if she does?”

“Sue, you can’t mean that. She’s a dying woman. I . . . I’ve done everything that can be done for her. The rest is up to you. I don’t know why she’s set her heart on having you come, but she has. You won’t refuse her? Please, Sue!”

Behind her Sue heard Bob come in. “Just a minute, Forest,” she said. With her hand over the transmitter she explained swiftly: “It’s Forest Webb calling from New York, Bob. He says Pats is—well, dying. She wants me to come. What shall I tell him?”

“Let me talk to him!” was the brief answer.

Three minutes later he put the telephone in its cradle.

“I’ve promised you shall go, honey. I hope it’s all right. It seemed only decent somehow, since she’s so set on it.”

“But do you think she’s rational, Bob? She can’t be—to want me to come. There’s nothing Pats can have to say to me. If it were Allen now!”

“Maybe Allen is on his way there,” her husband suggested. “Shall I find out?”

Sue nodded, and Bob put in the call.

“Evidently he knows nothing of Pats’ illness,” he informed her at last. “I got Van Ness—after trying, as you heard, almost everybody else he knows—and he says Allen’s been playing golf since three o’clock. I suppose you’d better fly, Sue. I’ll call Kansas City and find out when the next plane goes.”

She looked down at the golden glory of her gown.

“The dinner party—”

“I’ll see to all that.” He was actually a little impatient with her. “After all, dear, she was your brother’s wife—once.”

“Which makes it doubly impossible for me to believe she wants to see me now! She never liked me, Bob—you of all people should know that. I—I feel disloyal to Allen, going off to her like this.” She raised darkly unhappy eyes to his. “Somehow I have a feeling it’s wrong for me to go, Bob!”

“I expect it’s the thought of leaving the children.” He smiled at her reassuringly. Faced with the need for making plans for her, Bob was his kindest and most resourceful self. “Get out of that rig—it’s darned becoming, Sue!—and pack what you need. Remember to keep down the weight of your bag. I’ll have to drive you to Kansas City, I suppose. I’ll call now and find out—”

Dazedly she lifted off the pretty gown, donned instead a dark blue swiss with white organdy collar and cuffs. A light silk traveling coat, a small close-fitting hat, the expensive dressing bag containing everything she needed, which had been Bob’s last year’s birthday present, a pair of loose soft gloves . . . her preparations were made by the time Bob had secured his information.

“Robert, listen!” She knelt and took the little boy in the circle of her arms. “I’ll talk to Selma before I go, but I want to put Sister in your care. Promise me—promise me, my own boy, that you’ll look after her! And, Susan, you’re to do what brother tells you. If you don’t want to, do it anyway, and then talk to Dad about it when he comes home. But obey him promptly!”

The eyes of mother and son met above the small golden head of the little girl. Well they knew her incorrigible habit of absent-mindedness, the entire probability of her wandering off without bothering to mention her destination—if she knew it herself. Time after time Susan had been lost, only to be returned to her frantic mother by some kindly townsman who recognized her. Tender remonstrance, even punishment had not so far served to cure her of these excursions. Susan wept penitently, promised better behavior, and let her small feet stray off in search of some rainbow’s end of her own childish dreams.

“I shall be frantic if I can’t depend on you, Robert!”

The dark eyes so like her own looked back at her steadily.

“You can depend on me *every single minute*, Mother!”

And Sue, drawing a long breath, knew that she could.

She was in the car beside Bob, giving him last directions; she was in Kansas City, being directed to her seat in the big plane. She was flying through the night, her mind at last emptied of all save speculation about Patsy. Patsy dying! Of an illness, an accident? Had she wanted Allen? Would Allen go to her if he knew? Why should Pats wish so intensely to see a woman she had never liked? Would Forest have tired of her greediness, her

selfishness in these years he had been married to her, or would the infatuation which had held Allen so long still keep him bound to her, even though unwillingly?

A phrase of her brother's flashed through her mind: "the tingling awareness that gives meaning to existence!"

How many men had been thus aware of Patsy? Allen, Forest—even Eric perhaps, temporarily. Men in New York too, in all likelihood; men unknown to Sue but whose attraction to his wife had undoubtedly frayed the edges of Forest's patience as Allen's had been frayed.

The big ship moved swiftly, smoothly eastward. Sue thought of all the emotions which were being bound by the fiery ribbon of its passage: the stark and hopeless grief, the wild incredulous joy, the dull resignation, the sleek sense of righteousness, the rebellion against tyranny, against law and order, against, in some case, love and tenderness. Hearts burned hotly or slowed to a fluttering close below her, but here all was space and freedom and an unconscious dwarfing of human problems.

"Pats! Sweetheart! Heart's dearest!"

It was Forest's agonized voice. He knelt at the bedside, Sue stood close at hand. At the foot of the bed was a nurse.

"Pats, here's Sue! You wanted to see Sue, beloved! Can't you open your eyes? Oh, darling, darling!" Down went his head on the clean hospital coverlet.

"Doctor will be in to give her a stimulant soon, Mr. Webb," the nurse said, clearing her throat. "I expect she'll know you then."

But Forest kept on with his attempts to rouse his wife. Sue, after the one shocked glance at the face on the pillow, had resolutely kept her eyes turned away. Pats? This haggard and ugly woman! It could not be!

She remembered Allen's wife as she had last seen her: smartly if a little too expensively dressed; shining hair and painted nails; painted mouth, too, but cleverly painted. Not beautiful, unless one could call anything so perfectly turned out beautiful. Pats would rather have had a sin on her soul than a flaw on her clear skin; her reputation ripped to shreds in preference to a ladder in her sheer stocking. Say what you would against her morals, her character, you had to admit that her appearance, at whatever hour or in whatever situation you found her, was flawless.

