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DIVERGING ROADS



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BY
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PROLOGUE

The tale of California's early days is an epic, an immortal song of daring, of hope, of the urge of youth to unknown trails, of struggle, and of heartbreak. Across the great American plains the adventurers came, scrawling the story of their passing in lines of blood; they came around the Horn in wind-jammers, beating their way northward in the strange Pacific; they forced their way into the wilderness, awakening California's hills from centuries-long sleep, and they pitched their tents and built their cabins by thousands in Cherokee Valley.

Those were the great days of Cherokee, days of feverish activity, of hard, fierce living, of marvelous event. The tales came down to Masonville, where the stage stopped to change horses, and drivers, express-messengers, and prospectors gathered in Mason's bar. The Chinese laundryman had found beside his cabin a nugget worth sixteen hundred dollars; the stage to Honey Creek had been held up just north of Cherokee Hill; Jim Thane had struck it rich on North Branch.

Mason, prospering, ordered a billiard-table sent

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PROLOGUE

up from San Francisco, built a dance-hall. Richardson came in with his family and put up a general store. Cherokee was booming; Cherokee miners came down with their sacks of gold-dust, and Masonville thrived.

But the great days passed. The time came when placer mining no longer paid in Cherokee, and the camp moved on across the mountains. Cherokee Valley was left behind, a desolate little hollow among the hills, denuded of its trees, disfigured here and there by the scars of shallow tunnels where hope still fought against defeat. A handful of dogged miners remained, and a few Portuguese families living in little cabins, harvesting a bare subsistence from the unwilling soil.

A few discouraged men came down to Masonville and took up homestead claims, clearing the chaparral from their rolling acres, sowing grain or setting out fruit-trees. They had wives and children; in time they built a school-house. Later the railroad came through, and there was a station and a small bank.

But the stirring times of enterprise and daring were gone forever. The epic had ended in bad verse. Masonville slipped quietly to sleep, like an old man sitting in the sun with his memories. And youth, taking up its old immortal song of courage and of hope, went on to farther unknown trails and different adventure.

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CHAPTER I

THERE is a peculiar quality in the somnolence of an old town in which little has occurred for many years. It is the unease of relaxation without repose, the unease of one who lies too late in bed, aware that he should be getting up. The men who lounge aimlessly about the street corners cannot be wholly idle. Their hands, at least, must be busy. The scarred posts and notched edges of the board sidewalks show it; the paint on the little stations is sanded shoulder-high to prevent their whittling there. Energy struggles feebly under the weight of the slow, uneventful days; but its pressure is always there, an urge that becomes an irritation in young blood.

Helen Davies, pausing in the doorway of Richardson's store on a warm spring afternoon, said to herself that she would be glad never to see Masonville again. The familiar sight of its one drowsy street, the rickety wooden awnings over the sidewalks, the boys pitching horseshoes in the

shade of the blacksmith shop, was almost insupportable.

She did not want to stand there looking at it. She did not want to follow the old stale road home to the old farm-house, which had not changed since she could remember. She felt that she should be doing something, she did not know what.

A long purple curl of smoke unrolling over the crest of Cherokee Hill was the plume of Number Five coming in. Two short, quick puffs of white above the bronze mist of bare apricot orchards mutely announced the whistle for the grade.

Men sauntered past, going toward the station. The postmaster appeared in his shirt-sleeves, pushing a wheelbarrow filled with mail sacks down the middle of the street. The afternoon hack from Cherokee rattled by, bringing a couple of tired, dust-grimed drummers. And the Masonville girls, bare-headed, laughing, talking in high, gay voices, came hurrying from the post-office, from the drug-store, from one of their Embroidery Club meetings, to see Number Five come in. Helen shifted the weight of the package on her arm, pulled her sunbonnet farther over her face, and started home.

Depression and revolt struggled in her mind. She passed the wide, empty doorway of Harner's livery stable, the glowing forge of the blacksmith-shop, without seeing them, absorbed in the turmoil of her thoughts. But at the corner where the

gravel walk began, and the street frankly became a country road slipping down a little slope between scattered white cottages, her self-absorption vanished.

A boy was walking slowly down the path. The elaborate unconcern of his attitude, the stiffness of his self-conscious back, told her that he had been waiting for her, and a rush of dizzying emotion swept away all but the immediate moment. The sunshine was warm on her shoulders, the grass of the lawns was green, every lace-curtained window behind the rose-bushes seemed to conceal watching eyes, and the sound of her feet on the gravel was loud in her ears. She overtook him at last, trying not to walk too fast. They smiled at each other.

"Hello, Paul," she said shyly.

He was a stocky, dark-haired boy, with blue eyes. His father was dead, killed in a mine over at Cherokee. He had come down to the Masonville school, and they were in the same class, the class that would graduate that spring. He was studying hard, trying to get as much education as possible before he would have to go to work. He lived with his mother in a little house near the edge of town, on the road to the farm.

"Hello," he replied. He cleared his throat. "I had to go to the post-office to mail a letter," he said.

"Did you?" she answered. She tried to think of something else to say. "Will you be glad when school's over?" she asked.

Paul and she stood at the head of the class. He was better in arithmetic, but she beat him in spelling. For a long time they had exchanged glances of mutual respect across the school-room. Some one had told her that Paul said she was all right. He had beat her in arithmetic that day. "She takes a licking as well as a boy," was what he had said. But she had gone home and looked in the mirror.

The flutter at her heart had stopped then. No, she was not pretty. Her features were too large, her forehead too high. She despised the face that looked back at her. She longed for tiny, pretty features, large brown eyes, a low forehead with curling hair. The eyes in the mirror were gray and the hair was straight and brown. Not even a pretty, light brown. It was almost black. For the first time she had desperately wanted to be pretty. But now she did not care. He had waited for her, anyway.

They walked slowly along the country road, under the arch of the trees, through the branches of which the sun sent long, slanting rays of light. There was a colored haze over the leafless orchards, and the hills were freshly green from the rains.

"Well, I've got a job promised as soon as school is over," said Paul.

"What kind of job?" she asked.

"Working at the depot. It pays fifteen a month to start," he replied. It was as if they were uttering poetry. The words did not matter. What they said did not matter.

"That's fine," she said. "I wish I had a job."

"Gee, I hate to see a girl go to work," said Paul.

His lips were full and very firm. When he set them tightly, as he did then, he looked determined. There was something obstinate about the line of his chin and the slight frown between his heavy black brows. Her whole nature seemed to melt and flow toward him.

"I don't see why!" she flashed. "A girl like me has to work if she's going to get anywhere. I bet I could do as well as a boy if I had a chance."

The words were like a defensive armor between her and her real desire. She did not want to work. She wanted to be soft and pretty, tempting and teasing and sweet. She wanted to win the things she desired by tears and smiles and coaxing. But she did not know how.

Paul looked at her admiringly. He said, "I guess you could, all right. You're pretty smart for a girl."

She glowed with pleasure.

They had often walked along this road as far

as his house, when accident brought them home from school at the same time. But their talk had never had this indefinable quality, as vague and beautiful as the misty color over the orchards.

Sometimes she had stopped at his house for a few minutes. His mother was a little woman with brisk, bustling manner. She always stood at the door to see that they wiped their feet before they went in. The house was very neat. There was an ingrain carpet on the front-room floor, swept till every thread showed. The center-table had a crocheted tidy on it and a Bible and a polished sea-shell. This room rose like a picture in her mind as they neared the gate. She did not want to leave Paul, but she did not want to go into that room with him now.

"Look here — wait a minute —" he said, stopping in the gateway. "I wanted to tell you —" He turned red and looked down at one toe, boring into the soft ground. "About this being valedictorian —"

"Oh!" she said. There had been a fierce rivalry between them for the honor of being valedictorian at the graduating exercises. There was nothing to choose between them in scholarship, but Paul had won. She knew the teachers had decided she did not dress well enough to take such a prominent part.

"I hope you don't feel bad about it, Helen," he

went on awkwardly. "I told them I'd give it up, because you're a girl, and anyway you ought to have it, I guess. I don't feel right about taking it, some way."

"That's all right," she answered. "I don't care."

"Well, it's awfully good of you." She could see that he was very much relieved. She was glad she had lied about it. "Come in and look at what I've got in the shed," he said, getting away from the subject as quickly as possible.

She followed him around the house, under the old palm-tree that stood there. He had cleared out the woodshed and put in a table and a chair. On the table stood a telegraphic-sounder and key and a round, red, dry battery.

"I'm going to learn to be an operator," he said. "I've got most of the alphabet already. Listen." He made the instrument click. "I'm going to practise receiving, listening to the wires in the depot. Morrison says I can after I get through work. Telegraph-operators make as much as seventy dollars a month, and some of them, on the fast wires, make a hundred. I guess the train-dispatcher makes more than that."

"Oh, Paul, really?" She was all enthusiasm. He let her try the key. "I could do it. I know I could," she said.

He was encouraging.

"Sure you could." But there was a faint condescension in his tone, and she felt that he was entering a life into which she could not follow him.

"That 's the trouble with this rotten old world," she said resentfully. "You can get out and do things like that. A girl has n't any chance at all."

"Oh, yes, she has," he answered. "There 's lots of girl operators. There 's one down the line. Her father 's station agent. And up at Rollo there 's a man and his wife that handle the station between them. He works nights, and she works daytimes. They live over the depot, and if anything goes wrong she can call him."

"That must be nice," she said.

"He 's pretty lucky, all right," Paul agreed. "It is n't exactly like having her working, of course — right together like that. I guess maybe they could n't — been married, unless she did. He did n't have much, I guess. He is n't so awful much older than — But anyway, I 'd hate to see — anybody I cared about going to work," he finished desperately. He opened and shut the telegraph-key, and the metallic clacks of the sounder were loud in the stillness. Unsaid things hung between them. Dazzled, tremulous, shaken by the beating of her heart, Helen could not speak.

The palpitant moment was ended by the sound of his mother's voice. "Paul! Paul, I want some wood." They laughed shakily.

"I — I guess I better be going," she said. He made no protest. But when they stood in the woodshed doorway he said all in a rush:

"Look here, if I get a buggy next Sunday, what do you say we go driving somewhere?"

She carried those words home with her, singing as she went.

CHAPTER II

HE came early that Sunday afternoon, but she had been ready, waiting, long before she saw the buggy coming down the road.

She had tried to do her hair in a new way, putting it up in rag curlers the night before, working with it for hours that morning in the stuffy attic bedroom before the wavy mirror, combing it, putting it up, taking it down again, with a nervous fluttering in her wrists. In the end she gave it up. She rolled the long braid into its usual mass at the nape of her neck, and pinned on it a black ribbon bow.

She longed for a new white dress to wear that day. Her pink gingham, whose blue-and-white-plaid pattern had faded to blurred lines of mauve and pale pink, was hideous to her as she contemplated it stretched in all its freshly ironed stiffness on the bed. But it was the best she could do.

While she dressed, the sounds of the warm, lazy, spring morning floated in to her through the half-open window. The whinnying of the long-legged colt in the barnyard, the troubled, answering neigh

of his mother from the pasture, the cackling of the hens, blended like the notes of a pastoral orchestra with the rising and falling whirr of steel on the grindstone. Under the stunted live-oak in the side-yard her father was sharpening an ax, while her little sister Mabel turned the crank and poured water on the whirling stone. The murmur of their talk came up to her, Mabel's shrill, continuous chatter, her father's occasional monosyllables. She heard without listening, and the sounds ran like an undercurrent of contentment in her thoughts.

When she had pinned her collar and put on her straw sailor she stood for a long time gazing into the eyes that looked back at her from the mirror, lost in a formless reverie.

"My land!" her mother said when she appeared in the kitchen. "What're you all dressed up like that for, this time of day?"

"I'm going driving," she answered, constrained. She had dreaded the moment. Her mother stopped, the oven door half open, a fork poised in her hand.

"Who with?"

"Paul." She tried to say the name casually, making an effort to meet her mother's eyes as usual. It was as if they looked at each other across a wide empty space. Her mother seemed suddenly to see in her a stranger.

"But — good gracious, Helen! You're only a

little girl!" The words were cut across by Tommy's derisive chant from the table, where he sat licking a mixing-spoon.

"Helen's got a feller! Helen's got a feller!"

"Shut up!" she cried. "If you don't shut up —!"

But he got away from her and, slamming the screen door, yelled from the safe distance of the woodpile:

"Helen's mad, and I'm glad, an' I know what will please her —!"

She went into the other room, shutting the door with a shaking hand. She felt that she hated the whole world. Yes, even Paul. Her mother called to her that even if she was going out with a beau, that was no reason she should n't eat something. Dinner would n't be ready till two o'clock, but she ought to drink some milk anyway. She answered that she was not hungry.

Paul would come by one o'clock, she thought. His mother had only a cold lunch on Sundays, because they went to church. He came ten minutes late, and she had forgotten everything else in the strain of waiting.

She met him at the gate, and he got out to help her into the buggy-seat. He was wearing his Sunday clothes, the blue suit, carefully brushed and pressed, and a stiff white collar. He looked strange and formal.

"It is n't much of a rig," he said apologetically, clearing his throat. She recognized the bony sorrel and the rattling buggy, the cheapest in Harner's livery stable. But even that, she knew, was an extravagance for Paul.

"It's hard to get a rig on Sunday," she said. "Everybody takes them all out in the morning. I think you were awfully lucky to get such a good one. Is n't it a lovely day?"

"It looks like the rains are about over," he replied in a polite voice. After the first radiant glance they had not looked at each other. He chirped to the sorrel, and they drove away together.

Enveloped in the hood of the buggy-top, they saw before them the yellow road, winding on among the trees, disappearing, appearing again like a ribbon looped about the curves of the hills. There was gold in the green of the fields, gold in the poppies beside the road, gold in the ruddiness of young apricot twigs. The clear air itself was filled with vibrant, golden sunshine. They drove in a golden haze. What did they say? It did not matter. They looked at each other.

His arm lay along the back of the buggy seat. Its being there was like a secret shared between them, a knowledge held in common, to be cherished and to be kept unspoken. When the increasing consciousness of it grew too poignant to be borne

any longer in silence they escaped from it in sudden mutual panic, breathless. They left the buggy, tying the patient sorrel in the shade beneath a tree, and clambered up the hillside.

They went, they said, to gather wild flowers. He took her hand to help her up the trail, and she permitted it, stumbling, when unaided she could have climbed more easily, glad to feel that he was the leader, eager that he should think himself the stronger. At the top of the hill they came to a low-spreading live-oak with a patch of young grass beneath it, and here, forgetting the ungathered flowers, they sat down.

They sat there a long time, talking very seriously on grave subjects; life and the meaning of it, the bigness of the universe, and how it makes a fellow feel funny, somehow, when he looks at the stars at night and thinks about things. She understood. She felt that way herself sometimes. It was amazing to learn how many things they had felt in common. Neither of them had ever expected to find any one else who felt them, too.

Then there was the question of what to do with your life. It was a pretty important thing to decide. You did n't want to make mistakes, like so many men did. You had to start right. That was the point, the start. When you get to be eighteen or so, almost twenty, you realize that, and you look back over your life and see how you've wasted a lot

of time already. You realize you better begin to do something.

Now here was the idea of learning telegraphy. That looked pretty good. If a fellow really went at that and worked hard, there was no telling what it might lead to. You might get to be a train-dispatcher or even a railroad superintendent. There were lots of big men who did n't have any better start than he had. Look at Edison.

She agreed. She was sure there was nothing he could not do. Somehow, then, they began to talk as if she would be with him. She might be a telegrapher, too. Would n't it be fun if she was, so they could be in the same town? He'd help her with the train orders, and if he worked nights she could fix his lunch for him.

They made a sort of play of it, laughing about it. They were only supposing, of course. They carefully refrained from voicing the thought that clamored behind everything they said, that set her heart racing and kept her eyes from meeting his, the thought of that young couple at Rollo.

And at the last, when they could no longer ignore the incredible fact that the afternoon was gone, that only a golden western sky behind the flat, blue mass of the hills remained to tell of the vanished sunlight, they rose reluctantly, hesitant. He had taken her two hands to help her to her feet. In the grayness of the twilight they looked at each other, and

she felt the approach of a moment tremendous, irrevocable.

He was drawing her closer. She felt, with the pull of his hands, an urging within herself, a compulsion like a strong current, sweeping her away, merging her with something unknown, vast, beautifully terrible. Suddenly, in a panic, pushing him blindly away, she heard herself saying, "No — no! Please —" The tension of his arms relaxed.

"All right — if you don't want — I did n't mean —" he stammered. Their hands clung for a moment, uncertainly, then dropped apart. They stumbled down the dusky trail and drove home almost in silence.

Spring came capriciously that next year. She smiled unexpectedly upon the hills through long days of golden sunshine, coaxing wild flowers from the damp earth and swelling buds with her warm promise. She retreated again behind cold skies, abandoning eager petals and sap-filled twigs to the chill desolation of rain and the bitterness of frost.

Farmers trudging behind their plows felt her coming in the stir of the scented air, in the responsiveness of the springy soil and, looking up at the sparkling skies, felt a warmth in their own veins even while they shook their heads doubtfully. And rising in the dawns they tramped the orchard rows, bending tips of branches between anxious fingers,

pausing to cut open a few buds on their calloused palms.

But to Helen the days were like notes in a melody. Linnet's songs and sunshine streaming through the attic windows or gray panes and rain on the roof were one to her. She woke to either as to a holiday. She slipped from beneath the patchwork quilt into a cold room and dressed with shivering fingers, hardly hearing Mabel's drowsy protests at being waked so early. Life was too good to be wasted in sleep. She seemed made of energy as she ran down the steep stairs to the kitchen. It swelled in her veins as a river frets against its banks in the spring floods.

Every sight and sound struck upon her senses with a new freshness. There was exhilaration in the bite of cold water on her skin when she washed in the tin basin on the bench by the door, and the smell of coffee and frying salt pork was good. She sang while she spread the red table-cloth on the kitchen table and set out the cracked plates.

She sang:

"You're as welcome as the flowers in Ma-a-ay,
And I — love you in the same o-o-old way."

It seemed to her that she was caroling aloud poetry so exquisite that all its meaning escaped the dull ears about her. She walked among them, alone, wrapped in a glory they could not perceive.

Even her mother's tight-lipped anxiety did not quite break through her happy absorption. Her mother worked silently, stepping heavily about the kitchen, now and then glancing through the window toward the barn. When her husband came clumping up the path and stopped at the back steps to scrape the mud from his boots, she went to the door and opened it, saying almost harshly, "Well?"

He said nothing, continuing for a moment to knock a boot heel against the edge of the step. Then he came slowly in, and began to dip water from the water pail into the wash-basin. The slump of his body in the sweat-stained overalls expressed nothing but weariness.

"I guess last night settled it," he said. "We won't get enough of a crop to pay to pick it. Outa twenty buds I cut on the south slope only four of 'em was n't black."

His wife went back to the stove and turned the salt pork, holding her head back from the spatters. "What 're we going to do about the mortgage?" The question filled a long silence. Helen's song was hushed, though the echoes of it still went on in some secret place within her, safe there even from this calamity.

"Same as we 've always done, I guess," her father answered at last, lifting a dripping face and reaching for the roller towel. "See if I can get young Mason to renew it."

"Well, he will. Surely he will," Helen said. Her tone of cheerfulness was like a slender shaft splintering against a stone wall. "And there must be *some* fruit left. If there is n't much of a crop what we do get ought to bring pretty good prices, too."

"You're right it ought to," her father replied bitterly. "A good crop never brings 'em."

"Well, anyway, I'm through school now, and I'll be doing something," Helen said. She had no clear idea what it would be, but suddenly she felt in her youth and happiness a strength that her discouraged father and mother did not have. For the first time they seemed to her old and worn, exhausted by an unequal struggle, and she felt that she could take them up in her arms and carry them triumphantly to comfort and peace.

"Eat your breakfast and don't talk nonsense," her father said.

But her victorious mood revived while she washed the dishes. She felt older, stronger, and more confident than she had ever been. The news of the killing frost, which depressed her mother and quieted even Mabel's usual rebellion at having to help with the kitchen work, was to Helen a call to action. She splashed the dishes through the soapy water so swiftly that Mabel was aggrieved.

"You know I can't keep up," she complained. "It's bad enough to have the frost and never be

able to get anything decent, and stick here in this old kitchen all the time, without having you act mean, too."

"Oh, don't start whining!" Helen began. They always quarreled about the dishes. "I'd like to know who did every smitch of work yesterday, while you went chasing off." But looking down at Mabel's sullen little face, she felt a wave of compassion. Poor little Mabel, whose whole heart had been set on a new dress this summer, who didn't have anything else to make her happy! "I don't mean to be mean to you, Mabel," she said. She put an arm around the thin, angular shoulders. "Never mind, everything 'll be all right, somehow."

That afternoon when the ironing was finished she dressed in her pink gingham and best shoes. She was going to town for the mail, she explained to her mother, and when her sister said, "Why, you went day before yesterday!" she replied, "Well, I guess I'll just go to town, anyway. I feel like walking somewhere."

Her mother apparently accepted the explanation without further thought. The blindness of other people astonished Helen. It seemed to her that every blade of grass in the fields, every scrap of white cloud in the sky, knew that she was going to see Paul. The roadside cried it aloud to her.

She let her hand rest a moment on the gate as

she went through. It was the gate on which they leaned when he brought her home from church on Sunday nights. She could feel his presence there still; she could almost see the dark mass of his shoulders against the starry sky, and the white blur of his face.

The long lane by Peterson's meadow was crowded with memories of him. Here they had stopped to gather poppies; there, just beside the gray stone, he had knelt one day to tie her shoe. On the little bridge shaded by the oak-trees they always stopped to lean on the rail and watch their reflections shot across by ripples of light in the stream below. She was dazzled by the beauty of the world as she went by all these places. The sky was blue. It was a revelation to her. She had never known that skies were blue with that heart-shaking blueness or that hills held golden lights and violet shadows on their green slopes. She had never seen that shadows in the late afternoon were purple as grapes, and that the very air held a faint tinge of orange light. It seemed to her that she had been blind all her life.

She stood some time on the little bridge, looking at all this loveliness, and she said his name to herself, under her breath "Paul." A quiver ran along her nerves at the sound of it.

He would be busy handling baggage at the station when Number Five came in. She thought of his sturdy shoulders in the blue work-shirt, the smooth

forehead under his ragged cap, the straight-looking blue eyes and firm lips. She would stand a little apart, by the window where the telegraph-keys were clicking, and he would pass, pushing a hand-truck through the crowd on the platform. Their eyes would meet, and the look would be like a bond subtly uniting them in an intimacy unperceived by the oblivious people who jostled them. Then she would go away, walking slowly through the town, and he would overtake her on his way home to supper. She could tell him, then, about the frost. Her thoughts went no further than that. They stopped with Paul.

But before she reached his house she saw Sammy Harner frolicking in the road, hilarious in the first spring freedom of going barefoot. He skipped from side to side, his wide straw hat flapping; he shied a stone at a bird; he whistled shrilly between his teeth. When he saw her he sobered quickly and came trotting down the road, reaching her, panting.

"I was coming out to your house just 's fast as I could," he said. "I got a note for you." He sought anxiously in his pockets, found it in the crown of his hat. "He gave me a nickel, and said to wait if they 's an answer."

She saw that his eyes were fixed curiously on her hands, which shook so with excitement that she

could hardly tear the railway company's yellow envelope. She read:

Dear Friend Helen:

I have got a new job and I have to go to Ripley to-night where I am going to work. I would like to see you before I go, as I do not know when I can come back, but probably not for a long time. I did not know I was going till this afternoon and I have to go on the Cannonball. Can you meet me about eight o'clock by the bridge? I have to pack yet and I am afraid I cannot get time to come out to your house and I want to see you very much. Please answer by Sammy.

YOUR FRIEND, PAUL.

Sammy's interested gaze had shifted from her hands to her face. It rested on her like an unbearable light. She could not think with those calm observant eyes upon her. She must think. What must she think about? Oh, yes, an answer. A pencil. She did not have a pencil.

"Tell him I did n't have a pencil," she said. "Tell him I said, 'Yes.' " And as Sammy still lingered, watching her with unashamed curiosity, she added sharply, "Hurry! hurry up now!"

It was a relief to sit down, when at last Sammy had disappeared around the bend in the road. The whirling world seemed to settle somewhat into place then. She had never thought of Paul's going away. She wondered dully if it were a good job, and if he were glad to go.

CHAPTER III

SHE came down the road again a little after seven o'clock. It was another cold night, and the stars glittered frostily in a sky almost as black as the hills. The road lost itself in darkness before her, and the fields stretched out into a darkness that seemed illimitable, as endless as the sky. She felt herself part of the night and the cold.

For an eternity she walked up and down the road, waiting. Once she went as far as the top of the hill beyond the bridge, and saw shining against the blackness the yellow lights of his house. She looked at them for a long time. She thought that she would watch them until he came out. But she was driven to walking up and down, up and down, stumbling in the ruts of the road. At last she saw him coming, and stood still in the pool of darkness under the oaks until he reached her.

"Helen?" he said uncertainly. "Is it you?"

"Yes," she answered. Her throat ached.

"I came as quick as I could," he said. Somehow she knew that his throat ached, too. They moved to the little railing of the bridge and stood trying to see each other's faces in the gloom. "Are you cold?" he asked.

"No," she said. She saw then that the shawl

had slipped from her shoulders and was dragging over one arm. The wind fluttered it, and her hands were clumsy, trying to pull it back into place.

"Here," he was taking off his coat. "No," she said again. But she let him wrap half the coat around her. They stood close together in the folds of it. The chilly wind flowed around them like water, and the warmth of their trembling bodies made a little island of cosiness in a sea of cold.

"I got to go," he said. "It's a good job. Fifty dollars a month. I got to support mother, you know. Her money's pretty nearly gone already, and she spent a lot putting me through school. I just got to go. I wish — I wish I did n't have to."

She tried to hold her lips steady.

"It's all right," she said. "I'm glad you got a good job."

"You mean you are n't going to miss me when I'm gone?"

"Yes, I'll miss you."

"I'm going to miss you an awful lot," he said huskily. "You going to write to me?"

"Yes, I'll write if you will."

"You are n't going to forget me — you are n't going to get to going with anybody else — are you?"

She could not answer. The trembling that shook them carried them beyond speech. Wind and darkness melted together in a rushing flood around them.

The ache in her throat dissolved into tears, and they clung together, cheek against hot cheek, in voiceless misery.

"Oh, Helen! Oh, Helen!" She was crushed against the beating of his heart, his arms hurt her. She wanted them to hurt her. "You're so — you're so — sweet!" he stammered, and gropingly they found each other's lips.

Words came back to her after a time.

"I don't want you to go away," she sobbed.

His arms tightened around her, then slowly relaxed. His chin lifted, and she knew that his mouth was setting into its firm lines again.

"I got to," he said. The finality of the words was like something solid beneath their feet once more.

"Of course — I did n't mean —" She moved a little away from him, smoothing her hair with a shaking hand. A new solemnity had descended upon them both. They felt dimly that life had changed for them, that it would never be the same again.

"I got to think about things," he said.

"Yes — I know."

"There's mother. Fifty dollars a month. We just can't —"

Tears were welling slowly from her eyes and running down her cheeks. She was not able to stop them.

"No," she said. "I've got to do something to help at home, too." She groped for the shawl at her feet. He picked it up and wrapped it carefully around her.

They walked up and down in the starlight, trying to talk soberly, feeling very old and sad, a weight on their hearts. Ripley was a station in the San Joaquin valley, he told her. He was going to be night operator there. He could not keep a shade of self-importance from his voice, but he explained conscientiously that there would not be much telegraphing. Very few train orders were sent there at night. But it was a good job for a beginner and pretty soon maybe he would be able to get a better one. Say, when he was twenty or twenty-one seventy-five dollars a month perhaps. It would n't be long to wait. They were clinging together again.

"You — we must n't," she said.

"It's all right — just one — when you're engaged." She sobbed on his shoulder, and their kisses were salty with tears.

He left her at her gate. The memory of all the times they had stood there was the last unbearable pain. They held each other tight, without speaking.

"You — have n't said — tell me you — love me," he stammered after a long time.

"I love you," she said, as though it were a sacrament. He was silent for another moment, and in

the dim starlight she felt rather than saw a strange, half-terrifying expression on his face.