Now the skin was a waxy yellow, with deep pouches beneath the sunken eyes. Though she was but a year or two older than Sue, her neck was corded like that of an old woman. Her nails—those shining ovals the care of which was almost a religion with their owner—were bitten down to the quick. Sue held back a shudder as she looked at them.

No accident this, but a lingering illness which had drained Pats of everything. No, not everything when Forest Webb, whose love of the beautiful was almost an obsession, could hang above his wife, incessantly crying her name!

The doctor came, the stimulant was administered, Patsy roused for a few minutes, muttered thickly, lapsed into coma again. Forest renewed his frantic plea for recognition. The physician touched his arm.

“It’s not the slightest use, Mr. Webb,” he said kindly. “I doubt if she ever regains consciousness again. She may linger on like this for hours, even for some days, but she’ll not rouse again. Believe me, it’s better so. Hard for you but better for her!”

The long day wore on. A nurse took Sue to a room across the corridor, brought her a meal on a tray.

“What is it?” Sue asked her. “My brother was her first husband. Mr. Webb sent for me to come. I know absolutely nothing beyond the fact that she is dying. Is it—is it cancer?”

The nurse shook her head. “No, I’m thankful to say. Peritonitis. She’s only been ill six days.”

Sue was incredulous. “Six days? And she looks like that?”

“Oh, my, yes! Her temperature’s been up to 106, time after time; she’s suffered horribly except when she’s been given opiates. Her poor husband! It’s been all we could do to make him eat, and as for sleeping—” she shrugged eloquently.

Night came and still Pats lived. Sue tiptoed into her room, put a comforting hand on Forest’s shoulder, realized that she did not exist for him, and stole out again. She was desperately tired but she disliked to go to bed. At midnight an interne took her gravely aside.

“It’s Mrs. Trenton, isn’t it? I’d get some sleep if I were you. The patient may live until morning—until tomorrow noon perhaps. There’s absolutely no telling. Her resistance is wonderful. In any case, she’ll not know you. I’ll instruct the nurses to call you if there’s any change.”

She had come straight from the landing field to the hospital, her nightbag was with her. Thankfully she undressed and crept between the cool sheets. The big building echoed to its night sounds: the rubbershod feet of nurses coming and going in the corridors, the occasional long moan or ether-crazed voice of a patient as a door was briefly opened, the low but matter-of-fact voices of doctors. All the noises blended at last in Sue's mind with the whirl of last night's motor, and she slept.

Pats died a little after ten the next morning, without regaining consciousness, without knowing that Sue was there. Sue breathed a deep sigh of thankfulness when it was over. She thought Forest's mind would surely go if the suspense had been prolonged a single hour. As it was he allowed Sue at last to take him home to the apartment he and Pats had occupied on East Sixty-fourth Street. It was in an old brownstone house which had been remodeled, and the rooms were neither so large nor so well furnished as Sue had unconsciously expected.

"There's a guest room," he told her vaguely. "I don't know whether it's in order, or not. You see, Pats—it all came so suddenly—"

"I'll find what I want," she soothed him. "Forest, why don't you go right to bed and get some sleep? They told me at the hospital it's been two nights since you've rested at all."

He passed his hand wearily over his forehead.

"There are things to do. I must telephone—"

She moved to a small desk. "Give me a list of the people you want notified and I'll call them; send telegrams, too."

"I'd like Barbara to come," he said unexpectedly. "Sue, if we only knew what it was Pats wanted to say to you! If only I'd called you before! But you see, the doctors still gave me hope, so I—"

"I doubt if she wanted to say anything, Forest dear. I think it was just delirium. People get odd ideas when they're delirious, you know."

It required nearly an hour of coaxing to get him to bed. Sue promised to see the undertaker, she promised to call Barbara, she promised to send wires to Pats' sisters. She alternated an attitude of firmness with pleading, and at last he stumbled wearily away, to sleep for several hours, then start up, calling Pats' name.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“How is he?” Barbara inquired anxiously.

Sue gave her a swift hug. “Oh, Barb, darling! I’m so glad to see you! Forest? He’s—not so good.”

“How not so good?”

They were in a taxi, driving from the landing field to Forest’s apartment.

“He keeps talking about it all: Pats’ illness and death, I mean. How she’d had these attacks before and he wanted a medical examination but she was too afraid it might mean an operation; how Forest has reproached himself a thousand times that he didn’t take her to a doctor in spite of herself; how the final attack came and the appendix ruptured and neither of them realized anything except that the pain was gone; and then Pats waked him that night, moaning and out of her head—”

“For heaven’s sake, Sue!”

“Yes, it’s awful. I can’t get him to stop. I couldn’t get him to bed last night until I’d sent for a doctor. That’s why he wasn’t there to meet you this morning. He’s still asleep from the opiate he was given at midnight.”

“You poor dear!” Barbara looked at her friend affectionately. Her brother’s elopement with Allen’s wife had done nothing to interrupt her friendship with Sue. “You were angel-good to come because Pats wanted you. But it was odd, wasn’t it? I mean her insisting on having you here.”

“I don’t believe she had the slightest idea of wanting me. That’s another thing that upsets Forest. He’s got it into his head that Pats had something important to say to me, and that if he’d only called me sooner I could have got here in time. I hope you’ll do your best to convince him it was nothing—it could have been nothing, Barb. Why, what could Pats have to say to me? She never liked me.”

“Liked you, no; admired you, yes. I think you always stood to Pats for what she’d have liked to be herself. I suppose she carried you in the back of her mind; sort of tried to live up to you all the time. That’s probably why she was so insistent on seeing you when she became delirious. Poor Forest,” she sighed. “I confess I don’t envy myself these next few days. You’ll stay, Sue?”

“Until after the funeral, of course. Then I must go back. What shall you do, Barbara?”

The other girl shook her head. “It depends on Forest. Mother and Dad think I should stay on and keep house for him. I will—if he wants me, needs me; but I—I hope he doesn’t.” A lovely color dyed her face and Sue looked at her sharply. Was it Allen—at last? Were the eyes of her brother, for so long blind to this girl’s love, open after all these years? Sue devoutly hoped so.

Things went better after Barbara’s arrival. Forest became more reasonable. He rested, allowed the two women to attend to such details as they could deal with, went through the funeral services with more composure than Sue had hoped.

There was only a pitiful handful at the chapel. Evidently the young Webbs had not made many friends in New York.

“And now, my dear, I must be thinking of going home,” Sue said the next morning.

Forest had gone to his office, a sad, quiet man who assented almost listlessly to any plan made for him. Sue and Barbara had lingered on at the breakfast table after his departure. It had been a long time since they had had the chance to talk so uninterruptedly, so intimately. Barbara had paid regular visits to the Trentons wherever their home had happened to be, but this was the first time they had found themselves together without the children, without Bob. They had much to say to each other.

Barbara, while not exactly admitting there was an understanding between herself and Allen, had been shyly skirting the subject. Sue smiled and let her take her time. She could understand that this was hardly the hour or place to make such an announcement; nevertheless the thought of Allen’s being happy at last brought her deep happiness.

“Oh, no, Sue! Not yet!” Barbara said in answer to Sue’s remark. “Now you’re in New York, do stay on at least a week or two! It’ll do Forest good. I need you. I’m sure you must have some shopping to do.”

“All those reasons, Barb? No, lamb, I really must be getting back. Bob needs me, the children need me. Susan is such a little runaway I’m always worried when I’m away from her.”

The telephone rang. “It must be Forest,” Barbara muttered. “I don’t know a soul—”

“It’s for you,” she announced suddenly. “Some man, Sue.”

Without the slightest throb of premonition, Sue answered. Even when Eric’s voice spoke her name, no realization at first came to her. She had not thought of him as being in New York. Her mind and heart had been filled with Forest and his grief these last crowded days. She said numbly: “Eric!”

“Yes, Eric, Sue. Where and when can I see you?”

“Why—why—” She glanced about. Barbara had withdrawn to the tiny kitchen and begun to wash the few dishes. “How did you know I was here?”

“I saw the notice of Patsy’s death and wondered if you’d come. I watched you arrive at the chapel yesterday—I was outside. Sue, I must see you!”

“That’s—that’s impossible.” Her heart had begun to hammer, her breath was coming raggedly. “There is no place here—”

“Say you have an errand this afternoon.” It was his old imperious voice. “I’ll be waiting for you in a taxi. At four, Sue!”

She assented without argument. There was never any use to argue with Eric, she knew of old. If she had made objection to his plan, he was entirely capable of coming up here, of coolly requesting Barbara to leave them to themselves.

She was trembling a little when she left the elevator. Barbara had been so unsuspecting! Sue had explained that her call had been from an old friend; that she, Sue, had agreed to go out for tea at four o’clock.

“I wish you could ask her here,” Barbara said regretfully. “But Forest might come back from the office early, and it wouldn’t be pleasant for you.”

A car, not a taxi, stood in front of the building. Eric sprang out from it as Sue appeared.

“My dear!” he said. “My dear!” and then before she could answer he hurried her into the back seat and gave the driver a direction. “It isn’t far, so don’t let us try to talk until we are by ourselves.”

The tearoom where Sue presently found herself was quite deserted at this early hour. It was a dignified, almost stately place, devoid of those chintzy attempts at brightness she had half expected. Their order was taken by a middle-aged waitress who served them swiftly and then disappeared. Eric pushed away his plate of cinnamon toast.

“Sue, you lovely thing!”

The ardor in his voice made her eyelids fall over her upward glance. She had felt a little countryfied and simple as she donned the dark blue swiss she had worn in the plane. True, it had been pressed and fresh collar and cuffs basted in, but it seemed an unsophisticated little frock in which to meet a former lover! She could not know how lovely was the column of her throat above the white collar, how gracious the line from shoulder to wrist as she lifted her cup, how darkly splendid were her eyes.

She strove for composure. "You're looking well yourself, Eric. What are you doing now? And do you still live in New York?"

His brief, reluctant laugh rolled back the years.

"Such is fame! Sue, you little ignoramus, have you never heard of *The Issue*?"

"Of course," she returned indignantly. "Everybody reads it."

"Not quite everybody. It's a trifle too expensive for some purses, a trifle—shall we say? too subtle for some tastes."

"Too risqué," she amended frankly.

"But clever, Sue? You admit it's infernally clever?"

She nodded. "Both terms are entirely accurate. But what has *The Issue* to do with you?"

His arms were folded on the table, his smiling face was close to her own.

"I'm the editor, that's all. D'you mean you didn't know?"

His amusement filled her with the old sense of tagging breathlessly, admiringly in his wake. She hated the note of apology which crept into her attempt to explain.

"I've been so awfully busy, Eric! I have—there are two children, you know. They keep me occupied every minute. And we've lived in so many places—it seems to me I'm always making a new home. I read—of course I read, but I never happened to glance at the names of the staff on *The Issue*."

He waited patiently until she should have done with these details. Then he nodded.

"It doesn't matter at all, my Sue. Still, *The Issue* is quite the most important thing of its kind in America. I suppose I hoped you would be a little proud of my connection with it."

"I—I am proud, of course, Eric!"

“You don’t want that tea.” His hand set aside the cup with which she had been playing. “Sue, isn’t it over?”

“Isn’t what over, Eric?”

“The period of your duty to Trenton. I understand he’s on his feet again in a business way. That’s why you stayed, wasn’t it? To help him because he’d made a mess of his affairs. You’re free now.” It was a statement rather than a question.