"Will you go away with me — right now — and marry me — if I ask you to?" His voice was hoarse.

She felt that she was taking all she was or could be in her cupped hands and offering it to him.

"Yes," she said.

His whole body shook with a long sob. He tried to say something, choking, tearing himself roughly away from her. She saw him going down the road, almost running, and then the darkness hid him.

In the days that followed it seemed to her that she could have borne the separation better if she had not been left behind. He had gone down the shining lines of track beyond Cherokee Hill into a vague big world that baffled her thoughts. He wrote that he had been in San Francisco and taken a ride on a sight-seeing car. It was a splendid place, he said; he wished she could see the things he saw. He had seen Chinatown, the Presidio, the beach, and Seal Rocks. Then he had gone on to Ripley, which was n't much like Masonville. He was well, and hoped she was, and he thought of her every day and was hers lovingly. Paul. But she felt that she was losing touch with him, and when she contemplated two or three long years of waiting she felt that she would lose him entirely. She thought

again of that young couple at Rollo, and pangs of envy were added to the misery in which she was living.

He had been gone two weeks when she announced to her mother that she was going to be a telegraph-operator. She held to the determination with a tenacity that surprised even herself. She argued, she pleaded, she pointed out the wages she would earn, the money she could send home. There was a notice in the Masonville weekly paper, advertising a school of telegraphy in Sacramento, saying: "Operators in great demand. Graduates earn \$75 to \$100 a month up." She wrote to that school, and immediately a reply came, assuring her that she could learn in three months, that railroad and telegraph companies were clamoring for operators, that the school guaranteed all its graduates good positions. The tuition was fifty dollars.

Her father said he guessed that settled it.

But in the end she won. When he renewed the mortgage he borrowed another hundred dollars from the bank. Fifty dollars seemed a fortune on which to live for three months. Her mother and she went over her clothes together, and her mother gave her the telescope-bag in which to pack them.

An awkward intimacy grew up between the two while they worked. Her mother said it was just as well for her to have a good job for a while. Maybe she would n't make a fool of herself, getting mar-

ried before she knew her own mind. Helen said nothing. She felt that it was not easy to talk with one's mother about things like getting married.

Her mother said one other thing that stayed in her mind, perhaps because of its indefiniteness, perhaps because of her mother's embarrassment when she said it, an embarrassment that made them both constrained.

"There's something I got to say to you, Helen," she said, keeping her eyes on the waist she was ironing and flushing hotly. "Your father's still against this idea of your going away. He says first thing we know we'll have you back on our hands, in trouble. Now I want you should promise me if anything comes up that looks like it was n't just right, you let me know right away, and I'll come straight down to Trenton and get you. I'm going to be worried about you, off alone in a city like that."

She promised quickly, uncertainly, and her mother began in a hurry to talk of something else. Mrs. Updike, who lived on the next farm, was going down to San Francisco to visit her sister. She would take Helen as far as Sacramento and see her settled there. Helen must be sure to eat her meals regularly and keep her clothes mended and write every week and study hard. She promised all those things.

There was a flurry on the last morning. Between tears and excitement, Mabel was half hysterical,

Tommy kept getting in the way, her mother unpacked the bag a dozen times to be sure that nothing was left out. They all drove to town, crowded into the two-seated light wagon, and there was another flurry at the station when the train came in. She hugged them all awkwardly, smiling with tears in her eyes. She felt for the first time how much she loved them.

Until the train rounded the curve south of town she gazed back at Masonville and the little yellow station where Paul had worked. Then she settled back against red velvet cushions to watch unfamiliar trees and hills flashing backward past the windows. She had an excited sense of adventure, wondering what the school would be like, promising herself again to study hard. She and Mrs. Updike worried at intervals, fearing lest by some mischance Mr. Weeks, the manager of the school, would fail to meet them at the Sacramento station. They wore bits of red yarn in their buttonholes so that he would recognize them.

He was waiting when the train stopped. He was a thin, well-dressed man, with a young face that seemed oddly old, like a half-ripe apple withered. He hurried them through noisy, bustling streets, on and off street-cars, up a stairway at last to the school.

There were two rooms, a small one, which was the office, and a larger one, bare and not very clean,

lighted by two high windows looking out on an alley. In the large room were half a dozen tables, each with a telegraph-sounder and key upon it. There was no one there at the moment, Mr. Weeks explained, because it was Saturday afternoon. The school usually did no business on Saturday afternoons, but he would make an exception for Helen. If she liked, he said briskly, she could pay him the tuition now, and begin her studies early Monday morning. He was sure she would be a good operator, and he guaranteed her a good position when she graduated. He would even give her a written guarantee, if she wished. But she did not ask for that. It would have seemed to imply a doubt of Mr. Weeks' good faith.

Mrs. Updike, panting from climbing the stairs and nervous with anxiety about catching her train, asked him about rooms. Providentially, he knew a very good one and cheap, next door to the school. He was kind enough to take them to see it.

There were a number of rooms in a row, all opening on a long hallway reached by stairs from the street. They were kept by Mrs. Brown, who managed the restaurant down-stairs. She was a sallow little woman, with very bright brown eyes and yellow hair. She talked continuously in a light, mechanically gay voice, making quick movements with her hands and moving about the room with a whisking

of silk petticoats, driven, it seemed, by an intensity of energy almost feverish.

The room rented for six dollars a month. It had a large bow-window overlooking the street, gaily flowered wall-paper, a red carpet, a big wooden bed, a wash-stand with pitcher and bowl, and two rocking chairs. At the end of the long hall was a bathroom with a white tub in it, the first Helen had seen. There was something metropolitan about that tub; a bath in it would be an event far different from the Saturday night scrubs in the tin wash-tub at home. And she could eat in the restaurant below; very good meals for twenty cents, or even for less if she wanted to buy a meal-ticket.

"I guess it's as good as you can do," said Mrs. Updike.

"I think it's lovely," Helen said.

So it was settled. Helen gave Mrs. Brown six dollars, and she whisked away after saying: "I'm sure I hope you'll like it, dearie, and if there's anything you want, you let me know. I sleep right in the next room, so nothing's going to bother you, and if you get lonesome, just come and knock on my door."

Then Mrs. Updike, with a hasty farewell peck at her cheek, hurried away to catch her train, Mr. Weeks going with her to take her to the station, and Helen was left alone.

She locked her door first, and counted her money, feeling very businesslike. Then she unpacked her bag and put away her things, pausing now and then to look around the room that was hers. It seemed very large and luxurious. She felt a pleasant sense of responsibility when everything was neatly in order and she stood at the window, looking down the street to the corner where at intervals she saw street-cars passing. She promised herself to work very hard, and to pay back soon the money her father had lent her, with interest.

Then she thought, smiling, that in a little while she would go downstairs and eat supper in a restaurant, and then she would buy a tablet and pencil and, coming back to this beautiful room, she would sit down all alone and write a letter to Paul.

CHAPTER IV

THE thought of Paul was the one clear reality in Helen's life while she blundered through the bewilderments of the first months in Sacramento. It was the only thing that warmed her in the midst of the strangeness that surrounded her like a thin, cold fog.

There was the school. She did not know what she had expected, but she felt vaguely that she had not found it. Faithfully every morning at eight o'clock she was at her table in the dingy back room, struggling to translate the dots and dashes of the Morse alphabet into crisp, even clicks of the sounder. There were three other pupils, farm boys who moved their necks uncomfortably in stiff collars and reddened when they looked at her.

There was a wire from that room into the front office. Sometimes its sounder opened, and they knew that Mr. Weeks was going to send them something to copy. They moved to that table eagerly. There were days when the sounder did not click again, and after a while one of the boys would tiptoe to the office and report that Mr. Weeks was asleep. On other days the sounder would tap for

a long time meaninglessly, while they looked at each other in bewilderment. Then it would make a few shaky letters and stop and make a few more.

Then for several days Mr. Weeks would not come to the school at all. They sank into a kind of stupor, sitting in the close, warm room, while flies buzzed on the window-pane. Helen's moist finger tips stuck to the hard rubber of the key; it was an effort to remember the alphabet. But she kept at work doggedly, knowing how much depended upon her success. Always before her was the vision of the station where she would work with Paul, a little yellow station with housekeeping rooms up-stairs. She thought, too, of the debt she owed her father, and the help she could give him later when she was earning money.

Bit by bit she learned a little about the other pupils. Two of them had come down from Mendocino County together. They had worked two summers to earn the money, and yet they had been able to save only seventy-five dollars for the tuition. However, they had been sharp enough to persuade Mr. Weeks to take them for that sum. They lived together in one room, and cooked their meals over the gas-jet. It was one of them who asked Helen if she knew that gas would kill a person.

"If you turned it on for a long time and set fire to it, I suppose it would burn you up," she said doubtfully.

"I don't mean that way," he informed her, excited. "It kills you if you just breathe it long enough. It's poison." After that she looked with terrified respect at the gas-jet in her room, and was always very careful to turn it off tightly.

The other boy had a more knowing air and smoked cigarettes. He swaggered a little, giving them to understand that he was a man of the world and knew all the wickedness of the city. He looked at Helen with eyes she did not like, and once asked her to go to a show with him. Although she was very lonely and had never seen a show in a real theater, she refused. She felt that Paul would not like her to go. At the end of three months in Sacramento these were the only people she knew, except Mrs. Brown.

She felt that she would like Mrs. Brown if she knew her better. Her shyness kept her from saying more than "Good evening," when she handed her meal-ticket over the restaurant counter to be punched, and for some inexplicable reason Mrs. Brown seemed shy with her. It was her own fault, Helen thought; Mrs. Brown laughed and talked gaily with the men customers, cajoling them into buying cigars and chewing-gum from her little stock.

Helen speculated about Mr. Brown. She never saw him; she felt quite definitely that he was not alive. Yet Mrs. Brown often looked at her wide wedding-ring, turning it on her finger as if she were

not quite accustomed to wearing it. A widow, and so young! Helen's heart ached at the thought of that brief romance. Mrs. Brown's thin figure and bright yellow hair were those of a girl; only her eyes were old. It must be grief that had given them that hard, weary look. Helen smiled at her wistfully over the counter, longing to express her friendliness and sympathy. But Mrs. Brown's manner always baffled her.

These meetings were not frequent. Helen tried to make her three-dollar meal ticket last a month, and that meant that only five times a week she could sit in state, eating warm food in an atmosphere thick with smells of coffee and stew and hamburger steak. She had learned that cinnamon rolls could be bought for half price on Saturday nights, and she kept a bag of them in her room, and some fruit. This made her a little uneasy when she saw Mrs. Brown's anxious eye on the vacant tables; she felt that she was defrauding Mrs. Brown by eating in her room.

Mrs. Brown worked very hard, Helen knew. It was she who swept the hall and kept the rooms in order. She did not do it very well, but Helen saw her sometimes in the evenings working at it. She swept with quick, feverish strokes. Her yellow hair straggled over her face; her high heels clicked on the floor; her petticoats made a whisking sound. There was something piteous about her, as there is about

a little trained animal on the stage, set to do tasks for which it is not fitted. Helen stole down the hallway at night, taking the broom from its corner as if she was committing a theft, and surreptitiously swept and dusted her own room, so that Mrs. Brown would not have to do it.

She wished that it took more time. When she had finished there was nothing to do but sit at her window and look down at the street. People went up and down, strolling leisurely in the warm summer evening. She saw girls in dainty dresses, walking about in groups, and the sight increased her loneliness. Buggies went by; a man with his wife and children out driving, a girl and her sweetheart. At the corner there was the clanging of street-cars, and she watched to see them passing, brightly lighted, filled with people. Once in a while she saw an automobile, and her breath quickened, she leaned from the window until it was out of sight. She felt then the charm of the city, with its crowds, its glitter, its strange, hurried life.

Two young men passed often down that street in an automobile. They looked up at her window when they went by and slowed the machine. If she were leaning on the sill, they waved to her and shouted gaily. She always pretended that she had not seen them, and drew back, but she watched for the machine to pass again. It seemed to be a link between her and all that exciting life from which

she was shut out. She would have liked to know those young men.

She sat at the window one evening near the end of the three months that she had planned to spend in the telegraph school. Paul's picture was in her hand. He had had it taken for her in Ripley. It was a beautiful, shiny picture, cabinet size, showing him against a tropical background of palms and ferns. He had taken off a derby hat, which he held self-consciously; his stocky figure wore an air of prosperity in an unfamiliar suit.

She brooded upon the firm line of his chin, the clean-cut lips, the smooth forehead from which the hair was brushed back slickly. His neck was turned so that his eyes did not quite meet hers. It was baffling, that aloof gaze; it hurt a little. She wished that he would look at her. She felt that the picture would help her more if he would, and she needed help.

Mr. Weeks had returned from one of his long absences that day, and she had taken courage to ask him about a job. He had listened while she stood beside his desk, stammering out her worry and her need. Her money was almost gone; she thought she telegraphed pretty well, she had studied hard. She watched his shaking hand fumbling with some papers on his desk, and felt pityingly that she should not bother him when he was sick. But desperation drove her on. She did not suspect the truth until

he looked up at her with reddened eyes and answered incoherently. Then she saw that he was drunk.

Her shock of loathing came upon her in a wave of nausea. She trembled so that she could hardly get down the stairs, and she had walked a long time in the clean sunshine before the full realization of what it meant chilled her. She sat now confronting that realization.

She had only two dollars, a half-used meal-ticket, and a week's rent paid in advance. She saw clearly that she could hope for nothing from the telegraph school. It did not occur to her to blame anybody. Her mind ran desperately from thought to thought, like a caged creature seeking escape between iron bars.

She could not go home. She could not live there again, defeated, knowing day by day that she had added a hundred dollars to the mortgage. She had told Paul so confidently that she could do as well as a boy if she had the chance, and she had had the chance. He could not help her. The street below was full of happy people going by, absorbed in their own concerns, careless of hers.

She had not seen the automobile with the two young men in it until it stopped across the street. Even then she saw it dimly with dull eyes. But the two young men were looking up at her window, talking together, looking up again. They were getting out. They crossed the street. She heard their

voices below, and a moment later her heart began to thump. They were coming up the stairs.

Something was going to happen. At last something was going to break the terrible loneliness and deadness. She stood listening, one hand at her throat, alert, breathless.

They were standing half-way up the stairs, talking. She felt indecision in the sound of their voices. One of them ran down again. There was an aching silence. Then she heard footsteps and the high, gay voice of Mrs. Brown. They were laughing together. "Oh, you Kittie!" one of the young men said. The three came up the stairs, and she heard their clattering steps and caught a word or two as they went past her room. Then the scratch of a match, and light gleamed through the crack of Mrs. Brown's door.

They went on talking. It appeared that they were arguing, coaxing, urging something. Mrs. Brown's voice put them off. There was a crash and laughter. She gathered that they were scuffling playfully. Later she heard Mrs. Brown's voice at the head of the back stairs, calling down to some one to send up some beer.

Her tenseness relaxed. She felt herself falling into bottomless depths of depression. The bantering argument was going on again. Meaningless scraps of it came to her while she undressed in the dark and crept into bed.

“Aw, come on, Kittie, be a sport! A stunning looker like that! What’re you after anyhow — money?”

“Cut that out. No, I tell you. What’s it to you why I won’t?”

She crushed her face into the pillow and wept silently. It seemed the last unkindness of fate that Mrs. Brown should give a party and not ask her.

CHAPTER V

THE next day she dressed very carefully in a fresh white waist and her Indianhead skirt and went down to the telegraph-office to ask for a job. She knew where to find the office; she had often looked at its plate-glass front lettered in blue during her lonely walks on the crowded street. Her heart thumped loudly and her knees were weak when she went through the open door.

The big room was cut across by a long counter, on which a young man lounged in his shirt-sleeves, a green eye-shade pushed back on his head. Behind him telegraph instruments clattered loudly, disturbing the stifling quiet of the hot morning. The young man looked at her curiously.

"Manager? Won't I do?" he asked.

She heard her voice quavering:

"I'd rather see him — if he's busy — I could — wait."

The manager rose from the desk where he had been sitting. He was a tall, thin man, with thin hair combed carefully over the top of his head. His lips were thin, too, and there were deep creases on either side of his mouth, like parentheses. His eyes

looked her over, interested. He was sorry, he said. He did n't need another operator. She had experience?

She was a graduate of Weeks' School of Telegraphy, she told him breathlessly. She could send perfectly, she was n't so sure of her receiving, but she would be awfully careful not to make mistakes. She had to have a job, she just had to have a job; it did n't matter how much it paid, anything. She felt that she could not walk out of that office. She clung to the edge of the counter as if she were drowning and it were a life-line.

"Well — come in. I'll see what you can do," he said. He swung open a door in the counter, and she followed him between the tables. There was a dusty instrument on a battered desk, back by the big switchboard. The manager took a message from a hook and gave it to her. "Let's hear you send that."

She began painstakingly. The young man with the eye-shade had wandered over. He stood leaning against a table, listening, and after she had made a few letters she felt that a glance passed between him and the manager, over her head. She finished the message, even adding a careful period. She thought she had done very well. When she looked up the manager said kindly:

"Not so bad! You'll be an operator some day."

"If you'll only give me a chance," she pleaded.

He said that he would take her address and let her know. She felt that the young man was slightly amused. She gave the manager her name and the street number. He repeated it in surprise.

"You're staying with Kittie Brown?" Again a glance passed over her head. Both of them looked at her with intensified interest, for which she saw no reason. "Yes," she replied. She felt keenly that it was an awkward moment, and bewilderment added to her confusion. The young man turned away and, sitting down, began to send a pile of messages, working very busily, sending with his right hand and marking off the messages with his left. But she felt that his attention was still upon her and the manager.

"Well! And you want to work here?" The manager rubbed one hand over his chin, smiling. "I don't know. I might."

"Oh, if you would!"

He hesitated for an agonizing moment.

"Well, I'll think about it. Come and see me again." He held her fingers warmly when they shook hands, and she returned the pressure gratefully. She felt that he was very kind. She felt, too, that she had conducted the interview very well, and returning hope warmed her while she went back to her room.

That afternoon she had a visitor. She had written her weekly letter to her mother, saying that she

had almost finished school and was expecting to get a job, hesitating a long time, miserably, before she added that she did not have much money left and would like to borrow another five dollars. She had eaten a stale roll and an apple and was considering how long she could make the meal-ticket last when she heard the knock on her door.

She opened it in surprise, thinking there had been a mistake. A stout, determined-looking woman stood there, a well-dressed woman who wore black gloves and a veil. Immediately Helen felt herself young, inexperienced, a child in firm hands.

"You're Helen Davies? I'm Mrs. Campbell." She stepped into the room, Helen giving way before her assured advance. She swept the place with one look. "What on earth was your mother thinking of, leaving you in a place like this? Did you know what you were getting into?"

"I don't — what — w-won't you take a chair?" said Helen.

Mrs. Campbell sat down gingerly, very erect. They looked at each other.

"I might as well talk straight out to you," Mrs. Campbell said, as if it were a customary phrase. "I met Mrs. Morris, Mrs. Updike's sister, at the lodge convention in Oakland last week, and she told me about you, and I promised to look you up. Well, when I found out! I told Mr. Campbell I was coming straight down here to talk to you. If you want

to stay in a place like this, well and good, it's your affair. Though I should feel it my duty to write to your mother. I would n't want my own girl left in a strange town, at your age, and nobody taking any interest in her."

"I'm sure it's very kind." Helen murmured in bewilderment.

"Well,"—Mrs. Campbell drew a long breath and plunged,—“I suppose you know the sort of person this Kittie Brown, she calls herself, is? I suppose you know she's a bad woman?”

A wave of blackness went through the girl's mind.

"Everybody in town knows what *she* is," Mrs. Campbell continued. "Everybody knows—" She went on, her voice growing more bitter. Helen, half hearing the words, choked back a sick impulse to ask her to stop talking. She felt that everything about her was poisoned; she wanted to escape, to hide, to feel that she would never be seen again by any one. When the hard voice had stopped it was an effort to speak.

"But—what will I do?"

"Do? I should think you'd want to get out of here just as quick as you could."

"Oh, I do want to. But where can I go? I—my rent's paid. I have n't any money."

Mrs. Campbell considered.

"Well, you will have money, won't you? Your folks don't expect you to live here on nothing, do

they? If it's only a day or two, I could take you in myself rather than leave you in a place like this. There's plenty of decent places in town." She became practical. "The first thing to do's to pack your things right away. How long is your rent paid? Can't you get some of it back?"

She waited while Helen packed. She did not stop talking, and Helen tried to answer her coherently and gratefully. She felt that she should be grateful. They went down the stairs, and Mrs. Campbell waited outside the restaurant while Helen went in to ask Mrs. Brown to refund the week's rent.

It was noon, but there were only one or two people in the restaurant. Mrs. Brown's smile faded when Helen stammered that she was leaving.

"You are? What's wrong? Anybody been bothering you?" Her glance fell upon the waiting Mrs. Campbell, and her sallow face whitened. "Oh, that's it, is it?"

"No," Helen said hastily. "That is, it's been very nice here, and I liked it, but a friend of mine — she wants me to stay with her. I'm sorry to leave, but I have n't much money." She struggled against feeling pity for Mrs. Brown. She choked over asking her to refund the rent.

Mrs. Brown said she could not do it. She offered, however, to give Helen something in trade, two dollars' worth. They both tried to make the transaction commonplace and dignified.

Helen, at a loss, pointed out a heap of peanut candy in the glass counter. She had often looked at it and wished she could afford to buy some. Mrs. Brown's thin hands shook, but she was piling the candy on the scale when Mrs. Campbell came in.

"What's she doing?" Mrs. Campbell asked Helen. "You buying candy?"

"I don't know what business it is of yours, coming interfering with me!" Mrs. Brown broke out. "I never did her any harm. I never even talked to her. You ask her if I ever bothered her. You ask her if I did n't leave her alone. You ask her if I ain't keeping a decent, respectable, quiet place and doing the best I can and minding my own business and trying to make a square living. You ask her what I ever did to her all the time she's been here." Her voice was high and shrill. Tears were rolling down her face. Mechanically she went on breaking up the candy and piling it on the scales. "I don't know what I ever did to you that you don't leave me alone, coming poking around."

"I did n't come here to talk to you," said Mrs. Campbell. "Come on out of here," she commanded Helen.

"I wish to God you'd mind your own business!" Mrs. Brown cried after them. "If you'd only tend to your own affairs, you *good* people!" She hurled the words after them like a curse, her voice break-

ing with sobs. The door slammed under Mrs. Campbell's angry hand.

Helen, shaking and quivering, tried not to be sorry for Mrs. Brown. She was ashamed of the feeling. She knew that Mrs. Campbell did not have it. Hurrying to keep pace with that furious lady's haste down the street, she was overwhelmed with shame and confusion. The whole affair was like a splash of mud upon her. Her cheeks were red, and she could not make herself meet Mrs. Campbell's eyes.

Even when they were on the street-car, safely away from it all, her awkwardness increased. Mrs. Campbell herself was a little disconcerted then. She looked at Helen, at the bulging telescope-bag, the shabby shoes, and the faded sailor hat, and Helen felt the gaze like a burn. She knew that Mrs. Campbell was wondering what on earth to do with her.

Pride and helplessness and shame choked her. She tried to respond to Mrs. Campbell's efforts at conversation, but she could not, though she knew that her failure made Mrs. Campbell think her sullen. Her rescuer's impatient tone was cutting her like the lash of a whip before they got off the car.

Mrs. Campbell lived in splendor in a two-story white house on a complacent street. The smoothness of the well-kept lawns, the immaculate propriety of the swept cement walks, cried out against Helen's shabbiness. She had never been so aware

of it. When she was seated in Mrs. Campbell's parlor, oppressed by the velvet carpet and the piano and the bead portieres, she tried to hide her feet beneath the chair and did not know what to do with her hands.

She answered Mrs. Campbell's questions because she must, but she felt that her last coverings of reticence and self-respect were being torn from her. Mrs. Campbell offered only one word of advice.

"The thing for you to do is to go home."

"No," Helen said. "I — I can't — do that."

Mrs. Campbell looked at her curiously, and again the red flamed in Helen's cheeks. She said nothing about the mortgage. Mrs. Campbell had not asked about that.

"Well, you can stay here a few days."

She lugged the telescope-bag up the stairs, the wooden steps of which shone like glass. Mrs. Campbell showed her a room at the end of the hall. A mass of things filled it; children's toys, old baskets, a broken chair. It was like the closets at home, but larger. It was large enough to hold a narrow white iron bed, a wash-stand, and a chair, and still leave room to swing the door open. These things appeared when Mrs. Campbell had dragged out the others.

Watching her swift, efficient motions in silence, Helen tried again to feel gratitude. But the fact that Mrs. Campbell expected it made it impossible.

She could only stand awkwardly, longing for the moment when she would be alone. When at last Mrs. Campbell went down-stairs she shut the door quickly and softly. She wanted to fling herself on the sagging bed and cry, but she did not. She stood with clenched hands, looking into the small, blurred mirror over the washstand. A white, tense face looked back at her with burning eyes. She said to it, "You're going to do something, do you hear? You're going to do something quick!" Although she did not know what she could do, she could keep her self-control by telling herself that she would do something.

Some time later she heard the shouts of children and the clatter of pans in the kitchen below. It was almost supper-time. She took a cinnamon roll from the paper sack in her bag, but she could not eat it. She was looking at it when Mrs. Campbell called up the back stairs, "Miss Davies! Come to supper."

She braced herself and went down. It was a good supper, but she could not eat very much. Mr. Campbell sat at the head of the table, a stern-looking man who said little except to speak sharply to the children when they were too noisy. There were two children, a girl of nine and a younger boy in a sailor suit. They looked curiously at Helen and did not reply when she tried to talk to them. She perceived that they had been told to leave her alone,

and she felt that her association with a woman like Mrs. Brown was still visible upon her like a splash of mud.

When she timidly offered to help with the dishes after supper Mrs. Campbell told her that she did not need any help. Her tone was not unkind, but Helen felt the rebuff, and fearing she would cry, she went quickly up-stairs.

She looked at Paul's picture for some time before she put it back into her bag where she thought Mrs. Campbell would not see it. Then, sitting on the edge of the bed under a flickering gas-jet, she wrote him a long letter. She told him that she had moved, and in describing the street, the beautiful house, the furniture in the parlor, she drew such a picture of comfort and happiness that its reflection warmed her somewhat. It was a beautiful letter, she thought, reading it over several times before she carefully turned out the gas and went to bed.

Early in the morning she went to the telegraph-office and pleaded again for a job. Mr. Roberts, the manager, was very friendly, talking to her for some time and patting her hand in a manner which she thought fatherly and found comforting. He told her to come back. He might do something.

She went back every morning for a week, and often in the afternoons. The rest of the time she wandered in the streets or sat on a bench in the park. She felt under such obligations when she ate

Mrs. Campbell's food that several times she did not return to the house until after dark, when supper would be finished. She had to ring the door-bell, for the front door was kept locked, and each time Mrs. Campbell asked her sharply where she had been. She always answered truthfully.

At the end of the week she received a letter from her mother, telling her to come home at once and sending her five dollars for the fare. Mrs. Campbell had written to her, and she was horrified and alarmed.

Your father says we might have known it and saved our money, and I blame myself for ever letting you go. I don't say it will be easy for you here, short as we are this winter, but you ought to be glad you have a good home to come to even if it is n't very fine, and don't worry about the money, for your father won't say a word. Just you come home right away. Lovingly,

YOUR MOTHER.

Helen hated Mrs. Campbell. What right had that woman to worry her mother? Helen could get along all right by herself, and she wrote her mother that she could. She had a job at last. Mr. Roberts had made a place for her in the office, as a clerk at five dollars a week. She did not mention the wages to her mother; she said only that she had a job, and her mother was not to worry. She would be making more money soon and could send some home.

The letter had been waiting for her, propped on

the hall table, when she hurried in, eager to tell Mrs. Campbell the glad news. Her anger when she read it was obscurely a relief. The compulsion to feel gratitude toward Mrs. Campbell was lifted from her. She wrote her answer and hastened to drop it in the corner mail-box.

Running back to the house, she met Mrs. Campbell returning from a sewing-circle meeting. Mrs. Campbell was neatly hatted and gloved, and the expression in her pale blue eyes behind the dotted veil suddenly made Helen realize how blow-away she looked, bare-headed, her loosened hair ruffled by the breeze, her blouse sagging under the arms. She stood awkwardly self-conscious while Mrs. Campbell unlocked the front door.

"Did you get your mother's letter?"

"Yes. I got it."

"Well, what did she say?"

Helen did not answer that.

"I got a job," she said. Her breath came quickly.

"You have? What kind of job?"

Helen told her. They were in the hall now, standing by the golden-oak hat-rack at the foot of the stairs. The children watched, wide-eyed, in the parlor door.

Perplexity and disgust struggled on Mrs. Campbell's face.

"You think you're going to live in Sacramento on five dollars a week?"

"I'm going to. I got to. I'll manage somehow. I won't go home!" Helen cried, confronting Mrs. Campbell like an antagonist.

"Oh, I don't doubt you'll *manage!*" Mrs. Campbell said cuttingly. She went down the hall, and the slam of the dining-room door shouted that she washed her hands of the whole affair.

She came up the back stairs half an hour later. Helen was sitting on the bed, her bag packed, trying to plan what to do. She had only the five dollars. It would be two weeks before she could get more money from the office. Mrs. Campbell opened the door without knocking.

"I'm going to talk this over with you," she said, patient firmness in her tone. "Don't you realize you can't get a decent room and anything to eat for five dollars a week? Do you think it's right to expect your folks to support you, poor as they are? It is n't —"

"I don't expect them to!" Helen cried.

"As though you did n't have a good home to go back to," Mrs. Campbell conveyed subtly that a well-bred girl did not interrupt while an older woman was speaking. "Now be reasonable about this, my —"

"I won't go back," Helen said. She lifted miserable eyes to Mrs. Campbell's, and the expression she saw there reminded her of a horse with his ears laid back.

"Then you've decided, I suppose, where you *are* going?"

"No — I don't know. Where could I begin to look for a — nice room that I can live in on my wages?"

Mrs. Campbell exclaimed impatiently. Her almost ruthless capability in dealing with situations did not prepare her to meet gracefully one that she could not handle. Her voice grew colder, and the smooth cheeks beneath the smooth, fair hair reddened while she continued to talk. Her arguments, her grudging attempts at persuasion, her final outburst of unconcealed anger, were futile. Helen would not go home. She meant to keep her job and to live on the wages.

"Well, then I guess you'll have to stay here. I can't turn you out on the streets."

"How much would you charge for the room?" said Helen.

"Charge!" Helen flushed again at the scorn in the word.

"I could n't stay unless I paid you something. I'd have to do that."

"Well, of all the ungrateful —!"

Tears came into Helen's eyes. She knew Mrs. Campbell meant well, and though she did not like her, she wished to thank her. But she did not know how to do it without yielding somewhat to the im-

placable force of the older woman. She could only repeat doggedly that she must pay for the room.

She was left shaken, but with a sense of victory emphasized by Mrs. Campbell's inarticulate exclamation as she went out. It was arranged that Helen should pay five dollars a month for the room.

But the bitterness of living in that house, on terms which she felt were charity, increased daily. She tried to make as little trouble as possible, stealing in at the back door so that no one would have to answer her ring, making her bed neatly, and slipping out early so that she would not meet any of the family. She spent her evenings at the office or at the library, where she could forget herself in books and in writing long letters. For some inexplicable reason this seemed to exasperate Mrs. Campbell, who inquired where she had been and did not hide a belief that her replies were lies. Helen felt like a suspected criminal. She would have left the house if she could have found another room that she could afford.

It was only at the office that she could breathe freely. She worked from eight in the morning to six at night, and then until the office closed at nine o'clock she could practise on the telegraph instrument behind the tables where the real wires came in. She worked hard at it, for at last she was on the road to the little station where she would work

with Paul. She felt that she could never be grateful enough to Mr. Roberts for giving her the chance.

He was very kind. Often he came behind the screen where she was studying and talked to her for a long time. He was surprised at first by her working so hard. He seemed to think she had not meant to do it. But his manner was so warmly friendly that one day when he took her hand, saying, "What's the big idea, little girl — keeping me off like this?" she told him about everything but Paul. She told him about the farm and the mortgage and the failure of the fruit crop, even, shamefaced, about Mr. Weeks' drinking, and that she did not know what she would have done if she had not got the job. She was very grateful to him and tried to tell him so.

He said drily not to bother about that, and she felt that she had offended him. Perhaps her story had sounded as if she were begging for more money, she thought with burning cheeks. For several days he gave her a great deal of hard work to do and was cross when she made mistakes. She did her best, trying hard to please him, and he was soon very friendly again.

His was the only friendliness she found to warm her shivering spirit, and she became daily more grateful to him for it. Though she was puzzled by his displays of affectionate interest in her and his sudden cold withdrawals when she eagerly thanked

him, this was only part of the bewildering atmosphere of the office, in which she felt many undercurrents that she could not understand.

The young operator with the green eye-shade, for instance, always regarded her with a cynical and slightly amused eye, which she resented without knowing why. When she laid messages beside his key, he covered her hand with his if he could, and sometimes when she sat working he came and put his hand on her shoulder. She was always angry, for she felt contempt in his attitude toward her, but she did not know how to show her resentment without making too much of the incidents.

"Mr. McCormick, leave me alone!" she said impatiently. "I want to work."

"Just what *is* the game?" he drawled.

"What do you mean?" she asked, reddening under that cool, satirical gaze. He looked at her, grinning until she felt only that she hated him. Or sometimes he said something like: "Oh, well, I'm not butting in. It's up to you and the boss," and strolled away, whistling.

Much looking at life from the back-door keyhole of the telegraph-operator's point of view had made him blasé and wearily worldly-wise at twenty-two. He knew that every pretty face was moulded on a skeleton, and was convinced that all lives contained one. Only virtue could have surprised him, and he could not have been convinced that it existed.

When he was on duty in the long, slow evenings, Helen, practising diligently behind her screen, heard him singing thoughtfully:

“Life’s a funny proposition after all;

Just why we’re here and what it’s all about,

It’s a problem that has driven many brainy men to drink,

It’s a problem that they’ve never figured out.”

Life seemed simple enough to Helen. She would be a telegraph-operator soon, earning as much as fifty dollars a month. She could repay the hundred dollars then, buy some new clothes, and have plenty to eat. She would try to get a job at the Ripley station,—always in the back of her mind was the thought of Paul,—and she planned the furnishing of housekeeping rooms, and thought of making curtains and embroidering centerpieces.

It was spring when he wrote that he was coming to spend a day in Sacramento. He was going to Masonville to help his mother move to Ripley. On the way he would stop and see Helen.

Helen, in happy excitement, thought of her clothes. She must have something new to wear when they met. Paul must see in the first glance how much she had changed, how much she had improved. She had not been able to save anything, but she must, she must have new clothes. Two days of worried planning brought her courage to the point of approaching Mr. Roberts and asking him

for her next month's salary in advance. Next month's food was a problem she could meet later. Mr. Roberts was very kind about it.

"Money? Of course!" he said. He took a bill from his own pocket-book. "We'll have to see about your getting more pretty soon." Her heart leaped. He put the bill in her palm, closing his hand around hers. "Going to be good to me if I do?"

"Oh, I'd do anything in the world I could for you," she said, looking at him gratefully. "You're so good! Thank you ever so much." His look struck her as odd, but a customer came in at that moment, and in taking the message she forgot about it.

She went out at noon and bought a white, pleated, voile skirt for five dollars, a China-silk waist for three-ninety-five, and a white, straw sailor. And that afternoon McCormick, with his cynical smile, handed her a note that had come over the wire for her. "Arrive eight ten Sunday morning. Meet me. PAUL."

She was so radiantly self-absorbed all the afternoon that she hardly saw the thundercloud gathering in Mr. Roberts' eyes, and she went back to her room that evening so confidently happy that she rang the door-bell without her usual qualm. Mrs. Campbell's lips were drawn into a tight, thin line.

"There's some packages for you," she said.

"Yes, I know. I bought some clothes. Thank

you for taking them in," said Helen. She felt friendly even toward Mrs. Campbell. "A white, voile skirt, and a silk waist, and a hat. Would — would you like to see them?"

"No, *thank* you!" said Mrs. Campbell, icily. Going up the stairs, Helen heard her speaking to her husband. "'I bought some clothes,' she says, bold as brass. Clothes!"

Helen wondered, hurt, how people could be so unkind. She knew that the clothes were an extravagance, but she did want them so badly, for Paul, and it seemed to her that she had worked hard enough to deserve them. Besides, Mr. Roberts had said that she might get a raise.

She was dressed and creeping noiselessly out of the house at seven o'clock the next morning. The spring dawn was coming rosily into the city after a night of rain; the odor of the freshly washed lawns and flower-beds was delicious, and birds sang in the trees. The flavor of the cool, sweet air and the warmth of the sunshine mingled with her joyful sense of youth and coming happiness. She looked very well, she thought, watching her slim white reflection in the shop-windows.

CHAPTER VI

WHEN the train pulled into the big, dingy station Helen had been waiting for some time, her pulses fluttering with excitement. But her self-confidence deserted her when she saw the crowds pouring from the cars. She shrank back into the waiting-room doorway; and she saw Paul before his eager eyes found her.

It was a shock to find that he had changed, too. Something boyish was gone from his face, and his self-confident walk, his prosperous appearance in a new suit, gave her the chill sensation that she was about to meet a stranger. She braced herself for the effort, and when they shook hands she felt that hers was cold.

"You're looking well," she said shyly.

"Well, so are you," he answered. They walked down the platform together, and she saw that he carried a new suitcase, and that even his shoes were new and shining. However, these details were somewhat offset by her perception that he was feeling awkward, too.

"Where shall we go?" They hesitated, looking at each other, and in their smile the strangeness vanished.

"I don't care. Anywhere, if you're along," he said. "Oh, Helen, it sure is great to see you again! You look like a million dollars, too." His approving eye was upon her new clothes.

"I'm glad you like them," she said, radiant. "That's an awfully nice suit, Paul." Happiness came back to her in a flood and putting out her hand, she picked a bit of thread from his dear sleeve. "Well, where shall we go?"

"We'll get something to eat first," he said practically. "I'm about starved, aren't you?" She had not thought of eating.

They breakfasted in a little restaurant on waffles and sausages and coffee. The hot food was delicious, and the waiter in the soiled white apron grinned understandingly while he served them. Paul gave him fifteen cents, in an off-hand manner, and she thrilled at his careless prodigality and his air of knowing his way about.

The whole long day lay before them, bright with limitless possibilities. They left the suitcase with the cashier of the restaurant and walked slowly down the street, embarrassed by the riches of time that were theirs. Helen suggested that they walk awhile in the capitol grounds; she had supposed they would do that, and perhaps in the afternoon enjoy a car-ride to Oak Park. But Paul dismissed these simple pleasures with a word.

"Nothing like that," he said. "I want a real

celebration, a regular blow-out. I've been saving up for it a long time." He struggled with this conscience. "It won't do any harm to miss church one Sunday. Let's take a boat down the river."

"Oh, Paul!" She was dazzled. "But — I don't know — won't it be awfully expensive?"

"I don't care how much it costs," he replied recklessly. "Come on. It'll be fun."

They went down the shabby streets toward the river, and even the dingy tenements and broken sidewalks of the Japanese quarter seemed to them to have a holiday air. They laughed about the queer little shops and the restaurant windows, where electric lights still burned in the clear daylight over pallid pies and strange-looking cakes. Helen must stop to speak to the straight-haired, flat-faced Japanese babies who sat stolidly on the curbs, looking at her with enigmatic, slant eyes, and she saw romance in the groups of tall Hindoo laborers, with their bearded, black faces and gaily colored turbans.

It was like going into a foreign land together, she said, and even Paul was momentarily caught by the enchantment she saw in it all, though he did not conceal his detestation of these foreigners. "We're going to see to it we don't have them in our town," he said, already with the air of a proprietor in Ripley.

"Now this is something like!" he exclaimed when he had helped Helen across the gang-plank and de-

posited her safely on the deck of the steamer. Helen, pressing his arm with her fingers, was too happy to speak. The boat was filling with people in holiday clothes; everywhere about her was the exciting stir of departure, calls, commands, the thump of boxes being loaded on the deck below. A whistle sounded hoarsely, the engines were starting, sending a thrill through the very planks beneath her feet.

"We'd better get a good place up in front," said Paul. He took her through the magnificence of a large room furnished with velvet chairs, past a glimpse of shining white tables and white-clad waiters, to a seat whence they could gaze down the yellow river. She was appalled by his ease and assurance. She looked at him with an admiration which she would not allow to lessen even when the boat edged out into the stream and, turning, revealed that he had led her to the stern deck.

Her enthusiastic suggestion that they explore the boat aided Paul's attempt to conceal his chagrin, and she listened enthralled to his explanations of all they saw. He estimated the price of the crates of vegetables and chickens piled on the lower deck, on their way to the city from the upper river farms. It was his elaborate description of the engines that caught the attention of a grimy engineer who had emerged from the noisy depths for a breath of air, and the engineer, turning on them a quizzically

friendly gaze, was easily persuaded to take them into the engine-room.

Helen could not understand his explanations, but she was interested because Paul was, and found her own thrill in the discovery of a dim tank half filled with flopping fish, scooped from the river and flung there by the paddle wheel. "We take 'em home and eat 'em, miss," said the engineer, and she pictured their cool lives in the green river, and the city supper-tables at which they would be eaten. She was fascinated by the multitudinous intricacies of life, even on that one small boat.

It was a disappointment to find, when they returned again to the upper decks, that they could see nothing but green levee banks on each side of the river. But this led to an even more exciting discovery, for venturesomely climbing a slender iron ladder they saw beyond the western levee an astounding and incredible stretch of water where land should be. Their amazement emboldened Paul to tap on the glass wall of a small room beside them, in which they saw an old man peacefully smoking his pipe. He proved to be the pilot, who explained that it was flood water they saw, and who let them squeeze into his tiny quarters and stay while he told long tales of early days on the river, of floods in which whole settlements were swept away at night, of women and children rescued from floating roofs, of cows found drowned in tree-tops, and droves of hogs that cut

their own throats with their hoofs while swimming. Listening to him while the boat slowly chugged down the curves of the sunlit river, Helen felt the romance of living, the color of all the millions of obscure lives in the world.

"Is n't everything interesting!" she cried, giving Paul's arm an excited little squeeze as they walked along the main deck again. "Oh, I'd like to live all the lives that ever were lived! Think of those women and the miners and people in cities and everything!"

"I expect you'd find it pretty inconvenient before you got through," Paul said. "Gee, but you're awfully pretty, Helen," he added irrelevantly, and they forgot everything except that they were together.

They had to get off at Lancaster in order to catch the afternoon boat back to Sacramento. There was just time to eat on board, Paul said, and overruling her flurried protests he led her into the white-painted dining-room. The smooth linen, the shining silver, and the imposing waiters confused her; she was able to see nothing but the prices on the elaborate menu-cards, and they were terrifying. Paul himself was startled by them, and she could see worried calculation in his eyes. She felt that she should pay her share; she was working, too, and earning money. The memory of the office, the advance she had drawn on her wages, her uncomfortable ex-

istence in Mrs. Campbell's house, passed through her mind like a shadow. But it was gone in an instant, and she sat happily at the white table, eating small delicious sandwiches and drinking milk, smiling across immaculate linen at Paul. For a moment she played with the fancy that it was a honeymoon trip, and a thrill ran along her nerves.

They were at Lancaster before they knew it. There was a moment of flurried haste, and they stood on the levee, watching the boat push off and disappear beyond a wall of willows. A few lounging Japanese looked at them with expressionless, slant eyes, pretending not to understand Paul's inquiries until his increasing impatience brought from them in clear English the information that the afternoon boat was late. It might be along about five o'clock, they thought.

"Well, that 'll get us back in time for my train," Paul decided. "Let's look around a little."

The levee road was a tunnel of willow-boughs, floored with soft sand in which their feet made no sound. They walked in an enchanted stillness, through pale light, green as sea-water, drowsy, warm, and scented with the breath of unseen flowers. Through the thin wall of leaves they caught glimpses of the broad river, the yellow waves of which gave back the color of the sky in flashes of metallic blue. And suddenly, stepping out of the perfumed shadow, they saw the orchards. A sea of

petals, fragile, translucent, unearthly as waves of pure rosy light, rippled at their feet.

The loveliness of it filled Helen's eyes with tears. "Oh!" she said, softly. "Oh — Paul!" Her hand went out blindly toward him. One more breath of magic would make the moment perfect. She did not know what she wanted, but her whole being was a longing for it. "Oh, Paul!"

"Pears, by Jove!" he cried. "Hundreds of acres, Helen! They're the tops of trees! We're looking down at 'em! Look at the river. Why, the land's fifteen feet below water-level. Did you ever see anything like it?" Excitement shook his voice. "There must be a way to get down there. I want to see it!" He almost ran along the edge of the levee, Helen had to hurry to keep beside him. She did not know why she should be hurt because Paul was interested in the orchards. She was the first to laugh about going down-stairs to farm when they found the wooden steps on the side of the levee.

But she felt rebuffed and almost resentful. She listened abstractedly to Paul's talk about irrigation and the soil. He crumbled handfuls of it between his fingers while they walked between the orchard rows, and his opinion led to a monologue on the soil around Ripley and the fight the farmers were making to get water on it. He was conservative about the project; it might pay, and it might not.

But if it did, a man who bought some cheap land now would make a good thing out of it. It occurred to her suddenly to wonder about the girls in Ripley. There must be some; Paul had never written about them. She thought about it for some time before she was able to bring the talk to the point where she could ask about them.

"Girls?" Paul said. "Sure, there are. I don't pay much attention to them, though. I see them in church, and they're at the Aid Society suppers, of course. They seem pretty foolish to me. Why, I never noticed whether they were pretty, or not." Enlightenment dawned upon him. "I'll tell you; they don't seem to talk about anything much. You're the only girl I ever struck that I could really talk to. I—I've been awfully lonesome, thinking about you."

"Really truly?" she said, looking up at him. The sunlight fell across her white dress, and stray pink petals fluttered slowly downward around her. "Have you really been lonesome for me, too?" She swayed toward him, ever so little, and he put his arms around her.

He did love her. A great contentment flowed through her. To be in his arms again was to be safe and rested and warm after ages of racking effort in the cold. He was thinking only of her now. His arms crushed her against him; she felt

the roughness of his coat under her cheek. He was stammering love-words, kissing her hair, her cheeks, her lips.

"Oh, Paul, I love you, I love you, I love you!" she said, her arms around his neck.

Much later they found a little nook under the willows on the levee bank and sat there with the river rippling at their feet, his arm around her, her head on his shoulder. They talked a little then. Paul told her again all about Ripley, but she did not mind. "When we're married—" said Paul, and the rest of the sentence did not matter.

"And I'm going to help you," she said. "Because I'm telegraphing now, too. I'll be earning as much—almost as much, as you do. We can live over the depot—"

"We will not!" said Paul. "We'll have a house. I don't know that I'm crazy about my wife working."

"Oh, but I do want to help! A house would be nice. Oh, Paul, with rosebushes in the yard!"

"And a horse and buggy, so we can go riding Sunday afternoons."

"Besides, if I'm making money—"

"I know. We would n't have to wait so long."

She flushed. It was what she meant, but she did not want to think so. "I did n't—I don't—"

"Of course there's mother. And I want to feel that I can support—"

She felt the magic departing.

"Never mind!" The tiniest of cuddling movements brought his arms tight around her again.

"Oh, sweetheart, sweetheart, you're worth it!" he cried. "I'd wait for you!"

They were startled when they noticed the shadows under the trees. They had not dreamed it was so late. She smoothed her hair and pinned on her hat with trembling fingers, and they raced for the landing. The river was an empty stretch of dirty gray lapping dusky banks. There was no one at the landing.

"It must be way after five o'clock. I wish I had a watch. The boat could n't have gone by without our seeing it?" The suggestion drained the color from their cheeks. They looked at each other with wide eyes. "It could n't have possibly! Let's ask."

The little town was no more than half a dozen old wooden buildings facing the levee. A store, unlighted and locked, a harness shop, also locked, two dark warehouses, a saloon. She waited in the shadow of it while he went in to inquire. He came out almost immediately.

"No, the boat has n't gone. They don't know when it'll get here. No one there but a few Japanese."

They walked uncertainly back to the landing and stood gazing at the darkening river. "I suppose

there's no knowing when it will get here? There's no other way of getting back?"

"No, there's no railroad. I *have* got you into a scrape!"

"It's all right. It was n't your fault," she hastened to say.

They walked up and down, waiting. Darkness came slowly down upon them. The river breeze grew colder. Stars appeared.

"Chilly?"

"A little," she said through chattering teeth.

He took off his coat and wrapped it around her, despite her protests. They found a sheltered place on the bank and huddled together, shivering. A delicious sleepiness stole over her, and the lap-lap of the water, the whispering of the leaves, the warmth of Paul's shoulder under her cheek, all became like a dream.

"Comfortable, dear?"

"Mmmmhuh," she murmured. "You?"

"You bet your life!" She roused a little to meet his kiss. The night became dreamlike again.

"Helen?"

"What!"

"Seems to me we've been here a long time. What'll we do? We can't stay here till morning."

"I don't — know — why not. All night — under the stars —"

"But listen. What if the boat comes by and does n't stop? There is n't any light."

She sat up then, rubbing the drowsiness from her eyes.

"Well, let's make a fire. Got any matches?"

He always carried them, to light the switch-lamps in Ripley. They hunted dry branches and drift-wood and coaxed a flickering blaze alive. "It's like being stranded on a desert island!" she laughed. His eyes adored her, crouching with disheveled hair in the leaping yellow light. "You're certainly game," he said. "I — I think you're the pluckiest girl in the world. And when I think what a fool I am to get you into this!"

There came like an echo down the river the hoarse whistle of the boat. A moment later it was upon them, looming white and gigantic, its lights cutting swaths in the darkness as it edged in to the landing. Struggling to straighten her hat, to tuck up her hair, to brush the sand from her skirt, Helen stumbled aboard with Paul's hand steadying her.

The blaze of the salon lights hurt their eyes, but warmth and security relaxed tired muscles. The room was empty, its carpet swept, the velvet chairs neatly in place.

"Funny, I thought there'd be a lot of passengers," Paul wondered aloud. He found a cushion, tucked it behind Helen's head, and sat down beside

her. "Well, we're all right now. We'll be in Sacramento pretty soon."

"Don't let's think about it," she said with quivering lips. "I hate to have it all end, such a lovely day. It'll be such a long time —"

He held her hand tightly.

"Not so awfully long. I'm not going to stand for it." He spoke firmly, but his eyes were troubled. She did not answer, and they sat looking at the future while the boat jolted on toward the moment of their parting.

"Damn being poor!" The word startled her as a blow would have done. Paul, so sincerely and humbly a church member — Paul swearing! He went on without a pause. "If I had a little money, if I only had a little money! What right has it got to make such a difference? Oh, Helen, you don't know how I want you!"

"Paul, Paul dear, you must n't!" Her hand was crushed against his face, his shoulders shook. She drew his dear, tousled head against her shoulder.

"Don't, dear, don't! Please."

He pushed away from her and got up. She let him go, shielding his embarrassment even from her own eyes. "I seem to be making a fool of myself generally," he said shakily. He walked about the room, looking with an appearance of interest at the pictures on the walls. "It's funny there aren't more people on board," he said conversationally

after a while. "Well, I guess I'll go see what time we get in." He came back five minutes later, an odd expression on his face.

"Look here, Helen," he said gruffly. "We won't get in for hours. Something wrong with the engines. They're only making half time. I — ah — I don't know why I didn't think of it before. You've got to work to-morrow and all. The man suggested —"

"Well, for goodness' sake, suggested what?"

"Everybody else has berths," he said. "You better let me get you one, because there's no sense in your sitting up all night. There's no knowing when we'll get in."

"But, Paul, I hate to have you spend so much. I could sleep a little right here." A vision of the office went through her mind, and she saw herself, sleepy-eyed, struggling to get messages into the right envelopes and trying to manage the unmanageable messenger-boys. She was tired. But it would be awfully expensive, no doubt. "And besides, I'd rather stay here with you," she said.

"So would I. But we might as well be sensible. You've got to work, and I'd probably go to sleep, too. Come on, let's see how much it is, anyhow."

They found the right place after wandering twice around the boat. A weary man sat behind the half-door, adding up a column of figures. "Berths? Sure. Outside, of course. One left. Dollar and

a half." His expectation brought the money, as if automatically, from Paul's pocket. He came out, yawning, a key with a dangling tag in his hand. "This way."

They followed him down the corridor. Matters seemed to be taken from their hands. He stepped out on the dark deck.

"Careful there, better give your wife a hand over those ropes," he cautioned over his shoulder, and they heard the sound of a key in a lock. An oblong of light appeared; he stepped out again to let them pass him. They went in. "There's towels. Everything all right, I guess," he said cheerfully. "Good-night."

Their eyes met for one horrified second. Embarrassment covered them both like a flame. "I — Helen! You don't think — ?" They swayed uncertainly in the narrow space between berths and wash-stand. Did the boat jolt so or was it the beating of her heart?

"Paul, did you hear? How could — ?"

"I guess I better go now," he said. He fumbled with the door. "Good-night."

"Good-night." She felt suddenly forlorn. But he was not gone. "Helen? It might be true. We might be married!"

She clung to him.

"We can't! We could n't! Oh, Paul, I love you so!"

"We can be married — we will be — just as soon as we get to Sacramento." His kisses smothered her. "The very first thing in the morning! We'll manage somehow. I'll always love you just as much. Helen, what's the matter? Look at me. Darling!"

"We can't," she gasped. "I'd be spoiling everything for you. Your mother and me and everything on your hands, and you're just getting started. You'd hate me after a while. No, no, no!"

They stumbled apart.

"What am I saying?" he said hoarsely, and she turned away from him, hiding her face.

A rush of cold moist air blew in upon her from the open doorway. He was gone. She got the door shut, and sat down on the edge of the berth. A cool breeze flowed in like water through the shutters of the windows; she felt the throbbing of the engines. Even through her closed lids she could not bear the light, and after a while she turned it out, trembling, and lay open-eyed in the darkness.

The stopping of the boat struck her aching nerves like a blow. She sat up, neither asleep nor awake, pushing her hair back from a face that seemed sodden and lifeless. A pale twilight filled the stateroom. She smoothed her hair, straightened her crumpled dress as well as she could, and went out on the deck. The boat lay at the Sacramento landing.

A few feet away Paul was leaning upon the rail-

ing, his face pale and haggard in the cold light. As she went toward him the events of the night danced fantastically through her brain, as grotesque and feverish as images in a dream.

"You don't hate me, do you, Helen?" he pleaded hopelessly.

"Of course not," she said. Through her weariness she felt a stirring of pity. For the first time in her life she told herself to smile, and did it. "We'd better be getting off, had n't we?"

The grayness of dawn was in the air, paling the street-lights. A few workmen passed them, plodding stolidly, carrying lunch-pails and tools; a baker's wagon rattled by, awakening loud echoes. She tried to comfort Paul, whose talk was one long self-reproach.

He hoped she would not get into a row with the folks where she stayed. If she did, she must let him know; he would n't stand for anything like that. She could reach him in Masonville till Saturday; then he would come down again on his way home. He had n't thought he could stop on the way back, but he would. He'd be worried about her until he saw her again and was sure everything was all right. He had been an awful boob not to be sure about the boat; he'd never forgive himself if —

"What is it?" he broke off. She had turned to look after a young man who passed them. The motion was almost automatic; she had hardly seen the

man and not until he was past did her tired mind register an impression of a cynically smiling eye.

"Nothing," she said. She had been right; it was McCormick. But it would require too much effort to talk about him.

The blinds of Mrs. Campbell's house were still down when they reached it. The tight roll of the morning paper lay on the porch. She would have to ring, of course, to get in. They faced each other on the damp cement walk, the freshness of the dewy lawns about them.

"Well, good-by."

"Good-by." They felt constrained in the daylight, under the blank stare of the windows. Their hands clung. "You, really aren't mad at me. Helen, about anything?"

"Of course I'm not. Nothing's happened that was n't as much my fault as it was yours."

"You'll let me know?"

She promised, though she had no intention of troubling him with her problems. It was not his fault that the boat was late, and she had gone as gladly as he. "Don't bother about it. I'll be all right. Good-by."