“Free?” She so far forgot her perturbation as to smile. “Didn’t you hear me tell you I have children? Two of them: Robert and little Susan. They’re darlings, Eric.”

“I have no doubt.” He spoke coldly. “And I also have no doubt you’ll insist on bringing them with you. Well,” he continued, narrowing his eyes thoughtfully, “I shall try my best to be a decent sort of father to them. That is, I shall never venture to criticize your management of them.”

The implication of this astonishing speech reached her slowly. She withdrew her hand and leaned back in her chair, staring at him.

“If you mean what I think you do, Eric, you’re talking nonsense. Bring them with me—to you? Don’t joke about it, please.”

“Joke? My darling, I never was farther from joking in my life, I assure you. Wait a moment—let’s get this thing cleared up. I love you, Sue. I’ve never stopped loving you for one single minute. If you need proof of that, here I am, single and heart-whole, save for you. Do—you—love—me?”

The last words were spoken deliberately, almost solemnly. Sue felt the hot color stain her face from brow to throat. She strove to answer him lightly, but her throat seemed to close on her utterance. She tried to lift her eyes to his, but the lids seemed weighted. She could only sit there in miserable silence, her visible agitation telling him more loudly than words could do what she felt.

“Thank God! Not that I doubted you, darling. Love like ours doesn’t alter. We’re back where we were when I left you in St. Joseph. But this time there’s no Trenton with his picayune failure to stand between us. You’re mine now, Sue—all mine!”

The voice which had had the power to shake her heart since first she heard it ceased. The lean, almost ascetic face was close to hers. She felt as she had done when, at Susan’s birth, it had been necessary to give her ether.

She had welcomed that obliteration of her senses gladly; she fought this with all her might.

“Eric, you must be out of your mind, I think. Leave Bob—leave the children? If it was impossible years ago, it’s a hundred—it’s a thousand times more impossible now.” She made a movement as though to rise. “There’s absolutely no use prolonging this. I shouldn’t have come here at all—I see that now.”

“Sit down, Sue. I’m not going to abduct you bodily here and now. You’re quite safe. And I have a good deal to say to you. I see I didn’t take into account what this period of unadulterated domesticity would do to you. My standards are—slightly different, you know.”

“They are, indeed, if they include leaving my children for you!”

He laughed. “It’s nice to hear a touch of your old spirit, darling! But you’ve misunderstood me. I know you better than to think you’d leave the children. Bring them, bring them! I expect I could grow very fond of your children, Sue.”

It was said so simply, without the faintest hint of patronage, that Sue was momentarily disarmed. Eric must be a lonely person, she thought. She wished suddenly that she’d found him married, with children of his own. She told him so.

“Yes, I’ve wished it, too, many times. But there is only—there will always be only one woman in the world for me. When can you come to me, Sue?”

She felt a rising tide of mixed amusement and annoyance.

“Eric, you talk like a child! Do you think—even if I were willing to leave him—that Bob would simply and cheerfully give up his children? This is a futile and foolish conversation, my dear. I do beg of you to end it.”

“End it? When nothing has been decided? What could Trenton do if you left him; just brought the children here to New York with you? Pats came with Forest. It all worked out.”

The feeling of being partly anesthetized began to pass. Had Eric always been like this—unreasonable, absurd, even a little childish? She felt as though she were dealing with young Robert in one of his most impossible moods. There was a maternal note of patience in her voice as she answered him.

“Pats had no children, Eric. Besides—Pats and I are two different persons. I haven’t the slightest intention of leaving Bob. Whatever I may have felt for you, Eric, years ago—”

“Sue!”

“Whatever I may feel for you even now,” she went on bravely, “it isn’t enough! I know now it never was enough. I—let me be perfectly honest with you, Eric. I was deeply infatuated with you then. I think that’s the right word. Enough of the old feeling lingered to make me—to stir me when I saw you this afternoon. I suppose you’ll always be to me a figure of romance. I don’t mind at all telling you that I shall never feel toward Bob as I did—as I do toward you. But that’s not love, Eric; or if it is, it’s not the right kind of love.

“Listen,” she bade him smilingly. “Bob and I have been through almost every kind of experience that can come to a husband and wife; been through them together. We’ve had money, and we’ve been without it. We’ve lived in houses with parquet floors, and houses with board so splintery I’ve had to cover them with carpets clear up to the walls. I’ve borne Bob’s children—”

He was very white and he put up a hand for silence.

“The simple—and usual!—annals of the married woman, Sue. Don’t, for heaven’s sake, try to dramatize them. Any little clerk and his wife go through what you are describing. But that’s not love! There’s just one significant and important thing in all you’ve told me; that is, that you’ve never felt for Trenton what you feel for me. That pulls the underpinning from the admirable domestic structure you’ve been showing me, my dear. It’s all over with—it’s in the past. As for the children, if Trenton objects to your having them all the time, surely a compromise can be arranged! Half the year with him, half with—us.”

It was as if young Robert had said: “But, Mother, I don’t see why I can’t take the goldfish out of their bowl and put my little alligator in! It’s not every boy that’s had a real live alligator given to him!” Sue dealt with the suave, sophisticated child across the table from her as she would have with her own small son.

“Let’s not have any more nonsense about this, Eric,” she bade him crisply. “I shouldn’t even dream of leaving Bob—much less divide the children’s time between us. The sooner you understand that the easier it will be for us both. Shall we go now?”

She endured his long look bravely.

“Have you turned into a mere mother, Sue? Has all that fineness and sensitive understanding been absorbed into a biological function which woman shares with all other mammals?”

Her tension broke on laugh of genuine mirth.