"Good-by." Still their fingers clung together. She felt a rush of tenderness toward him.

"Don't look so worried, you dear!" Quickly, daringly, she leaned toward him and brushed a but-

terfly's wing of a kiss upon his sleeve. Then, embarrassed, she ran up the steps.

"See you Saturday," he called in a jubilant undertone. She watched his stocky figure until it turned the corner. Then she rang the bell. There was time for the momentary glow to depart, leaving her weak and chilly, before Mrs. Campbell opened the door. She said nothing. Her eyes, her tight lips, her manner of drawing her dressing-gown back from Helen's approach, spoke her thoughts. Explanations would be met with scornful unbelief.

Helen held her head high and countered silence with silence. But before she reached her room she heard Mrs. Campbell's voice, high-pitched and cutting, speaking to her husband.

"Brazen as you please! You're right. The only thing to do's to put her out of this house before we have a scandal on our hands. That's what I get for taking her in, out of charity!"

Helen shut her door softly. She would leave the house that very day. The battered alarm clock pointed to half-past five. Three hours before she could do anything. She undressed mechanically, half-formed plans rushing through her mind. No money, next month's wages spent for these crumpled clothes. She could telegraph her mother, but she must not alarm her. Why had n't she thought of borrowing something from Paul? There was Mr. Roberts, but she could never make up more money.

Perhaps he would advance the raise he had promised. Her brain was working with hectic rapidity. She saw in flashes rooming-houses, the office, Mr. Roberts. She thought out every detail of long conversations, heard her own voice explaining, arguing, promising, thanking.

CHAPTER VII

SHE woke with a start at the sound of the alarm. Her sleep had not refreshed her. Her body felt wooden, and there was a gritty sensation behind her eyeballs. Dressing and hurrying to the office was like a nightmare in which a tremendous effort accomplishes nothing. The office routine steadied her. She booked the night messages, laying wet tissue paper over them, running them through the copying-machine, addressing their envelopes, sending out messenger-boys, settling their disputes over long routes. Everything was as usual; the sunshine streamed in through the plate-glass front of the office; customers came and went; the telephone rang; the instruments clicked. Her holiday was gone as if she had dreamed it. There remained only the recurring sting of Mrs. Campbell's words, and a determination to leave her house.

She tried several times to talk to Mr. Roberts. But he was in a black mood. He walked past her without saying good-morning, and over the question of a delayed message his voice snapped like a whip-lash. She saw that some obscure fury was working in him and that he would grant no favors until it had

worn itself out. Perhaps he would be in a better humor later. She must ask him for some money before night.

In the lull just before noon she sat at her table behind the screen, her head on her arms. She did not feel like working at the instrument. Mr. McCormick was lounging against the front counter, talking to Mr. Roberts, who sat at his desk. They would take care of any customers; for a moment she could rest and try to think.

"Miss Davies!"

"Yes, sir!" She leaped to her feet. Mr. Roberts' tone was dangerous. Had she forgotten a message?

"I'd like to show you the batteries. Come with me."

"Oh, thank you! I'd like to see them." She tried by the cheerfulness of her voice to make his frown relax.

She followed him gingerly down the stairway to the basement. The batteries stood in great rows on racks of shelves, big glass jars rimmed with poisonous-looking green and yellow stains, filled with discolored water and pieces of rotting metal. A failing electric-light bulb illuminated their dusty ranks, and dimly showed black beams and cobwebs overhead.

"It's awfully good of you to take so much trouble," she began gratefully.

“Cut that out! How long ’re you going to think you ’re making a damn fool of me?” Mr. Roberts turned on her suddenly a face that terrified her. Words choked in his throat. He caught her wrist, and she felt his whole body shaking. “You — you — damned little —” The rows of glass jars spun around her. She hardly understood the words he flung at her. “Coming here with your big eyes, playing me for all you ’re worth, acting innocence! D ’you think you ’ve fooled me a minute? D ’you think I have n’t seen through your little game? How long d ’you think I ’m going to stand for it — say?”

“Let me go,” she said, panting.

She steadied herself against the end of a rack, where his furious gesture flung her. They faced each other in the close space, breathing hard. “I don’t know — what you mean,” she said. Her world was going to pieces under her feet.

“You know damn well what I mean. Don’t keep on lying to me. You can’t put it over. I know where you were last night.” His face was contorted again. “Yes, and all the other nights, all the time you ’ve been kidding yourself you were making a fool of me. I know all about it. Get that? I know what you were before I ever gave you a job. What d ’you suppose I gave it to you for? So you could run around on the outside, laughing at me?”

“Wait — oh, please —”

“I’ve done all the listening to you I’m going to do. You’re going to do something besides talk from now on. I’m not a boy you can twist around your finger. I don’t care how cute you are.”

“I don’t — want to. I only — want to get away,” she said. She still faced him, for she could not hide her face without taking her eyes from him, and she was afraid to do that. When the silence continued she began to drop into it small disjointed phrases. “I did n’t know, I thought you were so good to me. We could n’t help the boat being late. Please, please, just let me go away. I was only trying to learn to telegraph. I thought I was doing so well.”

She felt, then, that he was no longer angry, and turning against the cobwebbed boards, she covered her face with her arms and cried. She hated herself for doing it; but she could not help it. Every instant she tried to stop, and very soon she was able to do so. When she lifted her head Mr. Roberts was gone.

She waited a while among the uncaring battery jars, steadying herself, and wiping her face with her handkerchief. When she forced herself to climb up into the daylight again there was no one in the office but McCormick, who sat at the San Francisco wire, gazing into space, whistling “Life’s a

funny proposition after all," while the disregarded sounder clattered fretfully, calling him.

Of course she would leave the office. She put on her hat and did so at once, but when she was out in the sunlight, with the eyes of passers-by upon her, she could do nothing but writhe among her thoughts like a flayed thing among nettles. The side streets were better than the others, for there fewer people could see her. If it were only night, so she could crawl unobserved into some corner and die.

It was a long time before she realized that her body was aching and that she was limping on painful feet. She had reached a street in some residence subdivision, where cement sidewalks ran through tangles of last year's weeds, and little cottages stood forlornly at long intervals. She stumbled over an expanse of dry stubble and green grass and sat down. She could not suffer any more. It was good to sit in the warm sunshine, to be alone. Life was vile. She shrank from it with sick loathing. She had been so hurt that she no longer felt pain, but her soul was nauseated.

There was no refuge into which she could crawl. There was no time to heal her bruises, no one to help her bear them. The afternoon was almost gone. At the house there was Mrs. Campbell, at the office — she could get more money from her mother and go home to stay. She owed her mother a hun-

dred dollars — months of privation and heartbreaking work. She could not shudder away from the hideousness of life at such a cost to others. Somehow she must find strength in herself to stand up, to go on, to do something.

Mr. Roberts' recommendation was necessary before she could get another telegraph job. She did not know how to do anything else. She owed him ten dollars, which must be paid. Paul — shamed blood rose in her cheeks when her thoughts touched him. She must face this thing alone.

In the depths of her mind she felt a hardness growing. All her finer sensibilities, hurt beyond bearing, were concealing themselves beneath a coarser hardihood. Her chin went up, her lips set, her eyes narrowed unconsciously.

After a long time she rose, brushing dead grass-stalks from her skirt, and started back to town. A street-car carried her there quickly. On the way she remembered that she should eat, and thought of Mrs. Brown. The half-punched meal-ticket was still in her purse. She had shivered at the thought of ever seeing Mrs. Brown again, and many times she had intended to throw away the bit of paste-board, but she had not been able to do so because it represented food.

She got off the car at the corner nearest the little restaurant, and forced herself to its doors. It was closed and empty, and a "For Rent" sign was glued

to the dirty window. Under her quick relief there was a sense of triumph. She had made herself go there, at least.

In a dairy-lunch she drank a cup of coffee and swallowed a sandwich. Then she went back to the telegraph-office.

She held her head high and walked steadily, as she might have gone to her own execution. She felt that something within her was being crushed to death, something clean and fine and sensitive, which must die before she could make herself face Mr. Roberts again. She opened the office door and went in.

Mr. Roberts was at one of the wires. McCormick, frowning, was booking messages at her high desk. She hung her hat in the cabinet and took the pen from his hand.

"Well, Little Bright-eyes, welcome to our city!" he exclaimed in his usual manner, but she saw that he was nervous, disturbed by the sense of tension in the air.

"After this you're going to call me Miss Davies," she said, folding a message into an envelope. She struck the bell for the next messenger-boy. Well, she had been able to do that.

It was harder to approach Mr. Roberts. She did not know whether she most shrank from him, despised him, or feared him, but her heart fluttered and she felt ill when he came through the railing into

the office and sat down at his desk. She went over the day's bookings, and checked up the messenger books without seeing them, until her hatred of her cowardice grew into a kind of courage. Then she went over to his desk.

"Mr. Roberts," she said clearly. "I'm not any of the things you called me." Her cheeks, her forehead, even her neck, were burning painfully. "I'm a perfectly decent girl."

"Well, there's no use making such a fuss about it," he mumbled, searching among his papers for one which apparently was not there.

"I would n't stay, only I owe you ten dollars and I've got to have a job. You know that. It was all the truth I told you, about having to work. I got to stay here —"

"How do you know I'm going to let you?" he said, stung.

"I'm a good clerk. You can't get another as good any cheaper." She found herself on the defensive and struck wildly. "You ought to anyway let me keep the job, to make up —"

"That'll do," he said harshly. Turning away from her he caught McCormick's eye, which dropped quickly to the message he was sending. "Go take those messages off the hook and get them out, if you want a job so bad."

She obeyed. It startled her to find she was meeting McCormick's grin with a little twisted smile

almost as cynical. What she wanted to do was to scream.

Late that afternoon she was leaning on the front counter, watching people go by outside the plate-glass windows and wondering what was the truth about them, when she felt McCormick's gaze upon her. He came a step closer, putting his elbow on the counter beside hers, and spoke confidentially.

"Well, I guess you got the old man buffaloed, all right."

"I wish you'd leave me alone," she said in a hard, clear voice.

"Oh, what's the use of getting sore? You're a plucky little devil. I like you." He spoke meditatively, as if considering impersonally his sensations. "Made a killing at poker last night," he went on. When she did not answer, "There's no string tied to a little loan."

But this, even with the flash of hope it offered, was too much to be borne.

"Go away!" she cried. He strolled back to the wires, whistling.

She was checking up the last undelivered message at six o'clock and telling herself that she must go back to Mrs. Campbell's for the night, when Mr. Roberts laid a telegram on the desk beside her. "I'll try to keep the office going without your assistance," he said with an attempt at sarcasm. "Don't bother about me. Just get out."

The flowing operator's script danced before her eyes. She read it twice. "See your service this afternoon. Can offer Miss Davies night duty St. Francis hotel forty-five dollars a month report immediately. BRYANT, MGR."

"San Francisco?" she stammered, incredulous, gazing at the SF date-line. Across the yellow sheet she looked at Mr. Roberts, seeing in his eyes a dislike that was almost hatred. "I'll go to-night," she said. "I think everything's in order. That Ramsey message was out twice."

When he had gone, she borrowed ten dollars from McCormick, promising to return it at the end of the month. She hardly resented his elaborately kissing the money good-by, and holding her hand when he gave it to her. But she spent twenty-five cents of it to send a message from the station to Paul, though McCormick would have sent it for her as a note, costing nothing.

CHAPTER VIII

COOPED in a narrow space at the end of a long corridor, Helen sat gazing at the life of a great San Francisco hotel. Every moment the color and glitter shifted under the brilliant light of mammoth chandeliers. Tall, gilded elevator-doors opened and closed; women passed, wrapped in satins and velvets, airy feathers in their shining hair; men in evening dress escorted them; bell-boys went by, carrying silver trays and calling unintelligibly, their voices rising above the continuous muffled stir and the faint sounds of music from the Blue Room.

Helen had choked the telegraph-sounder with a pencil, so that she might hear the music. But the tones of the violins came to her blurred by a low hum of voices, by the rustle of silks, by the soft movement of many feet on velvet carpets. Nothing was clear, simple, or distinct in the medley. Her ears were baffled, as her eyes were dazzled and her thoughts confused, by a multiplicity of sensations. San Francisco was a whirlpool, an endless roaring circle, stupendous and dizzying.

This had been her sick impression of it on that first morning, when she struggled through the ed-

dying crowds at the ferry building, lugging her telescope-bag with one hand and with the other trying to hold her hat in place against gusts of wind. Beneath the uproar of street-car gongs, of huge wagons rumbling over the cobbles, of innumerable hurrying feet, whistles, bells, shouts, she had felt a great impersonal current, terrifying in its heedlessness of all but its own mighty swirl, and she had had the sensation of standing at the brink of a maelstrom.

After ten months the impression still remained. But now she seemed to have been drawn into the motionless vertex. The city roared around her, still incomprehensible, still driven by its own breathless speed, but in the heart of it she was alien and untouched. She had found nothing in it but loneliness.

Her first terrors had vanished, leaving her with a frustrated sense of having been ridiculous in having them. She had gathered her whole strength for a great effort, and she had found nothing to do. Far from lying in wait with nameless dangers and pitfalls for the unwary stranger, the city apparently did not know she was there.

At the main telegraph-office Mr. Bryant had received her indifferently. He was a busy man; she was one detail of his routine work. He directed her to the St. Francis, asked her to report there at five o'clock, and, looking at her again, inquired whether she knew any one in San Francisco or had arranged

for a place to live. Three minutes later he handed her over to a brisk young woman, who gave her an address and told her what car to take to reach it.

She had found a shabby two-story house on Gough Street, with a discouraged palm in a tub on the front porch. A colorless woman showed her the room. It was a small, neat place under the eaves, furnished with an iron bed, a washstand, a chair, and a strip of rag carpet. The bath-room was on the lower floor, and the rent was two dollars and a half a week. Helen set down her bag with a sigh of relief.

Thus simply she found herself established in San Francisco. Her first venture into the St. Francis had been no more exciting. After a panic-stricken plunge into its magnificence she was accepted non-committally by the day-operator, a pale girl with eye-glasses, who was already putting on her hat. She turned over a few unsent messages, gave Helen the cash-box and rate-book, and departed.

Thereafter Helen met her daily, punctually at five o'clock, and saw her leave. Helen rather looked forward to the moment. It was pleasant to say, "Good evening," once a day to some one.

In the afternoon she walked about, looking at the city, and learned to know many of the streets by name. She discovered the public library and read a great deal. The library was also a pleasant place

to spend Sundays, being less lonely than the crowded parks, and if the librarian were not too busy one might sometimes talk to her about a book.

The dragging of the days, as much as her need for more money, had driven her to asking for extra work at the main office. But here, too, she had been dropped into the machine and put down before her telegraph-key, with barely a hurried human touch. A beginner, rated at forty-five dollars, she replaced a seventy-five-dollar operator on a heavy wire, and the days became a nerve-straining tension of concentration on the clicking sounder at her ear, while the huge room with its hundreds of instruments and operators faded from her consciousness.

Released at four o'clock, she ate forlornly in a dairy lunch-room and hurried to the St. Francis. Here, at least, she could watch other people's lives. Gazing out at the changing crowd in the hotel corridor she let her imagination picture the romances, the adventures, at her finger-tips. A man spoke cheerfully to the cigar-boy while he lighted his cigarette at the swinging light over the news-stand counter. He was the center of a scandal that had filled the afternoon papers, and under her hand was the message he had sent to his wife, denying, appealing, swearing loyalty and love. A little, soft-eyed woman in clinging laces, stepping from the elevator to meet a plump man in evening dress, was there to put through a big mining deal with him.

The ends of the intrigue stretched out into vagueness, but her telegrams revealed its magnitude.

Helen's cramped muscles stirred restlessly. There was barely room to move in the tiny office, crowded with table and chair and wastebasket. Spaciousness was on the other side of the counter.

She snatched the pencil from the counter and began a letter to Paul. Her imagination, at least, was released when she wrote letters.

Dear Paul:

I wonder what you are doing now! It's eight o'clock and of course you've had your supper. Your mother's probably finishing up the kitchen work and putting the bread to rise, and you haven't anything to do but sit on the porch and look at the stars and the lighted windows here and there in the darkness, and listen to the breeze in the trees. And here I am, sitting in a place that looks just like a hothouse with all the flowers come to life. There's a ball upstairs, and a million girls have gone through the corridors, with flowers and feathers and jewels in their hair, and dresses and evening cloaks as beautiful as petals. How I wish you could see them all, and the men, too, in evening dress. They're the funniest things when they're fat, but some of the slim ones look like princes or counts or something.

What kind of new furniture was it your mother got? You've never told me a word about the place you're living since you moved, and I'm awfully interested. Do please tell me what color the wall-paper is and the carpets, and the woodwork, and what the kitchen is like, and if there are rose-bushes in the yard. Did your mother get

new curtains, too? There is a lovely new material for curtains just out — sort of silky, and rough, in the loveliest colors. I see it in the store windows, and if your mother wants me to I'd love to price it, and get samples for her.

A little boy's just come in with a toy balloon, and it got away from him and it's bumping up around on the gilded ceiling, and I wish you could hear him howl. It must be fun for the balloon, though, after being dragged around for hours, tugging all the time to get away, to escape at last and go up and up and up —

I felt just like that this morning. Just think, Paul, I sent the last of the hundred dollars home, and another fifty besides! Isn't that gorgeous? I'm making over ninety dollars a month now, with my extra work at SF office, and my salary here —

She paused, biting her pencil. That would give him a start, she thought. He had been so self-satisfied when he got his raise to being day-operator and station-agent. She had not quite got over the hurt of his taking it without letting her know that the night-operator's place would be vacant. He had explained that a girl could n't handle the job, but she knew that he did not want her to be working with him.

In the spring, she thought, she would be able to get some beautiful new clothes and go home for a visit. Paul would come, too, when he knew she would be there. He would see then how well she could manage on a very little money. In a few months more she would be able to save enough for a trousseau, tablecloths, and embroidered towels —

"Blank, please!" A customer leaned on the counter. She gave him the pad and watched him while he wrote. His profile was handsome; a lock of fair hair beneath the pushed-back hat, a straight forehead, an aquiline nose, a thin, humorous mouth. He wrote nervously, dashing the pencil across the paper, tearing off the sheet and crumpling it impatiently, beginning again. When he finished, shoving the message toward her with a quick movement, he looked at her and smiled, and she felt a charm in the warm flash of his eyes. His nervous vitality was magnetic.

She read the message. "'G. H. Kennedy, Central Trust Company, Los Angeles. Drawing on you for five hundred. Must have it. Absolutely sure thing this time. Full explanations follow by letter. GILBERT.' Sixty-seven cents, please," she said. She wished that she could think of something more to say; she would have liked to talk to him. There was about him an impression of something happening every instant. When, turning away, he paused momentarily, she looked at him quickly. But he was speaking to the rival operator.

"Hello, kid!"

"On your way," the girl replied imperturbably. Her eyes laughed and challenged. But with an answering smile he went past, and only his hat remained visible in glimpses through the crowd. Then it turned a corner and was gone.

"Fresh!" the girl murmured. "But gee, he can dance!"

Helen looked at her with interest. She was a new girl, on relief duty. The regular operator for her company was a sober, conscientious woman of thirty, who studied German grammar in her leisure moments. This one was not at all like her.

"Do you know him?" said Helen, smiling shyly. This was an opening for conversation, and she met it eagerly. The other girl had a friendly and engaging manner, which obviously included all the world.

"Sure I do," she answered, though there was uncertainty under the round tones. She ran a slim forefinger through the blond curl that lay against her neck, smiling at Helen with a display of even, white teeth. Helen thought of pictures on magazine covers. It must be wonderful to be as pretty as that, she thought wistfully. "Who's he wiring to?"

Helen passed the message across the low railing that separated the offices. She noticed the shining of the girl's fingernail as she ran it along the lines.

"Well, what do you know about that? He *was* giving me a song and dance about being Judge Kennedy's son. You never can tell about men," she commented sagely, returning the telegram. "Sometimes they tell you the absolute truth."

A childlike quality made her sophistication merely

piquant. Her comments on the passing guests fascinated Helen, and an occasional phrase revealed glimpses of a world of gaiety in which she seemed to flutter continually, like a butterfly in the sunshine. She worked, it appeared, only at irregular intervals.

"Momma supports me, of course on her alimony. Papa certainly treated her rotten, but his money's perfectly good," she said artlessly. Her frankness also was childlike, and her calm acceptance of the situation made it necessary to regard it as commonplace. Helen, in self-defense, could not be shocked.

"She's lot of fun, momma is. Just loves a good time. She's out dancing now. Gee! I wish I was! I'm just crazy about dancing, aren't you? Listen to that music! All I want is just to dance all night long. That's what I really love."

"Do you ever — often, I mean — do it? Dance all night long?" Helen asked, wide-eyed.

"Only once a night." She laughed. "About five nights a week."

Helen thought her entertaining, and warmed to her beauty and charm. In an hour she was asking Helen to call her Louise, and although she made no attempt to conceal her astonishment at the barrenness of Helen's life, her generous desire to share her own good times took the sting from her pity. Why, Helen did n't know the city at all, she cried, and Helen could only assent. They must go out to some of the cafés together; they must have tea at

Techau's; Helen must come to dinner and meet momma. Louise jumbled a dozen plans together in a rush of friendliness. It was plain that she was genuinely touched in her butterfly heart by Helen's loneliness.

"And you're a brunette!" she cried. "We'll be stunning together. I'm so blonde." The small circle of her thought returned always to herself. Helen, dimly seeing this, felt an amused tolerance, which saved her pride while she confessed to herself her inferiority in cleverness to this sparkling small person. Louise would never have drifted into dull stagnation; she would have found some way to fill her life with realities instead of dreams.

Midnight came before Helen realized it. Tidying her desk for the night, she found the unfinished letter to Paul and tucked it into her purse. She had not been forced to feed upon her imagination that evening.

Louise walked to the car-line with her, and it was settled that the next night Helen should come to dinner and meet momma. It meant cutting short her extra work and paying the day-operator to stay late at the St. Francis, but Helen did not regret the cost. This was the first friend the city had offered her.

Three weeks later she was sharing the apartment on Leavenworth Street with Louise and her momma.

The change had come with startling suddenness. There had been the dinner first. Helen approached it diffidently, doubtful of her self-possession in a strange place, with strange people. She fortified herself with a new hat and a veil with large velvet spots, yet at the very door she had a moment of panic and thought of flight and a telephone message of regrets. Only the thought of her desperate loneliness gave her courage to ring the bell.

The strain disappeared as soon as she met momma. Momma, slim in a silk petticoat and a frilly dressing-sack, had taken her in affectionately. Momma was much like Louise. Helen thought again of pictures on magazine covers, though Louise suggested a new magazine, and her mother did not. Even Helen could see that Momma's pearly complexion was liberally helped by powder, and her hair was almost unnaturally golden. But the eyes were the same, large and blue, fringed with black lashes, and both profiles had the same clear, delicate outlines.

"Yes, dear, most people do think we're sisters," Mrs. Latimer said complacently, when Helen spoke of the resemblance.

"We have awful good times together, don't we, Momma?" Louise added, her arm around her mother's waist, and Helen felt a pang at the fondness of the reply. "We certainly do, kiddie."

It was a careless, happy-go-lucky household.

Dinner was scrambled together somehow, with much opening of cans, in a neglected, dingy kitchen. Helen and Louise washed the dishes while momma stirred the creamed chicken. It was fun to wash dishes again and to set the table, and Helen could imagine herself one of the family while she listened to their intimate chatter. They had had tea down town; there was mention of some one's new car, somebody's diamonds; Louise had seen a lavallière in a jeweler's shop; she teased her mother to buy it for her, and her mother said fondly, "Well, honey-baby, we'll see."

They had hardly begun to eat when the telephone-bell rang, and momma, answering it, was gone for some time. They caught scraps of bantering talk and Louise wondered, "Who's that she's jollying now?" She sprang up with a cry of delight when momma came back to announce that the crowd was going to the beach.

There was a scramble to dress. Helen, hooking their gowns in the cluttered bedroom, saw dresser drawers overflowing with sheer underwear, silk stockings, bits of ribbon, crushed hat-trimmings, and plumes. Louise brushed her eyebrows with a tiny brush, rubbed her nails with a buffer, dabbed carefully at her lips with a lip-stick. Helen hoped that she did not show her surprise at these novel details of the toilet. They had taken it for granted she was going to the beach with them. Their surprise

and regret were genuine when she said she must go to work.

"Oh, what do you want to do that for?" Louise pouted. "You look all right." She said it doubtfully, then brightened. "I'll lend you some of my things. You'd be perfectly stunning dressed up. Would n't she be stunning, Momma? You've got lovely hair and that baby stare of yours. All you need's a dress and a little — Is n't it, Momma?"

Her mother agreed warmly. Helen glowed under their praise and was deeply grateful for their interest in her. She wanted very much to go with them, and when she stood on the sidewalk watching them depart in a big red automobile, amidst a chorus of gay voices, she felt chilled and lonely.

They were lovely to be so friendly to her, she thought, while she went soberly to work. She felt that she must in some way return their kindness, and after discarding a number of plans she decided to take them both to a *matinée*.

It was Louise, at their third meeting, who suggested that she come to live with them. "What do you know, Momma, Helen's living in some awful hole all alone. Why could n't she come in with us? There's loads of room. She could sleep with me. Momma, why not?"

Her mother, smiling lazily, said:

"Well, if you kids want to, I don't care." Helen was delighted by the prospect. It was arranged that

she should pay one third of the expenses, and Louise cried joyfully: "Now, Momma, you've got to get my lavallière!"

The next afternoon Helen packed her bag and left the room on Gough Street. Her feet wanted to dance when she went down the narrow stairs for the last time and let herself out into the windy sunshine.

It was maddening to find herself so tied down by her work. In the early mornings, dragging herself from bed, she left Louise drowsy among the pillows and saw while she dressed the tantalizing signs of last night's gaiety in the dress flung over a chair, the scattered slippers and silk stockings. She came home at midnight to a dark, silent apartment, letting herself in with a latch-key to find the dinner dishes still unwashed and splatterings of powder on the bedroom carpet, where street shoes and a discarded petticoat were tangled together. She enjoyed putting things in order, pretending the place was her own while she did it, but she was lonely. Later she awoke to blink at Louise, sitting half undressed on the edge of the bed, rubbing her face with cold-cream, and to listen sleepily to her chatter.

"You'll be a long time dead, kiddie," momma said affectionately. "What's the use of being a dead one till you have to?" Helen's youth cried.

that mamma was right. But she knew too well the miseries of being penniless; she dared not give up a job. A chance remark, flung out on the endless flow of Louise's gossip, offered the solution. "What do you know about that boob girl at MX office? She's picked a chauffeur in a garden of millionaires, and she's going to quit work and *marry* him!"

Helen's heart leaped. It was her chance. When she confronted Mr. Bryant across the main-office counter the next morning her hands trembled, but her whole nature had hardened into a cold determination. She would get that job. It paid sixty dollars a month; the hours were from eight to four. Whether she could handle market reports or not did not matter; she would handle them.

She scored her first business triumph when she got this job, although she did not realize until many years later what a triumph it had been. She settled into her work at the Merchants' Exchange wires with only one thought. Now she was free to live normally, to have a good time, like other girls.

The first day's work strained her nerves to the breaking point. The shouts of buyers and sellers on the floor, the impatient pounding on the counter of customers with rush messages, the whole breathless haste and excitement of the exchange, blurred into an indistinct clamor through which she heard only the slow, heavy working of the Chicago wire, tapping out a meaningless jumble of letters and frac-

tions. She concentrated upon it, with an effort which made her a blind machine. The scrawled quotations she flung on the counter were wrought from an agony of nerves and brain.

But it was over at last, and she hurried home. The dim stillness of the apartment was an invitation to rest, but she disregarded it, slipping out of her shirt-waist and splashing her face and bare arms with cold water. A new chiffon blouse was waiting in its box, and a thrill of anticipation ran through her when she lifted it from its tissue wrappings.

She fastened the soft folds, pleased by the lines of her round arms seen through the transparency, and her slender neck rising from white frills. In the hand-glass she gazed at the oval of her face reflected in the dressing-table mirror, and suddenly lifting her lids caught the surprising effect of the sea-gray eyes beneath black lashes, an effect she had never known until Louise spoke of it.

She was pretty. She was almost — she caught her breath — beautiful. The knowledge was more than beauty itself, for it brought self-assurance. She felt equal to any situation the evening might offer, and she was smiling at herself in the mirror when Louise burst in, a picture in a dashing little serge suit and a hat whose black line was like the stroke of an artist's pencil.

“The alimony's come!” she cried. “We're going to have a regular time! Momma'll meet us

down town. Look, is n't it stunning?" She displayed the longed-for lavallière twinkling against her smooth young neck. "I knew I'd get it somehow. Momma — the stingy thing! — she went and got her new furs. But we met Bob, and he bought it for me." She sat down before the mirror, throwing off her hat and letting down her hair. "I don't know — it's only a chip diamond." Her moods veered as swiftly as light summer breezes. "I wish momma'd get me a real one. It's nonsense, her treating me like a baby. I'm seventeen."

Helen felt her delight in the new waist evaporate. Louise's chatter always made her feel at a disadvantage. There was a distance between them that they seemed unable to bridge, and Helen realized that it was her fault. Perhaps it was because she had been so long alone that she often felt even more lonely when she was with Louise.

The sensation returned, overpowering, when they joined the crowd in the restaurant. She could only follow Louise's insouciant progress through a bewildering medley of voices, music, brilliant lights, and stumble into a chair at a table ringed with strange faces. Momma was there, her hat dripping with plumes, white furs flung negligently over her shoulders, her fingers a blaze of rings. There was another resplendent woman, named Nell Allan; a bald-headed fat man called Bob; a younger man, with a lean face and restless blue eyes, hailed by Louise as

Duddy. They were having a very gay time, but Helen, shrinking unnoticed in her chair, was unaccountably isolated and lonely. She could think of nothing to say. There was no thread in the rapid chatter at which she could clutch. They were all talking, and every phrase seemed a flash of wit, since they all laughed so much.

"I love the cows and chickens, but this is the life!" Duddy cried at intervals. "Oh, you chickens!" and "This is the life!" the others responded in a chorus of merriment. Helen did not doubt that it all meant something, but her wits were too slow to grasp it, and the talk raced on unintelligibly. She could only sit silent eating delicate food from plates that waiters whisked into place and whisked away again, and laughing uncertainly when the others did.

Color and light and music beat upon her brain. About her was a confusion of movement, laughter, clinking glasses, glimpses of white shoulders and red lips, perfumes, hurrying waiters, steaming dishes, and over and through it all the quick, accented rhythm of the music, swaying, dominating, blending all sensations into one quickening vibration.

Suddenly, from all sides, hidden in the artificial foliage that covered the walls, silvery bells took up the melody. Helen, inarticulate and motionless, felt her nerves tingle, alive, joyful, eager.

There was a pushing back of chairs, and she started. But they were only going to dance.

Duddy and momma, Bob and Mrs. Allan, swept out into a whirl of white arms and dark coats, tilted faces and swaying bodies. "Is n't it lovely!" Helen murmured.

But Louise was not listening. She sat mutinous, her fingers tapping time to the music, her eyes beneath the long lashes searching the room. "I can't help it. I just got to dance!" she muttered, and suddenly she was gone. Some one met her among the tables, put his arms around her, and whirled her away. Helen, watching for her black hat and happy face to reappear, saw that she was dancing with the man whose telegram had introduced them. Memory finally gave her his name. Gilbert Kennedy.

Louise brought him to the table when the music ceased. There were gay introductions, and Helen wished that she could say something. But momma monopolized him, squeezing in an extra chair for him beside her, and saying how glad she was to meet a friend of her little girl's.

Helen could only be silent, listening to their incomprehensible gaiety, and feeling an attraction for him as irresistible as an electric current. She did not know what it was, but she thought him the handsomest man she had ever seen, and she felt that he did whatever he wanted to do with invariable success. He was not like the others. He talked their jargon, but he did not seem of them, and she noticed that his hazel eyes, set in a network of tiny wrinkles,

were at once avid and weary. Yet he could not be older than twenty-eight or so. He danced with momma, when again the orchestra began a rag, but coming back to the table with the others, he said restlessly:

"Let's go somewhere else. My car's outside. How about the beach?"

"Grand little idea!" Duddy declared amid an approving chorus. Helen, following the others among the tables and through the swinging doors to the curb where the big gray car stood waiting, told herself that she must make an effort, must pay for this wonderful evening with some contribution to the fun. But when they had all crowded into the machine and she felt the rush of cool air against her face and saw the street lights speeding past, she forgot everything but joy. She was having a good time at last, and a picture of the Masonville girls flashed briefly through her mind. How meager their picnics and hay rides appeared beside this!

She half formed the phrases in which she would describe to Paul their racing down the long boulevard beside the beach, the salty air, and the darkness, and the long white lines of foam upon the breakers. This, she realized with exultation, was a joy-ride. She had read the word in newspapers, but its aptness had never before struck her.

It was astounding to find, after a rush through the darkness of the park, that the car was stopping.

Every one was getting out. Amazed and trying to conceal her amazement, she went with them through a blaze of light into another restaurant where another orchestra played the same gay music and dancers whirled beyond a film of cigarette smoke. They sat down at a round bare table, and Helen perceived that one must order something to drink.

She listened to the rapid orders, hesitating. "Blue moons" were intriguing, and "slow gin fizz" was fascinating, with its suggestion of fireworks. But beside her Mr. Kennedy said, "Scotch high-ball," and the waiter took her hesitation for repetition. The glass appeared before her, there was a cry of "Happy days!" and she swallowed a queer-tasting, stinging mouthful. She set the glass down hastily.

"What's the matter with the high-ball?" Mr. Kennedy inquired. He had paid the waiter, and she felt the obligation of a guest.

"It's very good really. But I don't care much for drinks that are fizzy," she said. She saw a faint amusement in his eyes, but he did not smile, and his order to the waiter was peremptory. "Plain high-ball here, no seltzer." The waiter hastened to bring it.

Mr. Kennedy's attention was still upon her, and she saw no escape. She smiled at him over the

glass. "Happy days!" she said, and drank. She set down the empty glass and the muscles of her throat choked back a cough. "Thank you," she said, and was surprised to find that the weariness was no longer in his eyes.

"You're all right!" he said. His tone was that of the vanquished greeting the victor, and his next words were equally enigmatic. "I hate a bluffer that does n't make good when he's called!" The orchestra had swung into a new tune, and he half rose. "Dance?"

It was hard to admit her deficiency and let him go.

"I can't. I don't know how."

He sat down.

"You don't know how to dance?" His inflection said that this was carrying a pretense too far, that in overshooting a mark she had missed it. His keen look at her suddenly made clear a fact for which she had been unconsciously groping while she watched these men and women, the clue to their relations. Beneath their gaiety a ceaseless game was being played, man against woman, and every word and glance was a move in that game, the basis of which was enmity. He thought that she, too, was playing it, and against him.

"Why do you think I'm lying to you, Mr. Kennedy? I would like to dance if I could—of course."

"I don't get you," he replied with equal directness. "What do you come out here for if you don't drink and don't dance?"

It would be too humiliating to confess the extent of her inexperience, her ignorance of the city in which she had lived for almost a year. "I come because I like it," she said. "I've worked hard for a long time and never had any fun. And I'm going to learn to dance. I don't know about drinking. I don't like the taste of it much. Do people really like to drink high-balls and things like that?"

It startled a laugh from him.

"Keep on drinking 'em, and you'll find out why people do it," he answered. Over his shoulder he said to the waiter, "Couple of rye high-balls, Ben."

The others were dancing. They were alone at the table, and when, resting an elbow on the edge of it, he concentrated his attention upon her, the crowded room became a swirl of color and light about their isolation. Her breath came faster, the toe of her slipper kept time to the music, exhilaration mounted in her veins, and her success in holding his interest was like wine to her. But a cold, keen inner self took charge of her brain.

The high-balls arrived. She felt that she must be rude, and did not drink hers. When he urged she refused as politely as she could. He insisted.

"Drink it!" She felt the clash of an imperious, reckless will against her impassive resistance.

There was a second in which neither moved, and their whole relation subtly changed. Then she laughed.

"I'd really rather not," she said lightly.

"Come on — be game," he said.

"The season's closed," Louise's flippancies had not been without their effect on her. It was easier to drop back into her own language. "No, really — tell me, why do people drink things that taste like that?"

He met her on her own ground. "You've got to drink, to let go, to have a good time. It breaks down inhibitions." She noted the word. The use of such words was one of the things that marked his difference from the others. "God knows why," he added wearily. "But what's the use of living if you don't hit the high spots? And there's a streak of — perversity — depravity in me that's got to have this kind of thing."

Their group swooped down about the table, and the general ordering of more drinks ended their talk. There was a clamor when Helen said she did not want anything. Duddy swept away her protests and ordered for her, but momma came to the rescue.

"Let the kid alone; she's not used to it. You stick to lemon sours, baby. Don't let them kid you," she said. The chatter swept on, leaving her once more unnoticed, but when the music called

again Mr. Kennedy took her out among the dancers.

"You're all right," he said. "Just let yourself go and follow me. It's only a walk to music." And unaccountably she found herself dancing, felt the rhythm beat through blood and nerves, and stiffness and awkwardness drop away from her. She felt like a butterfly bursting from a chrysalis, like a bird singing in the dawn. She was so happy that Mr. Kennedy laughed at the ecstasy in her face.

"You look like a kid in a candy-shop," he said, swinging her past a jam with a long, breathless swooping glide and picking up the step again.

"I'm — per-fect-ly-happy!" she cried, in time to the tune. "It's awfully good — of you-ou!"

He laughed again.

"Stick to me, and I'll teach you a lot of things," he said.

She found, when she went reluctantly back to the table with him, that the others were talking of leaving. It hurt to hear him enthusiastically greeting the suggestion. But after they were in the machine it appeared that they were not going home. There was an interval of rushing through the cool darkness, and then another restaurant just like the others, and more dancing.

The hours blurred into a succession of those swift dashes through the clean night air, and recurring plunges into light and heat and smoke and music.

Helen, faithfully sticking to lemon sours as momma had advised, discovered that she could dance something called a rag, and something else known as a Grizzly Bear; heard Duddy crying that she was some chicken; felt herself a great success. Bob was growing strangely sentimental and talked sorrowfully about his poor old mother; momma's cheeks were flushed under the rouge, and she sang part of a song, forgetting the rest of the words. The crowd shifted and separated; somewhere they lost part of it, and a stranger appeared with Louise.

Helen, forced at last to think of her work next morning, was horrified to find that it was two o'clock. Momma agreed that the best of friends must part. They sang while they sped through the sleeping city, the stars overhead and the street lights flashing by. Drowsily happy, Helen thought it no harm to rest her head on Mr. Kennedy's shoulder, since his other arm was around momma, and she wondered what it would be like if a man so fascinating were in love with her. It would be frightfully thrilling and exciting, she thought, playing daringly with the idea.

"See you again!" they all cried, when she alighted with momma and Louise before the dark apartment-house. The others were going on to more fun somewhere. She shook hands with Mr. Kennedy, feeling a contraction of her heart.

"Thank you for a very pleasant time." She felt that he was amused by the stilted words.

"Don't forget it is n't the last one!" he said.

She did not forget. The words repeated themselves in her mind; she heard his voice, and felt his arm around her waist and the music throbbing in her blood for a long time. The sensations came back to her in the pauses of her work next day, while she dragged through the hours as if she were drugged, hearing the noise of the exchange and the market quotations clicking off the Chicago wire, now very far and thin, now close and sickeningly loud.

She was white and faint when she got home, and mamma suggested a bromo-seltzer and offered to lend her some rouge. But Mr. Kennedy had not telephoned, and she went to bed instead of going out with them that evening. It was eleven days before he did telephone.

CHAPTER IX

IN the mornings Helen went to work. The first confusion of the Merchants' Exchange had cleared a little. She began to see a pattern in the fluctuations of the market quotations. January wheat, February wheat, May corn, became a drama to her, and while she snatched the figures from the wire and tossed them to the waiting boy, saw them chalked up on the huge board, and heard the shouts of the brokers, she caught glimpses of the world-wide gamble in lives and fortunes.

But it was only another great spectacle in which she had no part. She was merely a living mechanical attachment to the network of wires. She wanted to tear herself away, to have a life of her own, a life that went forward, instead of swinging like a pendulum between home and the office.

She did not want to work. She had never wanted to work. Working had been only a means of reaching sooner her own life with Paul. The road had run straight before her to that end. But now Paul would not let her follow it; he did not want her to work with him at Ripley; she would have to wait until he made money enough to support her. And she hated work.

Resting her chin on one palm, listening half consciously for her call to interrupt the ceaseless clicking of the sounder, she gazed across the marble counter and the vaulted room; the gesticulating brokers, the scurrying messengers, faded into a background against which she saw again the light and color and movement of the night when she had met Mr. Kennedy. She heard his voice. "What's the use of living if you don't hit the high spots?"

She hurried home at night, expecting she knew not what. But it had not happened. Restlessness took possession of her, and she turned for hours on her pillow, dozing only to hear the clicking of telegraph-sounders, and music, and to find herself dancing on the floor of the Merchants' Exchange with a strange man who had Mr. Kennedy's eyes. On the eleventh day she received a letter from Paul, which quieted the turmoil of her thoughts like a dash of cold water. In his even neat handwriting he wrote:

I suppose the folks you write about are all right. They sound pretty queer to me. I don't pretend to know anything about San Francisco, though. But I don't see how you are going to hold down a job and keep up with the way they seem to spend their time, though I will not say anything about dancing. You know I could not do it and stay in the church, but I do not mean to bring that up again in a letter. You were mighty fine and straight and sincere about that, and if you do not feel the call to join I would not urge you. But I do not think I would like

your new friends. I would rather a girl was not so pretty, but used less slang when she talks.

The words gained force by echoing a stifled opinion of her own. With no other standard than her own instinct, she had had moments of criticising Louise and momma. But she had quickly hidden the criticism in the depths of her mind, because they were companions and she had not been able to find any others. Now they stood revealed through Paul's eyes as glaringly cheap and vulgar.

Her longing for a good time, if she must have it with such people, appeared weak and foolish to her. She felt older and steadier when she went home that night. Then, just as she entered the door, the telephone rang and Louise called that Gilbert Kennedy wanted to speak to her.

It was impossible to analyze his fascination. Uncounted times she had gone over all he had said, all she could conjecture about him, vainly seeking an explanation of it. The mere sound of his voice revived the spell like an incantation, and her half-hearted resistance succumbed to it.

Before the dressing-table, hurrying to make herself beautiful for an evening with him, she leaned closer to the glass and tried to find the answer in the gray eyes looking back at her. But they only grew eager, and her reflection faded, to leave her brooding on the memory of his face, half mocking

and half serious, and the tired hunger of his eyes.

"Have a heart, for the lovea Mike!" cried Louise. "Give me a chance. You are n't using the mirror yourself, even!" She slipped into the chair Helen left and, pushing back her mass of golden hair, gazed searchingly at her face. "Got to get my lashes dyed again; they're growing out. Say, you certainly did make a hit with Kennedy!"

"Where's the nail polish?" Helen asked, searching in the hopeless disorder of the bureau drawers. "Oh, here it is. What do you know about him?"

"Well, he's one of those Los Angeles Kennedys. You know, old man was indicted for something awhile ago. Loads of money." Louise, dabbing on cold-cream, spoke in jerks. "His brother was the one that ran off with Cissy Leroy, and his wife shot her up. Don't you remember? It was in all the papers. I used to know Cissy, too. She was an awful good sport, really. Don't you love that big car of his?"

Helen did not answer. In her revulsion she felt that she was not at all interested in Gilbert Kennedy, and she had the sensation of being freed from a weight.

Momma, slipping a rustling gown over her head, spoke through the folds. "He's a live wire," she praised. She settled the straps over her shoulders, tossing a fond smile at Helen. "Hook me up,

dearie? Yes, he's a live wire all right, and you've certainly got him coming."

A sudden thought chilled Helen to the finger-tips. She fumbled with the hooks.

"He is n't married, is he?"

"Married! Well, I should say not! What do you think I am?" mamma demanded. "Do you think I'd steer you or Louise up against anything like that?" Her voice softened. "I know too well what unhappiness comes from some one taking another lady's husband away from his home and family, though he does pay the alimony regular as the day comes around, I will say that for him. I hope never to live to see the day my girl, or you either, does a thing like that." There was genuine emotion in her voice. Helen felt a rush of affectionate pity for her, and Louise, springing up, threw her bare arms around her mother.

"Don't you worry, angel mamma! I see myself doing it!" she cried.

At such moments of warm-hearted sincerity Helen was fond of them both. She felt ashamed while she finished dressing. They were lovely to her, she thought, and they accepted people as they were, without sneaking little criticisms and feelings of superiority. She did not know what she thought about anything.

Her indecisions were cut short by the squawk of an automobile-horn beneath the windows. With

last hasty slaps of powder-puffs and a snatching of gloves, they hurried down to meet Mr. Kennedy at the door, and again Helen felt his charm like a tangible current between them. Words choked in her throat, and she stood silent in a little whirlpool of greetings.

There were three indistinct figures already in the tonneau; a glowing cigar-end lighted a fat, jolly face, and two feminine voices greeted momma and Louise. Hesitating on the curb, Helen felt a warm, possessive hand close on her arm.

"Get out, Dick. Climb in back. This little girl's going in front with me." The dominating voice made the words like an irresistible force. Not until she was sitting beside him and a docile young man had wedged himself into the crowded space behind, did it occur to her to question it.

"Do you always boss people like that?"

They were racing smoothly down a slope, and his answer came through the rushing of the wind past her ears. "Always." The gleam of a headlight passed across his face and she saw it keen, alert, intensely alive. "Ask, and you'll have to argue. Command, and people jump. It's the man that orders what he wants that gets it. Philosophy taught in ten lessons," he added in a contemptuous undertone. "Well, little girl, you have n't been forgetting me, have you?"

She disregarded the change of tone. His idea had

struck her as extraordinarily true. It had never occurred to her. She turned it over in her mind.

"A girl ought to be able to work it, too," she said. He laughed.

"Maybe. She finds it easier to work a man."

"I'm too polite to agree that all of you are soft things."

"You're too clever to find any of us hard to handle."

"Yes? Is n't it too bad putty is so uninteresting?"

She was astounded at her own words. They came from her lips with no volition of her own, leaping automatically in response to his. She felt only the stimulation of his interest, of his electrical presence beside her, of their swift rush through the darkness pierced by flashing lights.

"You don't, of course, compare me to putty?"

"Well, of course, it does set and stay put, in the end. You can depend on it."

"You can count on me, all right. I'm crazy about you."

"Crazy people are unaccountable."

Her heart was racing. The speed of the car, the rush of the air, were in her veins. She had never dreamed that she could talk like this. This man aroused in her qualities she had never known she possessed, and their discovery intoxicated her.

He was silent a moment, turning the car into a

quieter street. There was laughter behind them, one of the others called: "We should worry about the cops! Go to it, Bert!" He did not reply, and the leap of the car swept their chatter backward again.

"Going too fast for you?" She read a double meaning and a challenge in the words.

"I've never gone too fast!" she answered. "I love to ride like this. Where are we going?"

"Anywhere you want to go, as long as it's with me."

"Then let's just keep going and never get there. Do you know what I thought you meant the other night when you said we'd go to the beach?"

"No, what?" He was interested.

She told him. This was safer ground, and she enlarged her mental picture of the still, moonlit beach, the white breakers foaming along the shore, the salt wind, and the darkness, and the car plunging down a long white boulevard.

"Do you mean to tell me you'd never been to the beach resorts before?"

"Isn't it funny?" she laughed.

"You're a damn game little kid."

She found that the words pleased her more than anything he had yet said.

They sped on in silence. Helen found occupation enough in the sheer delight of going so swiftly through a blur of light and darkness toward an un-

known end. She did not resist the fascination of the man beside her; there was exhilaration in his being there, security in his necessary attention to handling the big machine. They passed the park gates, and the car leaped like a live thing at the touch of a whip, plunging faster down the smooth road between dark masses of shrubbery. A clean, moist odor of the forest mixed with a salt tang in the air, and the headlights were like funnels of light cutting into the solid night a space for them to pass.

"Is n't it wonderful!" Helen sighed, and despised the inadequacy of the word.

"I like the bright lights better myself." After a pause, he added, "Country bred, are n't you?" His inflection was not a question.

She replied in the same tone.

"College man, I suppose."

"How did you dope that?"

"'Inhibitions,' " she answered.

"What? O-o-oh! So you have n't been forgetting me?"

"I did n't forget the word," she said. "I looked it up."

"Well, make up your mind to get rid of 'em?"

"I'd get rid of anything I did n't want."

"Going to get rid of me?"

"No," she said coolly. "I'll just let you go."

It struck her that she was utterly mad. She had

never dreamed of talking like that to any one. What was she doing and why?

"Don't you believe it one minute!" His voice had the dominating ring again, and suddenly she felt that she had started a force she was powerless to control. The situation was out of her hands, running away with her. Her only safety was silence, and she shrank into it.

When the car stopped she jumped out of it quickly and attached herself to momma. In the hot, smoky room they found a table at the edge of the dancing floor, and she slipped into the chair farthest from him, ordering lemonade. Exhilaration left her; again she could think of nothing that seemed worth saying, and she felt his amused eyes upon her while she sat looking at the red crepe paper decorations overhead and the maze of dancing couples. It was some time before the rhythm of the music began to beat in her blood and the scene lost its tawdriness and became gay.

"Everybody's doing it now!" Louise hummed, looking at him under her long lashes. The others were dancing, and the three sat alone at the table. "Everybody's doing it, doing it, doing it. Everybody's doing it, but you — and me."

"Go and grab off somebody else," he answered good-humoredly. "I'm dancing with Helen — when she gets over being afraid of me." He lighted a cigarette casually.

"Oh, really? I'd love to dance. Only I don't do it very well."

His arms were around her and they were dancing before she perceived how neatly she had risen to the bait. She stumbled and lost a step in her fury.

"No? Not afraid of me?" he laughed. "Well, don't be. What's the use?"

"It is n't that," she said. "Only I don't know how to play your game. And I don't want to play it. And I'm not going to. You're too clever."

"Don't be afraid," he said, and his arm tightened. They missed step again, and she lost the swing of the music. "Let yourself go, relax," he ordered. "Let the music — that's better."

They circled the floor again, but her feet were heavy, and the knowledge that she was dancing badly added to her effort. Phrases half formed themselves in her mind and escaped. She wanted to be able to carry off the situation well, to make her meaning clear in some graceful, indirect way, but she could not.

"It's this way," she said. "I'm not your kind. Maybe I talked that way for a while, but I'm not really. I — well — I'm not. I wish you'd leave me alone. I really do."

The music ended with a crash, and two thumps of many feet echoed the last two notes. He still held her close, and she felt that inexplicable charm like the attraction of a magnet for steel.

"You really do?" His tone thrilled her with an intoxicating warmth. The smile in his eyes was both caressing and confident. Consciously she kept back the answering smile it commanded, looking at him gravely.

"I really do."

"All right." His quick acquiescence was exactly what she had wanted, and it made her unhappy. They walked back to the table, and for hours she was very gay, watching him dance with momma and Louise. She crowded into the tonneau during their quick, restless dashes from one dancing place to the next. She laughed a great deal, and when they met Duddy and Bob somewhere a little after midnight she danced with each of them. But she felt that having a good time was almost as hard work as earning a living.

It was nearly two weeks before she went out again with momma and Louise, and this time she did not see him at all. Louise was astonished by his failure to telephone.

"What in the world did you do with that Kennedy man?" she wanted to know. "You must have been an awful boob. Why, he was simply dippy about you. Believe me, I'd have strung him along if I'd had your chance. And a machine like a palace car, too!" she mourned.

"Oh, well, baby, Helen does n't know much about handling men," momma comforted her. "She did

the best she could. You never can tell about 'em, anyway. And maybe he 's out of town."

But this was not true, for Louise had seen him only that afternoon with a stunning girl in a million dollars' worth of sables.

Helen was swept by cross-currents of feeling. She told herself that she did not care what he did. She repeated this until she saw that the repetition proved its untruth. Then she let her imagination follow him. But it could do this only blindly. She could picture his home only by combining the magnificence of the St. Francis with scraps from novels she had read, and while she could see him running up imposing steps, passing through a great door and handing his coat to a dignified man servant, either a butler or a footman, she could not follow him further. She could see him with a beautiful girl at a table in a private room of a café; there were no longer any veils between her and that side of a man's life, and she no longer shrank from facing the world as it exists. But she knew that this was only one of his many interests and occupations. She would have liked to know the others.

She turned to thoughts of Paul as one comes from a dark room into clear light. At times she felt an affection for him that made her present life seem like a feverish dream. She imagined herself living in a pretty little house with him. There would be white curtains at the windows and roses over the

porch. When the housework was all beautifully done she would sit on the porch, embroidering a centerpiece or a dainty waist. The gate would click, and he would come up the walk, his feet making a crunching sound on the gravel. She would run to meet him. It had been so long since she had seen him that his face was vague. When with an effort she brought from her memory the straight-looking blue eyes, the full, firm lips, the cleft in his chin, she saw how boyish he looked. He was a dear boy.

The days went by, each like the day before. The rains had begun. Every morning, in a ceaseless drizzle from gray skies, she rushed down a sidewalk filmed with running water and crowded into a street-car jammed with irritated people and dripping umbrellas. When she reached the office her feet were wet and cold and the hems of her skirts flapped damply at her ankles.

She had a series of colds, and her head ached while she copied endless quotations from relentlessly clicking sounders. At night she rode wearily home, clinging to a strap, and crawled into bed. Her muscles ached and her throat was sore. Momma, even in the scurry of dressing for the evening, stopped to bring her a glass of hot whiskey-and-water, and she drank it gratefully. When at last she was alone she read awhile before going to sleep. One forgot the dreariness of living, swept away

into an artificial world of adventure and romance.

Christmas came, and she recklessly spent all her money for gifts to send home; socks and ties and a shaving cup for her father, a length of black silk and a ten-dollar gold piece for her mother, hair ribbons and a Carmen bracelet for Mabel, a knife and a pocket-book with a two-dollar bill in it for Tommy. They made a large, exciting bundle, and when she stood in line at the post-office she pictured happily the delight there would be when it was opened. She hated work with a hatred that increased daily, but there was a deep satisfaction in feeling that she could do such things as this with money she herself had earned.

The brokers at the Merchants' Exchange gave her twenty dollars at Christmas, and with this she bought a gilt vanity-case for Louise, gloves for momma, and Paul's present. She thought a long time about that and at last chose a monogrammed stick-pin, with an old English "P" deeply cut in the gold.

He sent her a celluloid box lined with puffed pink sateen, holding a comb and brush set. It made a poor showing among the flood of presents that poured in for momma and Louise, but she would have been ashamed of being ashamed of it. However, she let them think it came from her mother. She had not told them about Paul, feeling a dim

necessity of shielding that part of her life from Louise's comments.

There were parties every night Christmas week, but she did not go to any of them. She was in the throes of grip, and though the work at the office was light it took all her sick energy. Even on New Year's night she stayed at home, resisting all the urgings of Louise and mamma, who told her she was missing the time of her life. She went resolutely to bed, to lie in the darkness and realize that it was New Year's night, that her life was going by and she was getting nothing she wanted. "It's the man that orders what he wants that gets it." Gilbert Kennedy's voice came back to her.

Rain was beating on the window-panes, and through the sound of it she heard the distant uproar of many voices and a constant staccato of fireworks crackling through the dripping night in triumphant expression of the inextinguishable gaiety of the city. She thought of Paul. So much had happened since she saw him, so much had come between them. He had been living and growing older, too. It was impossible to see what his real life had been through his matter-of-fact letters, chronicle of where he had been, how much money he was saving, on which Sundays the minister had had dinner at his house. Only occasional phrases were clear in her memory. "When we are married—" She could still thrill over that. And he always signed

his letters, "lovingly, Paul." And once, speaking of a Sunday-school picnic, he had written, "I wish you had been there. There was no girl that could touch you."

There was comfort and warmth in the thought that he loved her. When she saw him again everything would be all right. She went to sleep resolving that she would work hard, save her money, go home for a visit in March or April, and ask him to come. The hills would be green, the orchards would be iridescent with the colors of spring, and she would wear a thin white dress —

In February her mother wrote and asked for more money.