“I expect it has, Eric! So far as you can fathom it, anyhow! We’ll let it go at that. Poor Eric!”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

IT was good to be home again!

The children greeted her rapturously, Bob was soberly glad to have her back. She had been away only a week but there was a tidy budget of domestic news for her.

Robert had lost a front tooth. A dog had broken the stalk of her tallest delphinium just when it was beginning to show color. Little Susan—"and Dad was supposed to be watching her, Mother, 'cause I was at Sunday School!"—had wandered away and was gone until nearly five in the afternoon; had been discovered in the park, overlooking the river. "And Dad was so scared he didn't eat any dinner at all, and Susan promised cross-your-heart-and-hope-to-die she'd never do it again!"

"Allen was here day before yesterday," Bob told her later. "Spent the night. I thought he'd be all broken up about Pats but he took it very quietly. D'you know, Sue, I think—"

"Oh, I do, too!" she said radiantly. "Only I got it at the other end of the line—from Barbara. Of course it will be some time yet; Barbara will probably stay with Forest until fall. But after that! Bob, won't it be splendid to see old Allen happy at last? With children of his own, and a wife who really loves him!"

The strange New York week was beginning to seem unreal. Sometimes she wondered if she had really had that incredible talk with Eric. But yes, she remembered the touch of gray on his temples, the grooming of his hands which struck her as being a trifle too fastidious—or was it only in contrast to Bob's? Bob was forever tinkering with the engine of his car, forever fixing the wheel of Susan's doll buggy, forever seizing the trowel from her own hands in the evening and helping her with her self-imposed garden tasks.

The change in Bob's hands was almost the measure of the change in Bob himself, she mused: The immaculate young man who had very nearly pushed her over the river bluff years ago had palms as smooth, nails as meticulously cared for, as Eric's own. But how many useful tasks had engaged them since then! Sue had a tender memory of Bob, leaving his desk in Queen City to fit a troubled farm woman with comfortable shoes; Bob,

who had once declared that in his estimation a shoe clerk was the lowest form of masculine life!

As she moved through the routine of her days during the fortnight following her return from New York, she had a sense of layers of sophistry, of specious opinions falling away from her very soul. What, in comparison to the content and usefulness of her life with Bob, did that “tingling awareness that gives meaning to life” amount to? She might easily have had it with Bob himself. If so, it would have disappeared by this time, been replaced by habit, by the pattern of their mutual days. It would have disappeared with Eric, in time. The rapt girl of years ago would never have admitted that. The wiser woman of today knew it past all doubting. And what, with Eric, would have taken its place?

“You’re extra sweet these days, Sue, seems to me,” Bob said to her one evening. “If a week away from us has this affect on you, I advocate bigger and oftener weeks!”

“Maybe it gave me a better perspective,” she said simply. “Maybe I needed to go away from all I have to realize what a rich woman I am.”

“Don’t regret marrying me, Sue? Think of the old brick dining room we lived in, after the smash! Think of that big barn in Queen City we called a house! Think of having to pick up and move on every few years or so, just when you’ve begun to feel at home!”

“I’m thinking of it,” she answered placidly. “Thinking of a lot of other things, too, Bob,” she added with significance.

And that was the evening before the skies fell, and the world reeled under her feet, and the happiness she and Bob had built so sturdily together seemed threatened with final destruction.

They were at dinner the next night, she and Bob and the two children. Dessert—it was Bob’s favorite peach shortcake served with thick cream—had just been put on the table when the doorbell rang.

“Young Fellison from the office,” Bob predicted. “He said he might drop around to consult me about something this evening.”

“Ask him to come in and have some of this shortcake,” Sue bade him hospitably.

But the maid, returning, announced another name: Mr. Farraday from New York!

The room began to swing in slow circles in front of Sue's eyes. Eric! Eric, of course! It was exactly the mad, the impossible thing he would do! Why, oh, why hadn't she foreseen it—prepared for it? But how could she prepare for it, ran her frantic thoughts.

"Farraday? You don't suppose it's that writer fellow we used to know, Sue? Ellis—Enoch—what's his name?" Bob looked up, pleased.

She rose. "I'll see."

The maid spoke again. "It's Mr. Trenton he asked for, ma'am."

"Me?" Bob was frankly diverted. "What on earth would he want to see me for? Guess it can't be the same fellow. Save my shortcake for me, Sue!" He put down his napkin and disappeared across the hall. Sue heard his hearty greeting. "Well, it's Farraday sure enough! How're you, Farraday! But you'll want to see Sue!"

And then a low, rapid murmur that made her heart stand still.

The children finished their meal and ran off to play. Sue sat staring at her untouched dessert until the maid sidled in to see if she might clear the table.

"What shall I do? What shall I do?" she whispered to herself.

Her first impulse was to go boldly into the living room and interrupt whatever Eric might be saying. If she had only had the sense to do that at first! By now he must be half way through his revelation. Bob would not tolerate a break until he had heard it all.

She went into the little study across the hall from the living room. Without hesitation her feet led her to the window where she could see the river. She had a confused recollection of having done this same thing before: gone to stare at the river while a crisis in her life with Bob arose; passed.

Suddenly she threw back her head proudly.

"After all, what can he say? Only that I thought I loved him years ago; that I came back to Bob when I heard of the business failure; that I refused to listen to Eric in New York two weeks ago. Nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to disturb Bob!"

But she knew her husband's pride too well to console herself long with this thought. He would read in that frantic return, pity; and Bob would have none of pity.

The children were darting along the garden paths, careful not to tread on her flowers. "Your legs are too long, and you are too strong," little Susan

was chanting.

It wasn't as if there were any actual unfaithfulness to be admitted! She was behaving foolishly, acting as though she were a woman in a play with an enraged lover coming to reveal a wife's infidelity. Sue tried to pull herself together. At best Bob would be angry, would be hurt. When he had heard her version, realized how even just in the last few days she had begun to realize how deep and warm her love for him ran, he would say: "Forget it, Sue!" and give her one of his tenderest kisses.

How long they were talking, Eric and Bob! What could even Eric find to say in all this time! She bent her head, striving to disentangle words from the angry rumble of Bob's voice. She would know how to deal with Bob's anger. But there was only the low, rapid murmur which meant that Eric was still talking. She shivered a little in the warm summer evening.

Suddenly there was a new sound: the front screen closing quietly, almost silently. Eric gone at last, thank heaven! But how strange that Bob hadn't called her in before he left! There was—there was something ominous about the way she had been ignored from first to last in this visit of Eric's!

She waited; surely Bob would seek her out now. But five minutes passed, ten, a quarter of an hour, and she was alone at the window, watching the children, now sitting quietly on a garden bench; watching the river, beginning to turn crimson in the rays of the setting sun.

The suspense became unbearable. Her actual waiting began to seem an admission of wrong doing. She walked quickly across the room, across the hall. Bob was sitting in a deep chair, staring absently, almost sleepily, it seemed at first, at the fern-filled fireplace.

"Bob!"

The face he turned on her made her cry out.

"Bob, you mustn't—look like that, I mean! I've done nothing wrong. I don't know what Eric told you, but—"

"He told me that you'd loved him ever since you and he met; that you had left my house to go to him when—when *Treadons* failed, and duty—duty, Sue! brought you back. He told me you had admitted you never loved me. He said that even two weeks ago you—my wife and the mother of my children—had assured him that you never had felt toward me, you never could feel toward me—as you felt toward him. Is this—true?"

The tight band about her heart began to loosen. This was tangible, this was something she could fight.

“Literally I suppose it is, Bob; actually—I mean in the spirit of the situation—it is not. I was young and very foolish when I met Eric. I thought I loved him. Perhaps I did. Certainly the thrilling, hot-and-cold, ecstasy-and-anguish feeling I’d read of and never felt before was awakened by—by Eric. I told you when we were married I was afraid it might be—by some man I’d never met. It happened to be Eric. But, Bob—” a forlorn little laugh escaped her pale lips. “I found it—that sort of emotion—a much overrated thing! It didn’t stand up against your need of me—against my desire to be with you when—when the crash came. I—”

“That’s enough! I don’t want a wife who lives with me because she is sorry for me!”

“I don’t think I was exactly sorry for you then, Bob. And certainly I’m not now. I’m only sorry for myself if you’re going to let Eric make trouble between us. Why—” she faced him with hands outspread in a gesture unconsciously dramatic—“what was his coming here tonight but the angry gesture of a man scorned, rejected? I’d hurt his vanity—badly, in New York; he wanted to punish me by trying to destroy my happiness with you. Are you going to let him, Bob?”

He seemed not to hear her. “All these years when I thought you were such a good little sport—when I told myself that you must love me after all or you’d not have gone along shoulder to shoulder with me—”

“It was true, Bob!”

“—it was because you were sorry for me; you pitied the silly young ass who had thrown away his father’s money, the business that had been left him. Pats was honester than you, Sue! She would not stay with the husband she’d stopped loving. You were a traitor to both Farraday and me; to him when you turned back at Kansas City, to me when you left me.”

“I came back to you, Bob!”

“Purely because of an accident. If the failure had come one day later, you’d have been with Farraday. All this—” he swept an arm about the room—“would never have been. The children would never have been born. Oh, my God,” he groaned, “think of that! My children owe their very existence to the accident of a business failing one day instead of the next!”

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. “Most human relationships develop from chance, Bob. If you hadn’t driven your car into mine on the

top of Wyeth Hill, we'd never have met—the children would never have been born. And there was something more than accident in my return to you: there was my own will, my decision.”

He said: “Farraday tells me that for days afterward he wired you, called you from New York. And I knew nothing about it! I—fool that I was!—kept telling myself that there was one bright spot in the mess I'd made of things: that you were standing by me.”

“And wasn't I, Bob?”

“That I might have—have put aside,” he said moodily, choosing his words. “It was a long time ago, people change. I've changed a lot myself. But to listen to that confounded smug voice telling me that now—*now*—two short weeks ago, you'd admitted to him in New York that you felt for him what you'd never felt for me—” his face was suddenly congested. “Damn you, Sue, I'll never forgive you for that!”

Her own temper, disciplined through many years, was rising.

“There is nothing for you to forgive! It's perfectly true—what I said to Eric; I never shall feel for you what I felt for him. But you might have let me explain that I consider my—my love for you a far worthier, a far finer thing than any . . .” In her turn she choked, putting her hand to her bare throat.

“Listen,” he said suddenly. “Do you know what happened while you were away? Pearson has bought out the old *Treadon* business in St. Joseph; it's to be *Pearson's Peerless Treadons*. I've had Allen angling for weeks to buy back our house—the one I bought for you when we were married. I was keeping it for a surprise. I thought . . . the children can live in Sue's home town. She can have her old friends about her again. She and I can try to collect furniture as much like that first lot as it's possible. I can make up to her at last for what I lost. I was just waiting for Allen to bring the deed to surprise you with my news. Now—” he rose heavily, as if he had aged.

“Now,” Sue's voice caught it up, “you're making a mountain out of a molehill, Bob dear. Nothing's changed between us. Except that I know now that I love you as I always hoped to love my husband. You said yourself that I seemed happier since I came home from New York.”

“Yes, with Farraday having promised to follow you!”

The bitter words were cut short by the closing of the door. Bob was on his way upstairs.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“**Y**OU’RE sure there’s nothing wrong, Sis?” Allen asked anxiously. “What should be wrong, Buddy? Bob’s gone East to see Mr. Pearson. He told you that when he telephoned you.”