Old Nell died last week. Tommy found her dead in the pasture when he went to get the cows. We will have to have a new horse for the spring plowing, and your father has found a good six-year-old, blind in one eye, that we can get cheap. We will have to have sixty dollars, and if you can spare it, it will come in very handy. We would pay you back later. I would not ask you for it only you are making a good salary, and I would rather get it from you than from the bank. It would be only a loan, for I would not ask you to give it to us. If you can let us have it, please let me know right away.

She had saved thirty dollars and had just drawn her half-month's pay. Momma would gladly wait for her share of the month's expenses. As soon as she was through work she went to the post-office

and got a money-order for sixty dollars. She felt a fierce pride in being able to do it, and she was glad to know that she was helping at home, but there was rage in her heart.

It seemed to her that fate was against her, that she would go on working forever, and never get anything she wanted. She saw weeks and months and years of work stretching ahead of her like the interminable series of ties in a railroad track, vanishing in as barren a perspective.

For nearly three years her whole life had been work. Those few evenings at the cafés had been her only gaiety. She had copied innumerable market quotations, sent uncounted messages, been a mere machine, and for what? She did not want to work, she wanted to live.

That night she went to the beach with the crowd. Bob was there and Duddy and a score of others she had met in cafés. There again was the stir of shifting colors under brilliant lights, the eddy and swirl of dancers, sparkling eyes, white hands, a glimmer of rings, perfume, laughter, and through it all the music, throbbing, swaying, blending all sensations into one quickening rhythm, one exhilarating vibration of nerves and spirit. Helen felt weariness slip from her shoulders; she felt that she was soaring like a lark; she could have burst into song.

She danced. She danced eagerly, joyously, carried by the music as by the crest of a wave. Re-

partee slipped from her lips as readily as from Louise's; she found that it did not matter what one said, only that one said it quickly; her sallies were met by applauding laughter. In the automobile, dashing from place to place, she took off her hat and, facing the rushing wind, sang aloud for pure joy.

They encountered Gilbert Kennedy just after midnight. She turned a flushed, radiant face to him when he came over to their table. She felt sure of herself, ready for anything. He leaned past her to shake hands with momma, who greeted him in chorus with Louise.

"Back in our midst once more!" he said to Helen over his shoulder. He brought up a chair beside hers, and she saw in his first glance that he was tired and moody. She felt the lessening of his magnetic vitality; it seemed to have drained away through some inner lesion. He ordered straight Scotch and snapped his fingers impatiently until the waiter brought it.

"Who you with, Bert? Didn't see your car outside," said Duddy.

"Oh, I was with some crowd. Don't know where they are. Haven't got the car," he answered.

"Stick around with us then." "I bet you've been hitting the high spots, and smashed it!" Bob and Duddy said simultaneously. But the orchestra

was beginning another tune, and only Helen noticed that in the general pushing back of chairs he did not reply.

She shook her head at the question in his eyes, and he asked no one else to dance. Of course, after that, she had to refuse the others, too, and they were left sitting at the bare table ringed with the imprints of wet glasses. An unaccountable depression was settling on her; she felt sorry and full of pity, she did not know why, and an impulse to put her hand on his smooth, fair hair surprised and horrified her.

"Rotten life, is n't it?" he said. It was a tone so new in him that she did not know how to reply.

"I'm sorry," she answered.

"Sorry? Good Lord, what for?"

"I don't know. I just am. I'm sorry for — whatever it is that's happened." She saw that she had made a mistake, and the remnant of her exhilaration fluttered out like a spent candle. She sat looking at the dancers in silence, and they appeared to her peculiar and curious, going round and round with terrific energy, getting nowhere. The music had become an external thing, too, and she observed the perspiring musicians working wearily, with glances at the clock.

"Funny," she said at length.

"What?"

"All these people — and me, too — doing this

kind of thing. We don't get anything out of it. What do we do it for?"

"Oh, safety-valve. Watts discovered the steam-engine on the principle." His voice was very tired.

The more she considered the idea, the more her admiration for him grew. She was not in the least afraid of him now; she was eager to talk to him. Her hand went out detainingly when he rose, but he disregarded it. "So long," he said carelessly, and she saw that, absorbed in some preoccupation, he hardly knew that she was there. She let him go and sat turning an empty glass between her fingers, lost in speculations concerning him. Though she spent many of her evenings at the beach during several weeks, she did not see him again, and she heard one night that he had gone broke and left town.

She could not believe that disaster had conquered him. That last meeting and his disappearance had increased the charm he had for her. Her mind recurred to him, drawn by an irresistible fascination. She had only to brood on the memory of him for a moment and a thrill ran through her body. It could not be that she loved him. Why, she did not even know him.

CHAPTER X

IN March Paul came to see her.

It had been a hard day at the office. A mistake had been made in a message, and a furious broker, asserting that it had cost him thousands of dollars, that she was at fault, that he was going to sue the telegraph company, had pounded the counter and refused to be quieted. All day she was overwhelmed with a sense of disaster. It would be months before the error was traced, and alternately she recalled distinctly that she had sent the right word and remembered with equal distinctness that she had sent the wrong one.

Dots and dashes jumbled together in her mind. She was exhausted at four o'clock, and thought eagerly of a hot bath and the soothing softness of a pillow. Slumped in the corner of a street-car, she doggedly endured its jerks and jolts, keeping a grip on herself with a kind of inner tenseness until the moment when she could relax.

Louise was hanging over the banister on the upper landing when she entered the hall of the apartment-house. Her excited stage-whisper met Helen on the stairs.

"Sh-sh-sh! Somebody's here to see you."

"Who?" The event was unusual, but Louise's manner was even more so. Vague pictures of her family and accident and death flashed through Helen's startled mind.

He said his name was Masters. He was an awful stick. Momma'd sent Louise out to give her the high sign. Louise's American Beauty man was in town, and there was going to be a party at the Cliff House. They could sneak in and dress and beat it out the back way. Momma had the guy in the living-room. He'd simply spoil the party.

"Aw, have a heart, Helen. Momma'll get rid of him somehow. You can fix it up afterward."

Helen's first thought was that Paul must not see her looking like this, disheveled, her hair untidy, and her fingers ink-stained. Her heart was beating fast, and there was a fluttering in her wrists. It was incredible that he was really near, separated from her only by a partition. The picture of him sitting there a victim of momma's efforts to entertain him was ghastly and at the same time hysterically comic. She tiptoed in breathless haste past the closed door and gained the safety of the bedroom, Louise's kimono rustling behind her. The first glance into the mirror was sickening. She tore off her hat and coat and let down her hair with trembling fingers.

"He's — an awful good friend. I must see him.

Heavens! what a fright! Be an angel and find me a clean waist," she whispered. The comb shook in her hand; hairpins slipped through her fingers; the waist she found lacked a button, and every pin in the room had disappeared. It was an eternity before she was ready, and then, leaning for one last look in the glass, she was dissatisfied. There was no color in her face; even her lips were only palely pink. She bit them; she rubbed them with stinging perfume till they reddened; then with a hurried resolve she scrubbed her cheeks with Louise's rouge pad. That was better. Another touch of powder!

"Do I look all right?"

"Stunning! Aw, Helen, come through. Who is he? You've never told me a word." Louise was wild with curiosity.

"Sh-sh!" Helen cautioned. She drew a deep breath at the living-room door. Her little-girl shyness had come back upon her. Then she opened the door and walked in.

Momma, in her kimono, was sitting in the darkest corner of the room, with her back toward the window. Only a beaded slipper toe and some inches of silk stocking caught the light. She was obviously making conversation with painful effort. Paul sat facing her, erect in a stiff chair, his eyes fixed politely on a point over her shoulder. He rose with evident relief to meet Helen.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Masters," she said, embarrassed.

"Good afternoon." They shook hands.

"I'm very glad to see you. Won't you sit down?" she heard herself saying inanely.

Momma rose, clutching her kimono around her.

"Well, I'll be going, as I have a very important engagement, and you'll excuse me, Mr. Masters, I'm sure," she said archly. "So charmed to have met you," she added with artificial sweetness.

The closing of the door behind her left them facing each other with nothing but awkwardness between them. He had changed indefinitely, though the square lines of his face, the honest blue eyes, the firm lips were as she remembered them. Under the smooth-shaven skin of his cheeks there was the blue shadow of a stubborn beard. He appeared prosperous, but not quite sure of himself, in a well-made broadcloth suit, and he held a new black derby hat in his left hand.

"I'm awfully glad to see you," she managed to say. "I'm — so surprised. I didn't know you were coming."

"I sent you a note on the wires," he replied. "I was n't sure till last night I could get off."

"I didn't get it," she said. Silence hung over them like a threat. "I'm sorry I didn't know. I hope you didn't have to wait long. I'm glad you're looking so well. How is your mother?"

"She's all right. How is your's?"

"She's very well, thank you." She caught her laugh on a hysterical note. "Well — how do you like San Francisco weather?"

His bewilderment faded slowly into a grin.

"It is rather hard to get started," he admitted. "You look different than I thought you would, somehow. But I guess we have n't changed much really. Can't we go somewhere else?"

She read his dislike of momma in the look he cast at her living-room. It was natural, no doubt. But a quick impulse of loyalty to these people who had been so kind to her illogically resisted it. This room, with its close air, its film of dust over the table-tops, its general air of neglect emphasized by the open candy box on the piano-stool and the sooty papers in the gas grate, was nevertheless much pleasanter than the place where she had been living when she met Louise.

"I don't know just where," she replied. "Of course, I don't know the city very well because I work all day. But we might take a walk."

There was a scurry in the hallway when she opened the door; she caught a glimpse of Louise in petticoat and corset-cover dashing from the bathroom to the bedroom. She hoped that Paul had not seen it, but his cheeks were red. It was really absurd; what was there so terrible about a petticoat? He should have known better than to come to the

house without telephoning, anyway. She cast about quickly for something to say.

No, he answered, he could not stay in town long, only twenty-four hours. He wanted to see the superintendent personally about the proposition of putting in a spur-track at Ripley for the loading of melons. There were — her thoughts did not follow his figures. She heard vaguely something about irrigation districts and water-feet and sandy loam soil. 'So he had not come to see her!

Then she saw that he, too, was talking only to cover a sense of strangeness and embarrassment as sickening as her own. She wished that they were comfortably sitting down somewhere where they could talk. It was hard to say anything interesting while they walked down bleak streets with the wind snatching at them.

"Whew! You certainly have some wind in this town!" he exclaimed. At the top of Nob Hill its full force struck them, whipping her skirts and tugging at her hat while she stood gazing down at the gray honeycomb of the city and across it at masses of sea fog rolling over Twin Peaks. "It gives me an appetite, I tell you! Where'll we go for supper?"

She hesitated. She could not imagine his being comfortable in any of the places she knew. Music and brilliant lights and cabaret singers would be another barrier between them added to those she

longed to break down. She said that she did not know the restaurants very well, and his surprise reminded her that she had written him pages about them. She stammered over an explanation she could not make.

There were so many small, unimportant things that were important because they could not be explained, and that could not be explained without making them more important than they were. It seemed to her that the months since they had last met were full of them.

She took refuge in talking about her work. But she saw that he did not like that subject. He said briefly that it was a rotten shame she had to do it, and obviously hoped to close the theme with that remark.

They found a small restaurant down town, and after he had hung up his hat and they had discussed the menu, she sat turning a fork over and over and wondering what they could talk about. She managed to find something to say, but it seemed to her that their conversation had no more flavor than sawdust, and she was very unhappy.

"Look here, Helen, why did n't you tell those folks where you live that we're engaged?" There was nothing but inquiry in his tone, but the words were a bombshell. She straightened in her chair.

"Why —" How could she explain that vague

feeling about keeping it from Louise and momma?
“Why — I don’t know. What was the use?”

“What was the use? Well, for one thing, it might have cleared things up a little for some of these other fellows that know you.”

What had momma told him? “I don’t know any men that would be interested,” she said.

“Well, you never can tell about that,” he answered reasonably. “I was sort of surprised, that’s all. I had an idea girls talked over such things.”

She was tired, and in the dull little restaurant there was nothing to stimulate her. The commonplace atmosphere, the warmth, and the placidity of his voice lulled her to stupidity.

“I suppose they do,” she said. “They usually talk over their rings.” She was alert instantly, filled with rage at herself and horror. His cheeks grew dully red. “I did n’t mean —” she cried, and the words clashed with his. “If that’s it I’ll get you a ring.”

“Oh, no! No! I don’t want you to. I would n’t think of taking it.”

“Of course you know I have n’t had money enough to get you a good one. I thought about it pretty often, but I did n’t know you thought it was so important. Seems to me you’ve changed an awful lot since I knew you.”

The protest, the explanation, was stopped on her

lips. It was true. She felt that they had both changed so much that they might be strangers.

"Do you really think so?" she asked miserably.

"I don't know what to think," he answered honestly, pain in his voice. "I've been — about crazy sometimes, thinking about — things, wanting to see you again. And now — I don't know — you seem so different, sitting there with paint on your face —" Her hand went to her cheek as if it stung her — "and talking about rings. You did n't use to be like this a bit, Helen," he went on earnestly. "It seems to me as if you'd completely lost track of your better self somehow. I wish you'd —"

This struck from her a spark of anger.

"Please don't begin preaching at me! I'm perfectly able to take care of myself. Really, Paul, you just don't understand. It is n't anything, really, a little bit of rouge. I only put it on because I was tired and did n't have any color. And I did n't mean it about the ring. I just did n't think what I was saying. But I guess you're right. I guess neither of us knows the other any more."

She felt desolate, abandoned to dreariness. Everything seemed all wrong with the world. She listened to Paul's assurances that he knew she was all right, whatever she did, that he did n't care anyhow, that she suited him. But they sounded hollow in her ears, for she knew that beneath them was the same uncertainty she felt. When, flushing, he said

again that he would get her a ring, she answered that she did not want one, and they said no more about it. The abyss between them was left bridged only by the things they had not said, fearing to make it forever impassable by saying them.

He left her at her door promptly at the proper hour of ten. There was a moment in which a blind feeling in her reached out to him; she felt that they had taken hold of the situation by the wrong end somehow, that everything would be all right if they had had a chance.

He supposed she could n't take the morning off. He had to see the superintendent, but maybe they could manage an hour or two. No, she had to work. With the threat of that missent message hanging over her she dared not further spoil her record by taking a day off without notice. And she knew that one or two hours more could not possibly make up the months of estrangement between them.

"Well, good-night."

"Good-night." Their hands clung a moment and dropped apart. If only he would say something, do something, she did not know what. But awkwardness held him as it did her.

"Good-night." The broad door swung slowly shut behind her. Even then she waited a moment, with a wild impulse to run after him. But she climbed the stairs instead and went wearily to bed, her heart aching with a sense of irreparable loss.

In the morning she was still very tired, and while she drove herself through the day's work she told herself that probably she had never really loved him. "Unless you can love as the angels may, with the breadth of heaven betwixt you," she murmured, remembering the volume of poetry she had found on a library shelf. She had thrilled over it when she read it, dreaming of him; now it seemed to her a grim and almost cynical test. Well, she might as well face a lifetime of work. Lots of women did.

She managed to do this, seeing years upon years of lonely effort, during which she would accumulate money enough to buy a little home of her own. There would be no one in it to criticise her choice of friends or say that she painted. That remark clung like a bur in her mind. Yes, she could face a lifetime in which no one would have the right to say things like that!

But when she went home she found that she could not endure an evening of loneliness. Louise and momma were going out, and she was very gay while she dressed to go with them. They said they had never seen her in better spirits.

Unaccountably, the lights, the music, the atmosphere of gaiety, did not get into her blood as usual. At intervals she had moments of depression that they did not touch. She sat isolated in the crowd, sipping her lemonade, feeling that nothing in the world was worth while.

However, she went again the next night. She began to go almost as frequently as momma and Louise, and to understand the unsatisfied restlessness which drove Mrs. Latimer and her friends. She was tired in the morning, and there were more complaints of her work at the office, but she did not care. She felt recklessly that nothing mattered, and she went back to the beach resorts as a thirsty person will tip an emptied glass in which perhaps a drop remains.

"What 's the matter, little one? Got a grouch?" said Louise's American Beauty man one night. He was jovial and bald; his neck bulged over the back of his collar, and he wore a huge diamond on his little finger. Helen did not like him, but it was his party. He owned the big red car in which they had come to the beach, and she felt that his impatient reproach was justified. She was not paying her way.

"Not a bit!" she laughed. "Only for some reason I feel like a cold plum-pudding."

"What you need 's brandy sauce." Duddy said, appreciating his own wit.

"You mean you want me to get lit up!"

"That 's the idea! Bring on the booze, let joy be unrefined! Waiter, rye high-balls all around!"

She did not object; that did not seem worth while, either. When the glasses came she emptied hers with the rest, and her spirits did seem to lighten a little. "It removes inhibitions," Gilbert Kennedy

had said. And he was gone, too. If he were only there the sparkle of life would come back; she would be exhilarated, witty, alive to her finger-tips once more —

The crowd was moving on again. She went with them into the cool night, and it seemed to her that life was nothing but a moving on from dissatisfaction to dissatisfaction. Squeezed into a corner of the tonneau, she relapsed into silence, and it was some time before she noticed the altered note in the excitement of the others.

“Give ’er the gas! Let ’er out! Damn it, if you let ’em pass — !” the car’s owner was shouting, and the machine fled like a runaway thing. Against a blur of racing sand dunes Helen saw a long gray car creeping up beside them. “You’re going to kill us!” momma screamed, disregarded. Helen, on her feet, clinging to the back of the front seat, yelled with the others. “Beat ’im! Beat ’im! Y-a-a-ah!”

Her hat, torn from her head, disappeared in the roaring blur behind them. Her hair whipped her face. She was wildly, gloriously alive. “Faster — faster, oh!” The gray car was gaining. Inch by inch it crawled up beside them. “Can’t you go *faster?*” she cried in a bedlam of shouts. Oh, if only her hands were on the wheel! It was unbearable that they should lose. “Give ’er more gas — she’ll make eighty-five!” the owner yelled.

Everything in Helen narrowed to the challenge of that plunging gray car. Its passing was like an intolerable pulling of something vital from her grip. Pounding her hand against the car-door she shrieked frantic protests. "Don't let him do it! Go on! Go on!" The gray car was forging inexorably past them. It swerved. Momma's scream was torn to ribbons by the wind. It was ahead now, and one derisive yell from its driver came back to them. Their speed slowed.

"He's turning in at The Tides. Stop there?" the chauffeur asked over his shoulder.

"Yes, damn you! Wha'd yuh think you're driving, a baby-carriage? You're fired!" his employer raged, and he was still swearing when Helen, gasping and furious, stumbled from the running-board against Gilbert Kennedy.

"Good Lord, was it you?" he cried. "Some race!" he exulted and swinging her off her feet, he kissed her gayly. Something wild and elemental in her rushed to meet its mate in him. He released her instantly, and in a chorus of greetings, "Drinks on me, old man!" "Some little car you've got!" "Come on in!" she found herself under a glare of light in the swirl and glitter of The Tides. He was beside her at the round table, and her heart was pounding.

"No — no — this is on me!" he declared. "Only my money's good to-night. I'm going to

Argentine to-morrow on the water-wagon. What 'll you have? "

They ordered, helter-skelter, in a clamor of surprise and inquiry. "Argentine, what 're you giving us!" "What 's the big idea?" "You 're kidding!"

"On the level. Argentine. To-morrow. Say, listen to me. I 've got hold of the biggest proposition that ever came down the pike. Six million acres of land — good land, that 'll raise anything from hell to breakfast. Do you know what people are paying for land in California right now? I 'll tell you. Five hundred, six hundred, a thousand dollars an acre. And I 've got six million acres of land sewed up in Argentine that I can sell for fifty cents an acre and make — listen to what I 'm telling you — and make a hundred per cent. profit. The Government 's backing me — they 'd give me the whole of Argentine. I tell you there 's millions in it!"

He was full of radiant energy and power. Her imagination leaped to grasp the bigness of this project. Thousands of lives altered, thousands of families migrating, cities, villages, railroads built. She felt his kiss on her lips, and that old, inexplicable, magnetic attraction. The throbbing music beat in her veins like the voice of it. He smiled at her, holding out his arms, and she went into them with recklessness and longing.

They were carried together on waves of rhythm, his arms around her, her loosened hair tumbling backward on her neck.

"I'm mad about you!"

"And you're going away?"

"Sorry?"

"Sorry? Bored. You always do!"

He laughed.

"Not on your life! This time I'm taking you with me."

"Oh, but I would n't take you — seriously!"

"I mean it. You're coming."

"I'm dreaming."

"I mean it." His voice was almost savage. "I want you."

Fear ran like a challenge through her exultation. She felt herself a small fluttering thing against his breast, while the intoxicating music swept them on through a whirling crowd. His face so close to her was keen and hard, his eyes were reckless as her own leaping blood. "All I've ever needed is a girl like you. You're not going to get away this time."

"Oh, but I'm perfectly respectable!"

"All right! Marry me."

Behind the chaos of her mind there was the tense, suffocating hesitation of the instant before a diver leaves the spring-board — security behind him, ecstasy ahead. His nearness, his voice, the light in his eyes, were all that she had been wanting, without

knowing it, all these months. The music stopped with a crash.

He stood, as he had stood once before, his arm still tight around her, and in a flash she saw that other time and the dreary months that had followed.

"All right. It's settled?" There was the faintest question in his confident voice.

"You really do — love me?"

"I really do." His eyes were on hers, and she saw his confidence change to certainty. "You're game!" he said, and kissed her triumphantly, in the crowded room, beneath the glaring lights and crepe-paper decorations. She did not care; she cared for nothing in the world now but him.

"Let's — go away — a little while by ourselves, out where it's dark and cool," she said hurriedly as they crossed the floor.

"Not on your life! We're going to have the biggest party this town ever saw!" he answered exultantly over his shoulder, and she saw his enjoyment of the bomb he was about to drop upon the unsuspecting group at the table. "The roof is off the sky to-night. This is a wedding-party!"

Louise and momma were upon her with excited cries and kisses, and Helen, flushed, laughing, trying not to be hysterical, heard his voice ordering drinks, disposing of questions of license, minister, ring, rooms at the St. Francis, champagne, supper, flowers. She was the beggar maid listening to King Cophetua.

CHAPTER XI

AT ten o'clock on a bright June morning Helen Kennedy tip-toed across a darkened bedroom and closed its door softly behind her. Her tenseness relaxed with a sigh of relief when the door shut with the tiniest of muffled clicks and the stillness behind its panels remained unbroken.

Sunlight streamed through the windows of the sitting room, throwing a quivering pattern of the lace curtains on the velvet carpet and kindling a glow of ruddy color where it touched mahogany chairs and a corner of the big library table. She moved quickly to one of the broad windows and carefully raised a lower sash. The low roar of the stirring city rushed in like the noise of breakers on a far-away beach, and clean, tingling air poured upon her. She breathed it in deeply, drawing the blue silk negligée closer about her throat.

The two years that had whirled past since she became Bert Kennedy's wife had taught her many things. She had drawn from her experience generalities on men, women, life, which made her feel immeasurably older and wiser. But there were problems that she had not solved, points at which she felt herself at fault, and they troubled her

vaguely while she stood twisting the cord of the window-shade in her hand and gazing out at the many-windowed buildings of San Francisco.

She had learned that men loved women for being beautiful, gay, unexacting, sweet-tempered always, docile without being bores. She had learned that men were infuriated by three things; questions, babies, and a woman who was ill. She had learned that success in business depended upon "putting up a front" and that a woman's part was to help in that without asking why or for what end. She had learned that the deepest need of her own nature was to be able to look up to the man she loved, even though she must go down on her own knees in order to do it. She knew that she adored her husband blindly, passionately, and that she dared not open her eyes for fear she would cease to do so.

But she had not quite been able to fit herself into a life with him. She had not learned what to do with these morning hours while he was asleep; she had not learned to occupy all her energies in useless activities while he was away; in a word, she did not know what to do with the part of her life he did not want, and she could not compel herself to be satisfied in doing nothing with it.

Gathering up the trailing silks of her nightgown and negligée she went back to the pile of magazines and books on the table. She did not exactly want to read; reading seemed to her as out of place in the

morning as soup for breakfast. But she could not go out, for at any moment Bert might wake and call to her, and she could not dress, for he saw a reproach in that, and was annoyed. She turned over the books uncertainly, selecting at last a curious one called "Pragmatism," which had fascinated her when she dipped into its pages in the library. She had it in her hand when the door-bell rang loudly.

She stood startled, clutching the book against her breast. Her heart beat thickly, and the color faded from her face and then poured back in a burning flush. The bell rang again more imperatively. The very sound of it proclaimed that it was rung by a collector. Was it the taxi-cab man, the tailor, the collection agency? She could not make herself go to the door, and the third long, insistent peal of the bell wrung her like the tightening of a rack. It would waken Bert, but what further excuse could she make to the grimly insulting man she visualized on the other side of the door? The bell continued to ring.

After a long time it was silent, and she heard the slam of the automatic elevator's door. A second later she heard Bert's voice.

"Helen! Helen! What the devil?"

She opened the bedroom door and stood smiling brightly on the threshold. "'Morning, Bert dear! Behold, the early bird's gone with his bill still open!"

“Well, why the hell did n’t you open the door and tell him to stop that confounded noise? Were you afraid of disturbing him?”

He knew how it hurt her, but she was trained not to show it. It appeared to her now that she had been criminally selfish in not guarding Bert’s sleep. She saw herself a useless incumbrance to her husband’s career, costing him a great deal and doing nothing whatever to repay him.

“That’s the trouble—it would n’t have disturbed him a bit!” she laughed bravely. “Somebody ought to catch a collector and study the species and find out what will disturb ’em. I think they’re made of cast-iron. I wonder does collecting run in families, or do they just catch ’em young and harden them.”

Sometimes even in the mornings talk like this made him smile. But this morning he only growled unintelligibly, turning his head on the pillow. She went softly past the bed into the dressing-room.

Bert had scouted her idea of getting an apartment with a kitchenette. He said he had not married a cook, and he hated women with burned complexions and red hands. He made her feel plebeian and common in preferring a home to a hotel. But she had found when she interviewed the apartment-house manager and had spent a happy morning buying a coffee percolator and dainty cups and napkins,

that he did not mind her giving him coffee in bed. She found a deep pleasure in doing it.

The percolator stood behind a screen in the dressing-room. She turned on the electric switch and, sitting down before the mirror, took off her lace cap and released her hair from its curlers. Bert liked her hair curled. Its dark mist framed a face that she regarded anxiously in the mirror. The features had sharpened a little, and her complexion had lost a shade of its freshness. Bert would insist on her drinking with him, and she knew she must do it to keep her hold on him. A sense of the unreasonableness of men in loving women for their beauty and then destroying it came into her mind, nebulous, almost a thought. But she disregarded it, from a habit she had formed of disregarding many things, and began combing and coiling her hair, carefully inspecting the result from all angles with a hand mirror.

A few minutes later she came into the bedroom, carrying a tray and kicking the trailing lengths of her negligée before her. She held the tray in one hand while she cleared the bedside table with the other, and when she had poured the coffee she went through the sitting-room and brought in the morning paper. It had been the taxi-cab man. His bill, stuck in the crack of the door, fluttered down when she opened it, and after glancing at the figures hastily, she thrust it out of sight.

Bert was sitting up in bed, drinking his coffee, and the smile he threw at her made her happy. She curled on the bed beside his drawn-up knees and, taking her own cup from the tray, smiled at him in turn. She never loved him more than at such moments as this, when his rumpled hair and the eyes miraculously cleared and softened by sleep made him seem almost boyish.

“Good?”

“You’re some little chef when it comes to coffee!” he replied. “It hits the spot.” He yawned. “Good Lord, we must have had a time last night! Did I fight a chauffeur or did I dream it?”

“It was only a — rather a — dispute,” she said hurriedly.

“That little blond doll was some baby!”

He could not intend to be so cruel, not even to punish her for letting the bell waken him. It was only that he liked to feel his own power over her. He cared only for women that he could control, and she knew that it was the constant struggle between them, in which he was always victorious, that gave her her greatest hold on him. But it did hurt her cruelly in this moment of security to be reminded of the dangers that always threatened that hold.