“I know. But he was in such a tearing hurry to get hold of the house, he talked as if you’d be moving in as soon as it could be redecorated. And now he’s been gone almost a month. I suppose—” he hesitated—“it was his manner when I talked to him. He seemed—unlike himself.”

Sue’s hands went steadily on with her sewing. She was sitting with her brother on the side porch which overlooked the garden, beyond which lay the river. She was finishing a little dress for Susan, and she busied herself with it determinedly.

“Perhaps it was because he was so excited about the new company,” she commented. “Reviving the old name—at least combining it with the Peerless products; and getting our old house back.” She changed the subject adroitly. “Where, by the way, are you and Barbara going to live, Allen?”

At once her affairs were forgotten. Allen launched gaily upon his own.

“You’ll never guess, Sue! And it’s Barb’s choice, not mine. Not being in the shoe business, and the career of engineering being no more prosperous than it has for the last half dozen years, I can’t afford country estates for my—my wife.” There was something almost boyishly shy in the way he said the last word. “I made a clean breast of my assets and liabilities to Barb: the old furniture in storage, my surplus bank account, my salary. And she’s come out strong for—the brick dining room-kitchen place where you and Bob first lived after his firm’s failure! What do you think of that?” he demanded proudly.

“Good for Barb!” She laid down her work and looked at him with an affectionate smile. “No one knows better than I do how charming that old place can be made! You don’t find Barb wanting five stuffy rooms in the apartment house next door! Allen, you’re in luck!”

“Don’t I know it! Barbara, and the right kind of a home, and—and children! Barbara wants children, she says. That’s partly why we’re renting the old brick house. It leaves us a nice margin for those kids we both are

counting on. Yep, Sis dear, your two will have some cousins one of these days, I hope!”

“Barb’s coming to visit me soon? She promised!”

“She says if she knew when Bob expects to come back she’d set the day. She thinks you’re lonely without him.”

A sudden mist veiled the dark eyes which were gazing at him so affectionately. “I am, oh, I am, Allen! I miss him . . . terribly!”

“You two!” He was indulgent, approving. “You’re a model pair, Sis; and to think I had my doubts about your marrying him! Somehow I got the impression that you didn’t love him enough. I was so wrapped up in Pats I guess I measured all emotion by my own. Well, I must be on my way!” He stood up, shaking down a trouser leg. “It was luck, my having business over here this morning. And I wanted to ask about Bob. Give the old boy my best when you write!”

“I will!” She walked with him to his car, raised her face for his brotherly kiss; and went back to her chair with utter desolation at her heart.

Write Bob? If only she could! She had sent one desperate, pleading letter to the Pearson offices in New York. It had been returned to her unopened. She had not dared write Pearson himself. She had not dared make open inquiries. All she could do was to wait; wait until Bob’s rare but terrible anger had subsided; until sanity had returned to him.

That he had not done anything reckless she knew by the fact that his business in Atchison went on as usual. The manager called her occasionally, remarked chattily that Mr. Trenton would be pleased at the month’s volume of business. Even the amount of money Bob had left her was in its own way reassuring; ample for a month or so but not as a sum on which to live very long.

When he had gone that first evening, flinging what he needed into a bag and telling her in bitter, brief phrases that he had to get away to think things over, she had been conscious merely of anger on her own account. It was all such a tempest in a teapot, she thought. What after all had happened save that she had met a man with whom she had once believed herself to be in love, and laughed at his proposal that she leave her husband?

If it came right down to facts, Bob himself had injured her far more than she could do or had done to him. Bob had actually been married before he met her, and had deceived her about it. He had taken her forgiveness for granted; or perhaps he had not thought his rash and youthful folly even

required forgiveness. She remembered yet her outraged perception of his turning to her to shield him from Cecily. And he to go raging from home now because Eric Farraday chose to make a tale about an incident long past!

Her lips closed firmly as she thought of the last time she had seen Eric. It was the morning after Bob's departure. He had come striding into the garden to find her, leaving an angry maid staring after him.

“Sue!”

There had been no slightest trace of emotion in that meeting; so far as she was concerned, at any rate. She thought that he looked tired and a little old, in the unrelenting sunlight. There were lines in his face, faint traces of bagginess beneath his eyes. She wondered impersonally what she had ever found exciting about him. She would have as soon thought of embracing the support of the pergola where she stood as going into Eric's arms now.

“What have you gained, Eric?” she heard her own voice inquiring. “By what you did?”

“You,” he shot at her. “Your husband has gone. He called me up last night to tell me so—”

She laughed outright at that. Men were such dramatists! Eric, rushing in to announce to Bob that years ago Sue had loved him, Bob telephoning Eric that he had taken himself out of Sue's life! She played amusedly with the subject, recalling Forest Webb and his frantic efforts to rouse Pats that she might communicate some trivial last message to a woman she had never liked; Allen himself and his various scenes with Pats; even young Robert, exacting a cross-your-heart-and-hope-to-die promise from placid little Susan. Women were too concerned with the essentials of drama to wish the lines spoken, she thought.

She remembered seeing Sherwood Anderson's *Mary of Scotland* with its original cast. She had been transported by the gripping drama of the fictional meeting of the two queens. But it had broken, as the column of a fountain breaks when it has risen too high, at the self-conscious speech Mary made about posterity. The masculine delight in drama, when it functions at all, she thought, invariably falls back on itself through sheer excess.

It was that spontaneous laughter which sent Eric away at last. His sensitive spirit could brook opposition but not ridicule.

August passed and Bob did not return nor write. Sue began to grow anxious. Her funds were getting low, for one thing. Her position here was

growing slightly ridiculous. She practised various forms of putting a question to young Fellison at the store.

“Oh, Mr. Fellison, do you happen to know if Mr. Trenton has changed his address? I haven’t heard from him for several days and I thought—”

No, emphatically that would not do.

“Something has come up I want to wire Mr. Trenton about, and I think he’s on his way home—”

No, silence and dignity were her only resource. If Bob chose to put her in so uncomfortable a situation, she could but wait until he realized the ridiculousness of his own anger. She hoped she could keep herself sweet and reasonable. Bob had had a shock, she reminded herself almost daily. He had been touched in the tenderest of all spots, his pride. He had worked hard—how hard only Sue herself knew—to make his business recovery, to pay off the debts growing out of his bankruptcy.

And his ability to do that, the strength which had enabled him to go steadily forward, had its source in her love! Sue knew that as surely as she knew that tomorrow’s sun would rise. Bob without her dependence, without her loving confidence in him, would be a Samson shorn.

Suddenly she knew what she must do! It came to her in a spurt of laughter which brought baby Susan to her side.

“Funny, Muvver?”

“Very funny, darling!”

She reached briskly for the telephone, called St. Joseph. Yes, Mrs. Trenton. Yes, certainly the papers had all been made out; the house belonged to its earlier owner. Was there anything the office could do to assist?

“I’ll be over tomorrow,” she said.

The next day she put both children in her car and drove to the town of her birth, of her girlhood and the early years of her marriage. She got the key from the real estate office, and made her way briskly out to her old home.

It was in better condition than she had dared to hope: a few rooms repapered, some painting done, the floors waxed . . . it could be ready in less than a week, she was sure.

The garden, she observed happily, had been kept up. She had no idea that Bob had given orders for its care before he left.

Ensued busy days. Hardly were the decorators out than Sue had moved in. She placed the many-times-moved pieces of furniture to the best advantage, then bought recklessly what else was needed. As with the paint and papering, she charged everything serenely to Bob.

“It begins to look as it used to, Sue,” Barbara commented. “I almost expect Pats to drift in, hinting that she needs a new evening gown, that the coat you bought for her last year is out of style. Poor Pats!”

“But happy Allen!” she appended significantly.

“Oh, Sue, if I can only make it up to him!”

From the St. Joseph house Sue telephoned composedly to young Fellison.

“I’m simply swamped here, Mr. Fellison, as you probably know. I’m going to ask you to send Mr. Trenton a night letter saying that we’re safely settled. I don’t want him to think I’ve overdone and if *you* wire—” The emphasis made him stammer eagerly.

“Oh, yes, Mrs. Trenton! I’ve been feeling guilty that I’ve let you do it all! But I’ve been so rushed . . . it’s mighty kind of you to let the news come through me!”

Sue smiled faintly as she replaced the telephone in its cradle.

Two days later she went about her preparations as composedly as if she had been in hourly receipt of messages from Bob. She ordered his favorite dinner of broiled steak, French fried potatoes, endive salad and apple pie. She had put Bob’s study in order with her own hands, rejoicing that his desk, his books had survived the sale of their goods years ago. As a matter of fact, she had bid in that desk through Allen, knowing that Bob loved it because it was his father’s.

She dressed Susan in pale blue organdy, helped young Robert wrestle with the lock of hair which would stand up. And she chose for her own wear a frock which was Bob’s favorite: a dull red silk with puffed short sleeves showing her white arms, with a lace collar deep enough to expose the little hollow at the base of her throat.

And above and beyond these superficial preparations, she ordered her thoughts. She would not be impatient of Bob’s boyish rage which had parted them for so long. She would keep in mind that grief and love rather than lack of consideration for her had caused his going. She would know that just

as Bob, being a man, had all a man's unreasonableness of jealousy, so she, a woman, must soothe it with the healing ointment of tenderness.

She knew that planes arrived in Kansas City from New York between three and four every afternoon. Allowing for a two hours' drive from Kansas City to the suburb where the Trenton house stood, Bob should be here between five and six.

Sue could not have told why she believed Bob to have been East all this time when her one letter to him had been returned. It was as if the channel between her mind and her husband's had been slowly clearing with his departure until now it was free and unobstructed.

"Perhaps I should have had more pride than to send that message to Bob," she thought when she was ready to go downstairs. "But—pride? What is it when human happiness is at stake? It's a word for . . . dramatists and men," she finished with a smile.

"Dad's coming!" Susan caroled, dancing down the stairs ahead of her.

"Yes, Dad's coming!"

The house was lovely with its bowls of autumn blossoms here and there, with its freshly papered walls and shining floors; with its dinner table gleaming with Italian cutwork and their wedding silver.

Sue wandered into the garden. The trees were not yet turned and their lusty foliage almost hid the river, but not quite. She could catch a glimpse of its pewter-like brightness from where she stood.

Suddenly she called her son to her.

"Robert dear," she said urgently, "will you take Susan around to the back and keep her until Mother calls you both?"

"Nothing's—happened, Mother? You're all right?" His small face was filled with anxiety.

"Perfectly all right, dear. It's just that I hear Dad's car, and I want to speak to him for a few minutes alone. Will you do that for Mother?"

His answer was to take his sister's hand and lead her, chattering gaily, out of sight. A taxi drove up to the gate and Bob got out. It wrung Sue's heart to see how tired he looked. She thought back to a day years ago when he had returned to her with the ruins of his father's business newly fallen about him. She had been there to comfort him, to encourage and aid him.

She would always be there, she vowed in her heart, to do those things for him.

“Bob!” she called softly.

He whirled about, saw her, and came toward her uncertainly.

“Sue, I’ve been in hell!”

“Have you, my poor old man? Well, you’re home now. You’re in—”

“Heaven,” he supplied on a great sob of relief.

**THE END**

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *One Is Beloved*, by Louise Platt Hauck.]