“Oh, stunning!” she agreed, keeping her eyes clear and smiling. She would not fall into the error and the confession of being catty. But she felt that he perceived her motive, and she knew that in any

case he held the advantage over her. She was in the helpless position of the one who gives the greater love.

They sipped their coffee in silence broken only by the crackling of the newspaper. Then, pushing it away, he set down his cup and leaned back against the pillows, his hands behind his head. A moment had arrived in which she could talk to him, and behind her carefully casual manner her nerves tightened.

"It was pretty good coffee," she remarked. "You know, I think it would be fun if we had a real place, with a breakfast room, don't you? Then we'd have grape-fruit and hot muffins and all that sort of thing, too. I'd like to have a place like that. And then we'd have parties," she added hastily. "We could keep them going all night long if we wanted to in our own place."

He yawned.

"Dream on, little one," he said. But his voice was pleasant.

"Now listen, dear. I really mean it. We could do it. It would n't be a bit more trouble to you than a hotel, really. I'd see that it was n't. I really want it awfully badly. I know you'd like it if you'd just let me try it once. You don't know how nice I'd make it for you."

His silence was too careless to be antagonistic, but he was listening. She was encouraged.

"You don't realize how much time I have when you're gone. I could keep a house running beautifully, and you'd never even see the wheels go round. I —"

"A house!" He was aroused. "Great Scott, doesn't it cost enough for the two of us to live as it is? Don't you make my life miserable whining about bills?"

The color came into her cheeks, but she had never risked letting herself feel resentment at anything he chose to say. She laughed quite naturally. "My goodness!" she said. "You're talking as if I were a puppy! I've never whined a single whine; it's the howling of the collectors you've heard. Let 'em howl; it's good enough for 'em! No, but really, sweetheart, please just let me finish. I've thought it all out. You don't know what a good manager I am." She hurried on, forestalling the words on his lips. "You don't know how much I want to be just a little bit of help. I can't be much, I know. But I'm sure I could save money —"

"Old stuff!" he interrupted. "It isn't the money you save; it's the money you make that counts."

"I know!" she agreed quickly. "But we could get a house, we could buy a house, for less than we're paying here in rent. A very nice house. I would n't ask you to do it, if it cost any more than we're spending now. But — of course I don't know

anything about such things — but I should think it would give you an advantage in business if you owned some property. Would n't — would n't it — make people put more confidence —" She faltered miserably at the look in his eyes, and before he could speak she had changed her tactics, laughing.

"I'm just trying to tease you into giving me something I want, and I know I'm awfully silly about it." She nestled closer to him, slipping an arm under his neck. "Oh, honey, it would n't cost anything at all, and I do so want to have a house to do things to. I feel so — so unsettled, living this way. I feel as if I were always sitting on the edge of a chair waiting to go somewhere else. And I'm used to working and — and managing a little money. I know it was n't much money, but I liked to do it. You're letting a lot of perfectly good energy go to waste in me, really you are."

He laughed, tightening his arm about her shoulders, and for one deliriously happy moment she thought she had won. Then he kissed her, and before he spoke she knew she had lost."

"I should worry! You're giving me all I want," he said, and there was different delight in the words. She was satisfying him, and for the moment it was enough. He made the mistake of overconfidence in emphasizing a point already won and so losing it.

"And as long as I'm giving you three meals a

day and glad rags, it is n't up to you to worry. I'll look after the finances if you'll take care of your complexion. It's beginning to need it," he added with brutality that defeated its own purpose. Even in her pain she had an instant of seeing him clearly and feeling that she hated him.

She slipped to her feet and stood trembling, not looking down at him.

"Well, that's settled, then," she said in a clear, hard little voice. "I'll go and dress. It's nearly noon."

She felt that her own anger was threatening the most precious thing in her life; she felt that she was two persons who were tearing each other to pieces. With a blind instinct of reaching out to him for help she turned at the dressing-room door. "I know you don't realize what you're doing to me — you don't realize — what you're throwing away," she said.

There was a cool amusement in his eyes.

"Well, but why the melodrama?" he asked reasonably. She stood convicted of hysteria and stupidity, and she felt again his superiority and his mastery over her.

When she came from the dressing-room to find him, careless, good-humored, handsome, tugging his tie into its knot before the mirror, she knew that nothing mattered except that she loved him and that she must hold his love for her. She came close to

him, longing for a reassurance that she would not ask. Unless he gave it to her, left her with it to hold in her heart, she would be tortured by miserable doubts and flickering jealousies until he came back. She would be tied to the telephone, waiting for a call from him, trying to follow in her imagination the intricate business affairs from which she was shut out, telling herself that it was business and nothing else that kept him from her.

"Well, by-by," he said, putting on his hat.

"Good-by." Her voice was like a detaining hand. "You — you won't be gone long?"

He relented.

"I'm going down to see Clark & Hayward. I'm going to put through a deal with them that'll put us on velvet," he declared.

"Clark & Hayward? They're the real-estate people?"

"You're some little guesser. They certainly are. We're going to be millionaires when I get through with them! Farewell!"

The very door seemed to click triumphantly behind him, and she heard him whistling while he waited for the elevator. When he appeared on the sidewalk below, she was leaning from the window, and she would have waved to him if he had looked up. Her occupation for the day vanished when he swung into a street-car and was carried out of sight.

She picked up the pragmatism book again and

read a few paragraphs, put it down restlessly. The untidy bedroom nagged at her nerves, but Bert was paying for hotel service, and once when she had made the bed he had told her impatiently that there was no sense in letting the very servants know she was not used to living decently.

She would go for a walk. There might be something new to see in the shop windows. She would take the book with her and read it in the dairy lunch-room where she ate when alone. It seemed criminal to her to spend money unnecessarily when they owed so much, and she could not help trying to save it, though all her efforts seemed to make no difference.

If she could have only a small amount of money regularly, she could manage so much better. Even the salary she had earned as a telegraph-operator sometimes seemed like riches to her, because she had known that she would have it every month and had managed it herself. But every attempt to establish regularity and stability in her present life ended always in the same failure, and she hurriedly turned even her slightest thoughts from the memory of conversations like that just ended.

In the dressing-room she snapped on all the lights and under their merciless glare critically inspected every line of her face. The carefully brushed arch of the eyebrows was perfect; the slightest trace of rouge was spread skilfully on her cheeks, the round

point of her chin, the lobes of her ears. She coaxed loose a tendril of dark hair and, soaking it with banderine, plastered it against her cheek in a curve that was the final touch of striking artificiality. She did not like it, but Bert did.

She took time in adjusting her hat. Everything depended on that, she knew. She tied her veil with meticulous care. Then, slowly turning before the long mirror set in the door, she critically inspected every detail of her costume, the trim little boots, the crisp, even edges of her skirt, the line of the jacket, the immaculate gloves. A tremendous amount of thought and effort had gone into the making of that smart effect, and she felt that she had done a good job. She would still compare favorably with any of the women Bert might meet. A tiny spark of cheerfulness was kindled by the thought. She tried to nourish it, but it went out in dreariness.

What kind of deal was Bert putting through with Clark & Hayward? It was the first time he had mentioned real estate since the unexplained failure of his plan to go to Argentine. That was another memory from which she hastily turned her thoughts, a memory of his alternate moodiness and wild gaiety, of his angry impatience at her most tentative show of interest or sympathy, of their ending an ecstatic, miserable honeymoon by sneaking out of the hotel leaving an unpaid bill behind them. She still avoided the hotel, though he must long since have

paid the bill. She had not dared ask him, but he had made a great deal of money since then.

There had been the flurry of excitement about the mining stocks, which were selling like wild-fire and promised millions until something happened. And then the scheme for floating a rubber plantation in Guatemala — his long eastern trip and her diamond ring had come out of that — and then the affair of the patent monkey-wrench. He had said again that there were millions in it, and had derided her dislike of the inventor. She wondered what had become of that enterprise, and secretly thought that she had been right and that the man had tried to swindle Bert.

Now it was real estate again. She did not doubt that her clever husband would succeed in it; she was sure that he would be one of America's biggest business men some day, when he turned his genius to one line and followed it with a little more steadiness. But she would have liked to know more about his business affairs. Since they could not have a home yet, she would like to be doing something interesting.

She stopped such thoughts with an impatient little mental shake. Perhaps she would feel better when she had eaten luncheon. With the book tucked under her arm she walked briskly down the sunny, wind-swept streets, threading her way indifferently through the tangle of traffic at the corners

with the sixth sense of the city dweller, seeing without perceiving them the clanging street-cars, the silent, shining limousines, the streams of cleverly dressed women, preoccupied men, fluffy dogs on chains, and the panorama of shop windows filled with laces, jewels, gowns, furs, hats. She walked surrounded by an isolation as complete as if she were alone in a forest, and nothing struck through it until she paused before a window-display of hardware.

She came to that window frequently, drawn by an irresistible attraction. With a pleasant sense of dissipation she stood before it, gazing at glittering bathroom fixtures, rank on rank of shining pans, rows of kitchen utensils, electric flat-irons. To-day there was a glistening white kitchen cabinet, with ingenious flour-bin and built-in sifter, hooks for innumerable spoons, sugar and spice jars, an egg-beater, a market-memorandum device. A tempting yellow bowl stood on a white shelf.

Some day, she thought, she would have a yellow kitchen. She had in mind the shade of yellow, a clear yellow, like sunshine. There would be cream walls and yellow woodwork, at the windows sheer white curtains, which would wash easily, and on the window sill a black jar filled with nasturtiums. The breakfast-room should be a glassed-in porch, and its curtains should be thin yellow silk, through which the sunshine would cast a golden light on the little breakfast table spread with a white embroidered

cloth and set with shining silver and china. The coffee percolator would be bubbling, and the grapefruit in place, and when she came from the kitchen with the plate of muffins Bert would look up from his paper and say, "Muffins again? Fine! You're some little muffin-maker!"

She dimpled and flushed happily, standing before the unresponsive sheet of plate glass. Then, with a shrug and a half laugh at herself, she came back to reality and went on. But the display held her as a candy-shop holds a child, and she must stop again to look at the next window, filled with color-cards and cans of paint. Her mind was still busy with color combinations for a living-room when she entered the dairy lunch-room and carried her tray to a table.

For a moment she looked at the crowd about her, clerks and shopgirls and smartly dressed stenographers hurriedly drinking coffee and eating pie. Then she propped her book against the sugar bowl and began slowly to eat, turning a page from time to time. This was an astonishing book. It was not fiction, but it was even more interesting. She read quickly, skipping the few words she did not understand, grasping their meaning by a kind of intuition, wondering why she had never before considered ideas of this kind.

She was so deeply absorbed that she merely felt, without realizing, the presence of some one hesitating at her elbow, some one who moved past her to

draw out a chair opposite her and set down his tray. She moved her coffee-cup to make room for it, and apologetically lifted the book from the sugar bowl, glancing across it to see Paul.

The shock was so great that for an instant she did not move or think. He stood motionless and stared at her with eyes wiped blank of any expression. Her cup rattled as the book dropped against it and the sound roused her. With the sensation of a desperate twist, like that of a falling cat righting itself in the air, she faced the situation.

"Why — Paul!" she said, and felt that the old name struck the wrong note. "How you startled me. But of course I'm very glad to see you again. Do sit down."

In his face she saw clearly his chagrin, his rage at himself for blundering into this awkwardness, his resolve to see it through. He put himself firmly into the chair and though his face and even his neck were red, there was the remembered determination in the set of his lips and the lift of his chin.

"I'm certainly surprised to see you," he said. "From all I've been hearing about you I had a notion you never ate in places like this any more. They tell me you're getting along fine. I'm mighty glad to hear it." With deliberation he dipped two level spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee and attacked the triangle of pie.

"Oh, I come in sometimes for a change," she said

lightly. "Yes, everything's fine with me. You're looking well, too."

There was an undeniable air of prosperity about him. His suit was tailor-made, and the hat on the hook above his head was a new gray felt of the latest shape. His face had changed very slightly, grown perhaps a bit fuller than she remembered, and the line of the jaw was squarer. But he looked at her with the same candid, straight gaze. Of course, she could not expect warmth in it.

"Well, I can't complain," he said. "Things are going pretty well. Slow, of course, but still they're coming."

"I'm awfully glad to hear it. Your mother's well?" The situation was fantastic and ghastly, but she would not escape from it until she could do so gracefully. She formed the next question in her mind while he answered that one.

"Do you often get up to the city?"

"Oh, now and then. I only come when I have to. It's too windy and too noisy to suit me. I just came up this morning to see a real-estate firm here about a house they've got in Ripley. I'm going back to-night."

"You're buying a house?" she cried in the tone of a child who sees a toy taken from it. Her anger at her lack of self-control was increased when she saw that he had misinterpreted her feeling.

"Just to rent," he said hastily. "I'm not think-

ing of — moving. Mother and I are satisfied where we are, and I expect it'll be some time before I get that place paid for. This other house—" It seemed to her unbearable that he should have two houses. But he went on doggedly, determined, she saw, to give no impression of a prosperity that was not his. "I expect you would n't think much of it. But there's a big real-estate firm up here that's going to boom Ripley, and I wanted to get in on as much of it as I could. They're buying up half the land in the county, and I had an option on a little piece they wanted, so I traded it in for this house. I figure I can fix it up some and make a good thing renting it pretty soon."

She saw that her momentary envy had been absurd. He might have two houses, but he was only one of the unnumbered customers of a big real-estate firm. At that moment her husband was dealing as an equal with the heads of such a firm. There was, of course, no comparison between the two men, and she made none. The stirring of remembered affection that she felt for Paul registered in her mind only a pensive realization of the decay of everything under the erosion of time.

She felt that she was managing the interview very well, and when she saw Paul resugaring his coffee from time to time, with the same deliberate measuring of two level spoonfuls, she felt a complex gratification. She told herself that she did not want Paul

to be still in love with her and unhappy, but there was a pleasure in seeing this evidence that his agitation was greater than hers. Being ashamed of the emotion did not kill it.

He told her, with an attempt to control his pride, that he was no longer with the railroad company. The man who "just about owned Ripley" had given him a better job. He was in charge of the ice-plant and lumber-yard now, and he was getting a hundred and fifty a month. He mentioned the figures diffidently, as one who does not desire to be boastful.

"That's fine!" she said, and thought that they paid nearly half that sum for rent, and that the very clothes she was wearing had cost more than his month's salary. She would have liked him to know these things, so that he might see how wonderful Bert was, though they did not have a house, and the cruelty of even thinking this made her hate herself. "Why, you're doing splendidly," she said. "I'm so glad!"

Paul, though conscientiously modest, agreed with her, and was deeply pleased by her applause. After an evident struggle between two opposing impulses, he began to ask questions about her. She found there was very little to tell him. Yes, she was having a very good time. Yes, she was very well. His admiration of her rosy color threw her into a strangling whirlpool of emotions, from which she rescued herself by the sardonic thought that her technic with

rouge had improved since their last meeting. She told him vaguely that business was fine, and that they had a lovely apartment on Bush Street.

There was nothing else to tell about herself, and both of them avoided directly mentioning her husband. She had never more keenly realized the emptiness of her life, except for Bert, than when she saw Paul's mind circling about it in an effort to find something there.

He turned at last, baffled, to the book beside her plate.

"Still keeping on reading, I see. I re—" he stopped short. They both remembered the small book-case with the glass doors that had stood in his mother's parlor in Masonville, and how they had lingered before it on the pretext that she was borrowing a book. "Something good?" he asked hastily. When she showed him the title, he repeated it doubtfully: "Pragmatism? Well, it's all right, I suppose. I don't go much for these Oriental notions about religion, myself."

"It is n't a religion, exactly," she said uncertainly. "It's a new way of looking at things. It's about truth—sort of. I mean, it says there is n't any, really—not absolutely, you know," she floundered on before the puzzled question in his eyes. "It says there is n't *absolute* truth—truth, you know, like a separate thing. Truth's only a sort of quality, like—well, like beauty, and it be-

longs to a thing if the thing works out right. I've got it clear in my head, but I don't express it very well, I know."

"I don't see any sense to it, myself," he commented. "Truth is just simply truth, that's all, and it's up to us to tell it all the time."

She knew that an attempt to explain further would fail, and she felt that her mind had a wider range than his; but she had an impression of his standing sure-footed and firm on the rock of his simple convictions, and she saw that his whole life was as secure and stable as hers was insecure and precarious. She felt about that as she did about his house, envying him something which she knew was not as valuable as her own possessions.

A strange pang — a pain she could not understand — struck her when he stopped at the cashier's grating and paid her check with his own in the most matter-of-fact way.

They parted at the door of the lunch-room; for seeing his hesitation she said brightly:

"Well, good-by. I'm going the other way." She held out her hand, and when he took it she added quickly, "I'm so glad to have seen you looking so well and happy."

"I'm not so blamed happy," he retorted gruffly, as if her words jarred the exclamation from him. He covered it instantly with a heavy, "So'm I — I'm glad you are. Good-by."

That exclamation remained in her mind, repeating itself at intervals like an echo. She had been more deeply stirred than she had realized. Fragments of old emotions, unrealized hopes, unsatisfied longings, rose in her, to be replaced by others, to sink, and come back again. "I'm not so blamed happy." It might have meant anything or nothing. She wondered what her life would be if she were living in a little house in Ripley with him, and rejected the picture, and considered it again.

Looking back, she saw all the turnings that had taken her from the road to a life like that — the road that she had once unquestioningly supposed that she would take. If she had stayed at home in Masonville, if she had given up the struggle in Sacramento; if she had been able to live in San Francisco with nothing to fill her days but work and loneliness — she saw as a series of merest chances the steps which had brought her at last to Bert.

One could not have everything. She had him. He was not a man who would work slowly, day by day, toward a petty job and a small house bought on the instalment plan. He was brilliant, clever, daring. He would one day do great things, and she must help him by giving him all her love and faith and trust. Suddenly it appeared monstrous that she should be struggling against him, troubling him with her commonplace desires for a common-

place thing like a home, at the very moment when he needed all his wit and skill to handle a big deal. She was ashamed of the thoughts with which she had been playing; they seemed to her an infidelity of the spirit.

CHAPTER XII

BERT was not in the apartment when she reached it; she knew her disappointment was irrational, for she had told herself he would not be there. However, he might telephone. She curled up in the big chair by the window, the book in her lap, and read with a continual consciousness of waiting. She felt that his coming or the sound of his voice would rescue her from something within herself.

At six o'clock she told herself that he would telephone within an hour. Experience had taught her that this way of measuring time helped it to pass more quickly. With determined effort she concentrated her attention upon her book, shutting out voices that clamored heart-shaking things to her. At seven o'clock she was walking up and down the living-room, despising herself, telling herself that nothing had happened, that he did these things only to show her his hold on her, that at any moment now his message would come.

For another hour she thought of many things she might have done differently. She might have walked past the office of Clark & Hayward, meeting him as if by accident when he came out. But that

might have annoyed him. She might have gone to some of the cafés for tea on the chance of meeting him there. But there were so many cafés! He must be dining in one of them now, and she could not know which one. She could not know who might be dining with him.

"Helen Davies Kennedy, stop it! Stop it!" she said aloud. She was a little quieter then, walking to the window, and standing there, gazing down at the street. Her heart beat suffocatingly at the sight of each machine that passed; she thought, until it went by, that he might be in it.

It was the old agony again, and weariness and contempt for herself were mingled with her pain. So many times she had waited, as she was waiting now, and always he had come back to her, laughing at her hysteria. Why could she not learn to bear it more easily? She might have to wait until midnight, until later than midnight. She set her teeth.

The sudden peal of the telephone bell in the dark room startled a smothered cry from her. She ran, stumbling against the table, and the receiver shook at her ear; but her voice was steady and pleasant.

"Yes?"

"Helen? Bert. I'm going south to-night on the Lark. Pack my suitcases and ship 'em express to Bakersfield, will you?"

"What? Yes, yes. Right away. Are you — will you — be gone long?"

His voice was going on, jubilant:

"Trust your Uncle Dudley to put it over! D'you know what I got from the tightest firm in town? Unlimited letter of credit! Get that 'unlimited'?"

"Oh Bert!"

"It's the biggest land proposition ever put out in the West! Ripley Farmland Acres! I'm going to put them on the map in letters a mile high! Believe me, I'm going to wake things up! There's half a million in it for me if it's handled right, and, believe me, I'm some little handler!"

"I know you are! O Bert, how splendid!"

"All right. Get the suitcases off early — here's my train. By-by!"

"Wait a minute — when're you coming back? Can't I come, too?"

"Not yet. I'll let you know. Oh, d'you want some money?"

"Well — I have n't got much — but that is n't —"

"Send you a check. From now on I'm made of money — so long —"

"Bert dear —" she cried, against the click of a closed receiver. Then with a long, relaxing sigh she slowly put down the telephone. After a moment she went into the bedroom, switched on the lights, and began to pack shirts and collars into his bags. She was smiling, because happiness and

hope had come back to her ; but her hands shook, for she was exhausted.

It was thirty-two days before she heard from him again. A post-dated check for a hundred dollars, crushed into an envelope and mailed on the train, had come back to her, and that was all. But she assured herself that he was too busy to write. The month went by slowly, but it was not unbearably dreary, for she was able to keep uneasy doubts in check, and to live over in her memory many happy hours with him. She planned, too, the details of the house they would have if this time he really did make a great deal of money. He would give her a house, she knew, whenever he could do it easily and carelessly.

When the telephone awakened her one night at midnight her first thought was that he had come back. She was struggling into a negligée and snatching a fresh lace cap from a drawer when it rang again and undeceived her.

Long distance from Coalinga had a call for her and wished her to reverse charges. She repeated the name uncertainly, and the voice repeated : " Call from Mr. Kennedy in Coalinga — "

" Oh, yes, yes ! Yes. I 'll pay for it. Yes, it 's O. K. " She waited nervously in the darkness until his voice came faintly to her.

" Hello, Helen ! Bert. Listen. Have you got any money ? "

"About thirty dollars."

"Well, listen, Helen. Wire me twenty, will you? I've got to have it right away."

"Of course. Very first thing in the morning. Are you all right?"

"Am I all right? Good God, Helen! do you think anybody's all right when he has n't got any money? We've just got into this rotten burg; been driving all day long and half the night across a desert hotter than the hinges of the main gate, and not a drink for a hundred and forty—" His voice blurred into a buzzing on the wire, and she caught disconnected words: "Skinflints — over on me — they've got another guess — piker stunt —"

She reiterated loudly that she would send the money, and heard central relaying the words. Nothing more came over the wire, though she rattled the receiver. At last she went back to bed, to lie awake till dawn came.

She was waiting at the telegraph-office when the money-order department opened. After she had sent the twenty dollars she tried to drink a cup of coffee, and walked quickly back to the apartment. She felt that she should be able to think of something to do, some action she could take which would help Bert, and many wild schemes rushed through her feverish brain. But she knew that she could do nothing but wait.

The telephone bell was ringing when she reached

her door. It seemed an eternity before she could reach it. Again she assured central that she would pay the charges, and heard his voice. He wanted to know why she had not sent the money, then when she had sent it, then why it had not arrived. He talked a great deal, impatiently, and she saw that his high-strung temperament had been excited to a frenzy by disasters which in her ignorance of business she could not know. Her heart ached with a passion of sympathy and love; she was torn by her inability to help him.

Half an hour later he called again, and demanded the same explanations. Then suddenly he interrupted her, and told her to come to Coalinga. It was a rotten hole, he repeated, and he wanted her.

That he should want her was almost too much happiness, but she tried to be cool and reasonable about it. She pointed out that she had just paid a month's rent, that she had only ten dollars, that it might be wiser, she might be less a burden to him, if she stayed in San Francisco. She would make the ten dollars last a month, and that would give him time — He interrupted her savagely. He wanted her. Was she coming or was she throwing him down? Thought he could n't support her, did she? He always had done it, had n't he? Where she'd get this sudden notion he was no good? He could tell her Gilbert Kennedy was n't done for yet. not by a damned sight. Was she coming or —

"Oh, yes! yes! yes! I'll come right away!" she cried.

While she was packing, she wished that she had something to pawn. She would have braved a pawnbroker's shop herself. But the diamond ring had gone when the Guatemala rubber plantation failed; her other jewels were paste or semi-precious stones; her furs were too old to bring anything. She could take Bert nothing but her courage and her faith.

She found that her ticket cost nine dollars and ninety cents. When she reached Coalinga, after a long restless night on the train and a two-hours' careful toilet in the swaying dressing-room, she gave the porter the remaining dime. It was a gesture of confidence in Bert and in the future. She was going to him with a high spirit, matching his reckless daring with her own.

He was not on the platform. When the train had gone she still waited a few minutes, looking at a row of one-story ramshackle buildings which paralleled the single track. Obviously they were all saloons. A few loungers stared at her from the sagging board sidewalk. She turned her head, to see on either side the far level stretches of a desert broken only by dirty splashes of sage-brush. The whole scene seemed curiously small under a high gray sky quivering with blinding heat.

She picked up her bags and walked across the

street in a white glare of sunlight. A heavy, sickening smell rose in hot waves from the oiled road. She felt ill. But she knew that it would be a simple matter to find Bert in a town so small. He would be at the best hotel.

She found it easily, a two-story building of cream plaster which rose conspicuously on the one main street. There was coolness and shade in the wide clean lobby, and the clerk told her at once that Bert was there. He told her where to find the room on the second floor.

Her heart fluttered when she tapped on the panels and heard Bert call, "Come in!" She dropped her bags and rushed into a dimness thick with the smoke of cigars. The room seemed full of men, but when the first flurry of greetings and introductions were over and she was sitting on the edge of the bed beside Bert, she saw that there were only five.

They were all young and appeared at the moment very gloomy. Depression was in the air as thickly as the cigar smoke. She gathered from their bitter talk that they were land salesmen, that a campaign in Bakersfield had ended in some sudden disaster,—“blown up,” they said,—and that they found a miserable pleasure in repeating that Coal-inga was a “rotten territory.”

Bert, lounging against the heaped-up pillows on the bed, with a cigar in his hand and whisky and ice-

water at his elbow, let them talk until it seemed that despondency could not be more blacker, then suddenly sitting up, he poured upon them a flood of tingling words. His eyes glowed, his face was vividly keen and alive, and his magnetic charm played upon them like a tangible force. Helen, sitting silent, listening to phrases which meant nothing to her, thrilled with pride while she watched him handle these men, awakening sparks in the dead ashes of their enthusiasm, firing them, giving them something of his own irresistible confidence in himself.

"I tell you fellows this thing's going to go. It's going to go big. There's thousands of dollars in it, and every man that sticks is going to be rolling in velvet. Get out if you want to; if you're pikers, beat it. I don't need you. I'm going to bring into this territory the livest bunch of salesmen that ever came home with the bacon. But I don't want any pikers in my game. If you're going to lay down on me, do it now, and get out."

They assured him that they were with him. The most reluctant wanted to know something about details, there was some talk of percentage and agreements. Bert slashed at him with cutting words, and the others bore him down with their aroused enthusiasm. Then Bert offered to buy drinks, and they all went out together in a jovial crowd.

Helen was left alone, to realize afresh her hus-

band's power, and to reflect on her own smallness and stupidity. She stifled a nagging little worry about Bert's drinking. She always wished he would not do it, but she knew it was a masculine habit which she did not understand because she was a woman. After all, men accomplished the big things, and they must be allowed to do them in their own way.

She opened the windows, but letting out the smoke let in a stifling heat and the sickening smell of crude oil. She closed them again and reduced the confusion of the room to orderliness, smoothing the bed, gathering up armfuls of scattered papers and unpacking her bags. When Bert came back a few hours later she was reading with interest a pile of literature about Ripley Farmland Acres.

He came in exuberantly, and as she ran toward him he tossed into the air a handful of clinking gold coins. They fell around her and scattered rolling on the floor. "Trust your Uncle Dudley to put one over!" he cried. "Pick 'em up! They're yours!"

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" she gasped, between laughter and the tears that now she could no longer control. Her arms were around his neck, and she did not mind his laughing at her, though she controlled herself quickly before his amusement could change to annoyance. "I knew you'd do it!" she said.

It was a long time before she remembered the money. Then, gathering it up, she was astonished to find nearly a hundred dollars. He laughed at her again when she asked him how he had got it. It was all right. He'd got it, hadn't he? But he told her not to pay for her meals in the dining-room, to sign the checks instead, and from this she deduced that his business difficulties were not yet entirely overcome. She put the money in her purse, resolving to save it.

She discovered that he now owned a large green automobile. Apparently he had bought it in Bak-ersfield, for it had been some months since he had sold the gray one. In the afternoon they drove out to the oil leases, and she sat in the machine while the salesmen scattered to look for land buyers.

The novelty of the scene was sufficient occupation for her. Low hills of yellow sand, shimmering in glassy heat-waves, were covered with innumerable derricks, which in the distance looked like a weird forest without leaf or shade and near at hand suggested to her grotesque creatures animated by unnatural life, their long necks moving up and down with a chugging sound. There were huddles of little houses, patchworks of boards and canvas, and now and then she saw faded women in calico dresses, or a child sitting half naked and gasping in the hot shadows. She felt that she was in a foreign land, and the far level desert stretching into a haze

of blue on the eastern sky-line seemed like a sea between her and all that she had known.

The salesmen were morose when they returned to the machine, and Bert's enthusiasm was forced. "There's millions of dollars a year pouring out of these wells," he declared. "We're going to get ours, boys, believe me!" But they did not respond, and Helen felt an increasing tension while they drove back to town through a blue twilight. She thought with relief of the gold pieces in her purse.

After supper Bert sent her to their room, and she lay in her nightgown on sheets that were hot to the touch, and panted while she read of Ripley Farmland Acres. The literature was reassuring; it seemed to her that any one would buy land so good on such astonishingly low terms. But her uneasiness increased like an intolerable tightening of the nerves, and her enforced inaction in this crisis that she did not understand tortured her. It occurred to her that she was still able to telegraph, and until she dismissed the thought as unfair to Bert she was tantalized by a wild idea of once more having some control of her fate.

It was nearly midnight when he came in, and she saw that any questions would drive him into a fury of irritated nerves. In the morning, she thought, he would be in a more approachable mood. But when she awakened in the dawn he was gone.

She did not see him until nearly noon. After sitting for some time in the lobby and exploring as much of the sleepy town as she could without losing sight of the hotel entrance to which he might come, she had returned to the row of chairs beside it and was sitting there when he appeared in the green automobile.

She ran to the curb. He was flushed, his eyes were very bright, and while he introduced her to a man and woman in the tonneau, she heard in his voice the note she had learned to meet with instant alertness. He told her smoothly that Mr. and Mrs. Andrews were interested in Ripley Farmland Acres; he was driving them over to look at the proposition. She leaned across a pile of luggage to shake hands with them and talked engagingly to the woman, but she did not miss Bert's slightest movement or change of expression.

When he asked her to get his driving gloves she knew that he would follow her, and on the stairs she gripped the banister with a hand whose quivering she could not stop. She was not afraid of Bert in this mood, but she knew that it threatened an explosion of nervous temper as sufficient atmospheric tension threatens lightning. He was at the door of their room before she had closed it.

"Where's that money?"

"Right here." She hesitated, opening her purse.

"Bert — it's all we have, is n't it?"

"What difference does that make? It is n't all I'm going to have."

"Listen just a minute. Did that woman tell you she was going to buy land?"

"Good Lord, do I have to stand here and talk? They're waiting. Give me that money."

"But Bert. She's taking another hat with her. She's got it in a bag, and she's got two suitcases, and she—the way she looks—I believe she's just going somewhere and getting you to take her in the machine. And—please let me finish—if it's all the money we have don't you think—"

She knew that his outburst of anger was her own fault. He was nervous and overwrought; she should have soothed him, agreed with him in anything, in everything. But there had been no time. Shaken as she was by his words, she clung to her opinion, even tried to express it again. She felt that their last hold on security was the money in her purse, and she saw him losing it in a hopeless effort. Against his experience and authority she could offer only an impression, and the absurdity of talking about a hatsack in a woman's hand. The futility of such weapons increased her desperation. His scorn ended in rage. "Are you going to give me that money?"

Tears she would not shed blinded her. Her fingers fumbled with the fastening of the purse. The coins slid out and scattered on the floor. He picked

them up, and the slamming of the door told her he was gone.

She no longer tried to hold her self-control. When it came back to her it came slowly, as skies clear after a storm. Her body was exhausted with sobs and her face was swollen and sodden, but she felt a great relief. The glare of sunlight on the drawn shades and the stifling heat told her that it was late in the afternoon. She undressed wearily, bathed her face with cool water and, lying down again, was engulfed in the pleasant darkness of sleep.

The next day and the next passed with a slowness that was like a deliberate refinement of cruelty. She felt that time itself was malicious, prolonging her suspense. The young salesmen shared it with her. They had telegraphed friends and families and were awaiting money with which to get out of town. One by one they were released and departed joyfully. Five days passed. Six. Seven.

She would have telegraphed to Clark & Hayward, but she had no money for the telegram. She would have found work if there had been any that she could do. The manager of the small telegraph-office was the only operator. In the little town there were a few stores, already supplied with clerks, a couple of boarding-houses on Whiskey Row, and scores of pretty little houses in which obviously no servants were employed. The local paper carried

half a dozen "help wanted" advertisements for stenographers and cooks on the oil-leases. She did not know stenography, and she did not have the ability to cook for twenty or forty hungry men.

A bill in her box at the end of the week told her that her room was costing three dollars a day, and she dared not precipitate inquiry by asking for a cheaper one. She was appalled by the prices of the bill-of-fare, and ate sparingly, signing the checks, however, with a careless scrawl and a confident smile at the waitress.

She was coming from the dining-room on the evening of the seventh day when the manager of the hotel, somewhat embarrassed, asked her not to sign any more checks for meals. It was a new rule of the house, he said. She smiled at him, too, and agreed easily. "Why, certainly!" Altering her intention of going up-stairs, she walked into the lobby and sat relaxed in a chair, glancing with an appearance of interest at a newspaper.

So it happened that she saw the item in the middle of the column, which at last gave her news of Bert.

BERT KENNEDY SOUGHT ON BAD CHECK CHARGE

Charging Gilbert H. Kennedy, well-known along the city's joy zones, with cashing a bogus check for a hundred dollars on the Metropolitan National Bank, Judge C. K.

Washburne yesterday issued a warrant for the arrest of the young man on a felony charge. The police search for Kennedy and his young wife, a former candy-store girl, has so far proved fruitless. Interviewed at his residence in Los Angeles last night, former Judge G. H. Kennedy, father of the missing man, controller of the Central Trust Company until his indictment some years ago for mis-handling its funds, denied knowledge of his son's whereabouts, saying that he had not been on good terms with his son for several years.

After some time she was able to rise and walk quite steadily across the lobby. Her hand on the banister kept her from stumbling very much while she went up-stairs. There was darkness in her room, and it covered her like a shield. She stood straight and still, one hand pressing against the wall.

It was Saturday night, and in the happy custom of the oil fields a block of the oiled street had been roped off for dancing. Already the musicians were tuning their instruments. Impatient drillers and tool-dressers, with their best girls, were cheering their efforts with bantering applause. The ropes were giving way before the pressure of the holiday crowd in a tumult of shouts and laughter.

Suddenly, with a rollicking swing, the band began to play. The tune rose gaily through the hot, still night, and beneath it ran a rustling undertone, the shuffling of many dancing feet. Below her

window the pavement was a swirl of movement and color. Her body relaxed slowly, letting her down into a crumpled heap, and she lay against the window-sill with her face hidden in the circle of her arms.

CHAPTER XIII

MORNING came like a change in an interminable delirium. Light poured in through the open window, and the smothering heat of the night gave way to the burning heat of the day. Helen sat up on the tumbled bed, pressing her palms against her forehead, and tried to think.

The realization of her own position did not rouse any emotion. Her mind stated the situation baldly and she looked at it with impersonal detachment. It seemed a curious fact that she should be in a hotel in the oil fields, without money, with no way of getting food, with no means of leaving the place, owing bills that she could not pay.

"Odd I'm not more excited," she said, and in the same instant forgot about it.

The thought of Bert did not hurt her any more, either. She felt it as a blow on a spot numbed by an anesthetic. But slowly, out of the chaos in her brain, there emerged one thought. She must do something to help him.

She did not need to tell herself that he had not meant to break the law; she knew that. She understood that he had meant to cover the check, that he was in danger because of some accident or mis-

calculation. In the saner daylight the succession of events that had led to this monstrous catastrophe became clear to her. Bert's over-wrought self-confidence when he brought her the gold, his feverish insistence that this was a good territory for land sales, his excitement when he rushed away, believing that he could sell a farm to that shifty-eyed woman with the hat-box, should have told her the situation.

Just because Bert had made that tiny mistake in judgment — A frenzy of protest rose in Helen, beating itself against the inexorable fact. It could not be true! It could not be true that so small an incident had brought such calamity. It was a nightmare. She would not believe it.

"O Bert! It is n't true! It is n't — it is n't — O Bert!" She stopped that in harsh self-contempt. It was true. "Get up and face it, you coward, you coward!"

She made herself rise, bathed her face and shoulders with cool water. The mirror showed her dull eyes and a mass of frowsy hair stuck through with hairpins. She took out the pins and began tugging at the snarls with a comb. Everything had become unreal; the solid walls about her, the voices coming up from the street below, impalpable things; she herself was least real of all, a shadow moving among shadows. But she must go on; she must do something.

Money. Bert needed money. It was the only thing that stood between him and unthinkable horrors of suffering and disgrace. His father would not help him. Her people could not. Somehow she must get money, a great deal of money.

She did not think out the idea; it was suddenly there in her mind. It was a chance, the only one. She stood at the window, looking out over the low roofs of Coalinga to the sand hills covered with derricks. There was money there. "Millions of dollars a year." She would take Bert's vacant place, sell the farm he had failed to sell, save him.

Her normal self was as lifeless as if it were in a trance, but beneath its dull weight a small clear brain worked as steadily as the ticking of a clock. It knew Ripley Farmland Acres; it recalled scraps of talk with the salesmen; it reminded her of photographs and blank forms and price lists. She dressed quickly, twisting her hair into a tidy knot, dashing talcum powder on her perspiring face and neck. From Bert's suitcase she hurriedly gathered a bunch of Ripley Farmland Acres literature and tucked it into a salesman's leather wallet. At the door she turned back to get a pencil.

The hotel was an empty place to her. If the idlers looked at her curiously over their waving fans when she went through the lobby she did not know it. It was like opening the door of an oven to meet the white glare of the street, but she walked

briskly into it. She knew where to find the livery-stable, and to the man who lounged from its hay-scented dimness to meet her she said crisply:

"I want a horse and buggy right away, please."

She waited on the worn boards of the driveway while he brought out a horse and backed it between the shafts. He remarked that it was a hot day; he inquired casually if she was going far. To the oil fields, she said. East or west? "East," she replied at a venture. "Oh, the Limited?" Yes, the Limited, she agreed. When she had climbed into the buggy and picked up the reins, it occurred to her to ask him what road to take.

When she had passed Whiskey Row the road ran straight before her, a black line of oiled sand drawn to a vanishing-point on the level desert. The horse trotted on with patient perseverance, the parched buggy rattled behind him, and she sat motionless with the reins in her hands. Around her the air quivered in great waves above the hot yellow sand; it rippled above the black road like the colorless vibrations on the lid of a stove. Far ahead she saw a small dot, which she supposed was the Limited. She would arouse herself when she reached it. Her brain was as motionless as her body, waiting.

Centuries went past her. She reached the dot, and found a watering-trough and an empty house. She unchecked the horse, who plunged his nose eag-

erly into the water. His sides were rimed with dried sweat, and with the drinking can she poured over him water, which almost instantly evaporated. She was sorry for him.

When she was in the buggy again and he was once more trotting patiently down the long road she found that she was looking at herself and him from some far distance, and finding it fantastic that one little animal should be sitting upright in a contrivance of wood and leather, while another little animal drew it industriously across a minute portion of the earth's surface. Her mind became motionless again, as though suspended in the quivering intensity of heat.

Hours later she saw that the road was winding over hills of sand. A few derricks were scattered upon them. She stopped at another watering-trough, and in the house beside it a faded woman, keeping the screen door hooked between them, told her that the Limited was four miles farther on. It did not occur to her to ask anything more. Her mind was set, like an alarm clock, for the Limited.

She drove into it at last. It was like a small part of a city, hacked off and set freakishly in a hollow of the sand hills. A dozen huge factory buildings faced a row of two-story bunkhouses. Loaded wagons clattered down the street between them, and electric power wires crisscrossed overhead. On the hillside was a group of small cot-

tages, their porches curtained with wilting vines. When she had tied the horse in the shade she stood for a moment, feeling all her courage and strength gathering within her. Then she went up the hill.

The screen doors of the cottages opened to her. She heard herself talking pleasantly, knew that she was smiling, and saw answering smiles. Tired women with lines in their sallow faces tipped the earthen ollas to give her a cool drink, pushed forward chairs for her. Brown-skinned children came shyly to her and touched her dress with sticky little fingers, laughing when she patted their cheeks and asked their names. Mothers showed her white little babies gasping in the heat, and she smiled over them, saying how pretty they were. Beneath it all she felt trapped and desperate.

It seemed to her that these women should have started at the sight of her as at a death's-head. There was nothing but friendly interest in their eyes, and their obliviousness gave her the comfort that darkness gives to a tortured animal. The hours were going by, relentlessly taking her one hope.

"Do you own any California land?"

"Yes." There would be a flicker of pride in tired eyes. "My husband just bought forty acres last week, near Merced. We're going to pay for it out of his wages, and have it to go to some day!"

"Is n't that fine! Oh yes, the land near Merced is very good land. Your husband's probably done

very well. Do you know any one else who's looking for a ranch?" No one did.

She kept on doggedly. When she left each cottage desperation clutched at her throat, and for an instant her breath stopped. But she was so hopeless that she could do nothing but clench her teeth and go on. At the next door she smiled again and her voice was pleasant. "Good afternoon! Might I ask you for a drink of water? Oh, thank you! Yes, isn't it hot? I'm selling farm land. Do you own a California ranch?"

It was when she approached the sixteenth cottage that the steps, the wilted vine, the little porch went out in blackness before her eyes. But she escaped the catastrophe, and almost at once saw them clearly again and felt the gate-post under her tight fingers. The taste in her mouth was blood. She had bitten her lips quite badly, but wiping her mouth with her handkerchief she found that it did not show. She was past caring for anything but finding some one who would buy land. All her powers of thinking had narrowed to that and were concentrated upon it like a strong light on a tiny spot.

In the twentieth cottage a woman said that she had heard that Mr. MacAdams, who worked in the boiler factory, had been to Fresno to buy land and had not bought it. Helen thanked her, and went to the boiler factory.

It was a large building, set high above the ground.

Circling it, she saw a man in overalls and undershirt lounging in a wide doorway above her. The roar and bang and whir of machinery behind him drowned her voice, and he stared at her as at an apparition. When he leaped down beside her and understood her demand to see Mr. MacAdams his expression of perplexity changed to a broad grin. MacAdams was in a boiler, he said, and still grinning, he climbed back to the door-step and drew her up by one arm into a huge room shaking with noise. He led her through crashing confusion and with his pipe-stem pointed out MacAdams.

MacAdams was crouching in a big cylinder of steel. In his hand he held a jerking riveter, and the boiler vibrated with its racket. His ears were stuffed with cotton, his eyes intent on his work. In mute show Helen thanked the man beside her and, going down on her hands and knees, crawled into the boiler. When she touched MacAdam's shoulder the riveter stopped.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "I heard you were interested in buying a ranch."

MacAdam's astonishment was profound. Mechanically he put a cold pipe in his mouth and took it out again. She saw that his mind was passive under the shock. Sitting back on her heels she opened the wallet and took out the pictures. Her voice sounded thin in her ears.

"There's lots of good land in California. I

would n't try to tell you, Mr. MacAdams, that ours is the only land a man can make money by buying. But what do you think of that alfalfa?"

She knew that it was alfalfa because the picture was so marked on the back. While he looked at it she studied him, and her life was blank except for his square Scotch face, the deliberate mind behind it, and her intensity of purpose.

She saw that she must not talk too much. His mind worked slowly, standing firmly at each point it reached. He must think he was making his own decisions. She must guide them by questions, not statements. He would be obstinate before definite statements. He was interested. He handed back the picture and asked a question. She answered it from the information in the advertising, and while she let him reach for another picture she thought quickly that she must not let him catch her in a lie. If he asked a question, the answer to which she did not know, she must say so. She was ready when it came.

"I don't know about that," she answered. "We can find out on the land if you want to go and look at it."

He was noncommittal. She let the point go. She felt that her life itself hung on his decisions, and she could do nothing to hasten them. Her hands were shaking, and she forced her body to relax. She unfolded a map of Ripley Farmland

Acres and pointed out the proposed railroad, the highway, the irrigation canals. She made him ask why part of the map was painted red, and then told him that those farms were sold. He was impressed. She folded the map a second too soon, leaving his interest unsatisfied.

He said he thought the proposition was worth looking into. She did not reply because she feared her voice would not be steady. In the pause he added that he would go over and look at it next Tuesday. She unfolded the map again. Her fingers were cold and stiff paper rattled between them, but the moment had come to test her success, and she would not deceive herself with false hopes.

She told him that she wanted to reserve a certain farm for him to see. She pointed it out at random. It was a very good piece, she said, the best piece unsold. She feared it would be sold before Tuesday. It could not be held unless he would pay a deposit on it. If he did not buy it the deposit would be returned.

"You don't want to waste your time, Mr. Mac-Adams, and neither do I." She felt the foundations of her self-control shaking, but she went on, looking at him squarely. "If this piece suits you, you will buy it, won't you?"

He would. If it suited him.

"Then please let me hold it until I can show it to you."

She waited while time ticked by slowly. Then he leaned sidewise, putting his hand in his pocket. "How much will I have to put up?"

When she backed out of the boiler five minutes later she had a twenty-dollar gold piece in her hand, and in her wallet was the yellow slip of paper with his signature on the dotted line. She stumbled down a lane between whirring machinery and dropped over a door-sill into the hot dust of the road. Her grip on herself was being shaken loose by unconquerable forces. She ran blindly to the buggy, and when she had somehow got into it she heard herself laughing through sobs in her throat. The horse trotted gladly toward Coalinga.

During the long drive across the desert she sat relaxed, too weary to be troubled or pleased by anything. The sun sank slowly beyond cool blue hills, and darkness crept down from them across the level miles of sand. A crescent of twinkling lights appeared on the lower slopes, where the western oil fields lay. Their lower rim was Coalinga, and she thought of bed and sleep. Clutching the gold piece, she reminded herself that she must eat. She must keep up her strength until she had sold that piece of land. She was too tired to face that effort now. The horse took her quickly past Whiskey Row and dashed to the livery-stable. She climbed down stiffly.

"Charge it." Her voice was stiff, too. "Clark

& Hayward, San Francisco. I'm representing them. H. D. Kennedy — I'm at the hotel."

Her body lagged as she drove it to the telegraph-office. She had written a telegram to Clark & Hayward before she realized that she dared not face any inquiry until after Tuesday. It occurred to her then that she had committed a crime. She was not certain what it was, but she thought it was obtaining money under false pretenses. She destroyed the telegram.

Later, when she laid the twenty-dollar gold piece on the check for her supper, it seemed to her that she was embezzling. A discrepancy vaguely irritated her. Could one obtain money under false pretenses and then embezzle it, too? She was too tired to be deeply concerned, but as an abstract question it annoyed her. The waitress looked at her sharply, and she wondered if she had said something about it. In a haze she got up the stairs and into bed.

CHAPTER XIV

VERY early Tuesday morning she drove to the Limited lease and got MacAdams. He looked formidable in his good clothes, and now that he had shaved the scrubby gray beard his chin had an even more obstinate line. She talked to him in an easy and friendly manner, without mentioning land. She must not waste her strength. There was a struggle before her and a menace behind. She had opened a livery-stable account against Clark & Hayward, who had never heard of her. The hotel, she knew, had let her go only because she took no baggage and had told the clerk casually that she would return to-morrow. The ticket to Ripley left five dollars of the twenty that belonged to MacAdams. And every moment that the sale was delayed might make it impossible to save Bert.

She sat smiling, listening to a tale of MacAdams' youth, when he was a sea-faring man.

The train reached Fresno, and MacAdam's gaze rested with joy on leafy orchards and vineyards and the cool green of alfalfa fields. She perceived the effect upon him of that refreshing contrast with the arid desert. Before they reached Ripley his

mind would be adjusted to a green land and ditches filled with running water. She had lost one point.

Her attention concentrated upon the thoughts slowly forming in his mind. Each word he spoke was an indication which she seized, considered, turned this way and that, searching for the roots of it, the implications growing from it.

The train was now running across a level plain covered with dry grass. Desolation was written upon it, and small unpainted houses stood here and there like periods at the end of sentences expressing the futility of human hope. She smiled above a sinking heart. They alighted at Ripley.

She had never seen the town before, and she saw now, with MacAdam's eyes, a yellow station, several big warehouses, a wide dusty road into which a street of two-story buildings ran at right angles. It was not much larger than Coalinga. She looked anxiously for the agent from Ripley Farmland Acres. That morning she had telegraphed him to meet her.

He came toward them and shook MacAdams' hand heartily. His name was Nichols. He had a consciously frank eye, and a smooth manner. He hustled them toward a dusty automobile whose sides were covered with canvas advertisements of the tract, and put MacAdams into the front seat beside him.

The machine, stirring a cloud of dust behind it,

rattled down the road between fields of dry stubble. She was ignored in the back seat. Nichols had taken the situation out of her hands, and she did not trust him. However, she could not trust herself, in the midst of her uncertainties and ignorance.

Nichols talked too much and too enthusiastically. She was astounded by his blindness. To her it seemed obvious that his words were of little importance. It was what MacAdams said that mattered. He gave MacAdams no silences in which to speak, and he appeared oblivious to the fact that MacAdams, gazing contemplatively at the sky-line, said nothing.

They drove beneath an elaborate plaster gateway into the tract. Seventy thousand acres of scorched dry grass lay before them, stretching unbroken to a misty level horizon. Over it was the great arch of a hot sky.

The machine carried them out into the waves of dry grass like the smallest of boats putting out into an ocean of aridity. When it stopped the sun poured its heat upon them and dust settled on perspiring hands and faces. Nichols unrolled a map and talked with galvanic enthusiasm. He talked incessantly and his phrases seemed worn threadbare by previous repetition. MacAdams said nothing, and Helen tried to devise a way to ask Nichols to stop talking.

His manner had dropped her outside of consid-

eration, save as a woman for whom automobile-doors must be opened. She saw that he felt her presence as a handicap in this affair between men; he apologized for saying "damn," and his apology conveyed resentment. He was losing her the sale, and she could not interfere. Her only hope of saving Bert rested on this sale. She controlled a rising desperation, and smiled at him.

They got out of the machine and waded through dusty grass, searching for surveyor's posts. Nichols pointed out the luxuriant growth of wild hay, asked MacAdams what he thought of that, continued without a pause to pour facts and figures upon him, heedless that he received no reply. They got into the car again and Nichols, pulling a pad of blanks from his pocket, tried to make MacAdams buy a certain piece of land then and there. He attacked obliquely, as if expecting to trap MacAdams into signing his name, and MacAdams answered as warily. "Well, I have seen worse. And I have seen better." He lighted his pipe and listened equably. He did not sign his name.

They drove further down the road and got out again. Helen caught Nichols' sleeve, and though he shook his arm impatiently she held him until MacAdams had walked some distance away and picked up a lump of soil.

"Leave him to me, please," she said.

"What do you know about the tract?"

"Just the same, I wish you'd give me a chance, please."

"Do you want to sell him or don't you? I know how to handle prospects."

They spoke quickly. Already MacAdams was turning his head.

"He's my prospect. And, by God! I'm going to sell him or lose him myself!" Her words shocked her like a thunderclap, but the shock steadied her. And Nichols' overthrow was complete. He said hardly a word when they reached MacAdams.

Almost in silence they examined that piece of land. MacAdams walked to each of its corners; he looked at the map for some time; he asked questions that Nichols answered briefly. He pulled up clumps of grass and looked at the earth on their roots. At last he walked back to the machine and leaned against it, lighting his pipe leisurely and looking out across the tract. The silence was palpitant. When she saw that he did not mean to break it, Helen asked, "Shall we look at another piece?"

"No. I've seen enough."

They got into the machine, and this time Nichols was alone on the front seat. They drove back toward the tract office. The sun was sinking, and a gray light lay over the empty fields. Helen felt herself part of it. She had lost, and nothing mattered any more. She had no more to lose. She

kept up the hopeless effort, but the approaching end was like the thought of rest to a struggling man who is drowning.

"What do you think of it, Mr. MacAdams?"

"Well — I have seen worse."

"Were you satisfied with the soil?"

"I would n't say anything against it."

"Would you like us to show you anything more of the water system?" What did she care about water systems!

"No."

The machine stopped before the tract office. They got out.

"Your man's no good. He's a looker, not a buyer," Nichols said to her in an aside.

"He has money and he wants land," she answered wearily.

"We'll have another go at him. But it's no use."

They went into the office. A smoky lamp stood on a desk littered with papers. MacAdams asked when the train left Ripley. Nichols told him that they had half an hour. They sat down, and Nichols, drawing his chair briskly to the desk, began.

"Now, Mr. MacAdams, in buying land you have to consider four things; land, water, climate, and markets. Our land —"

She could not go back to Coalinga with him. Probably there would be a warrant out for her ar-

rest. Oh, Bert! She had done her best, her very best. There were five dollars left, MacAdams's money. The whole thing was unreal. She was dreaming it.

Nichols was leading him up to the decision. MacAdams evaded it. Nichols began again. The blank form was out now and the fountain-pen ready.

"You like the piece, don't you? You're satisfied with it. You've found everything exactly as we represented it. It's the best buy on the tract. Well, now we'll just close it up."

MacAdams put his hands in his pockets and gazed at the map on the wall. "I'm not saying it is n't a good proposition."

Nichols began again. Was forty acres more than MacAdams wanted to carry? MacAdams would not exactly say that. Would a change in the terms be more convenient for him? MacAdams had no fault to find with the terms. Did the question of getting the land into crop trouble him? No. Well, then they'd get down to the point. The payments on this piece would be—"I'll not be missing my train, Mr. Nichols?"

Patiently Nichols went back to the beginning. Land, water, transportation, and cli—Helen could endure it no longer. One straight question would end it, would leave her facing certainty. She leaned forward and heard her own voice.

"Mr. MacAdams, you came to look at this land. You've looked at it. Do you want it?"

There was one startled, arrested gesture from Nichols. Then they remained motionless. The clock ticked loudly. Slowly MacAdams leaned back in his chair, straightened one leg, put his hand into his trouser pocket. He pulled out a grimy canvas bag.

"Yes. How much is the first payment?"

Deliberately he poured out on the desk a heap of golden coins. His stubby fingers extracted from the sack a wad of banknotes. Nichols was figuring madly. "Twelve hundred and seventy-three dollars and ninety cents," he announced in a shaking voice. MacAdams counted it out with exactness. He signed the contract. Nichols recounted the money and sealed it in an envelope. They rose.

Helen found herself stumbling against the side of the automobile, and felt Nichols squeezing her arm exultantly while he helped her into it. They had reached Ripley before she was able to think. Then she said that she would not return to Coalinga with MacAdams. They put him on the train.

She told Nichols that she wanted the money and the contract. She was going to take the next train to San Francisco. He objected. She argued through a haze, and her greatest difficulty was keeping her voice clear. But she held tenaciously to her purpose. Later she was on the train with the

contract and Nichols' check drawn to Clark & Hayward. She slept then and she slept in the taxicab on the way to a San Francisco hotel. She felt that she was asleep while she wrote her name on a register. She shut a door somehow behind a bell-boy, and at last could sleep undisturbed.

At nine o'clock the next morning she sat facing Mr. Clark across a big flat-topped desk. The contract and Nichols' check lay upon it.

Mr. Clark was a lean, shrewd-looking man about forty-five years old. He gave the impression of having kept his nerves at high tension for so many years that now he must strain them still tighter or relax altogether. This catastrophe he would have described as "losing his grip," and Helen felt that he lived in dread of it as the ultimate calamity. They had been talking for some time. Mr. Clark did not know where Bert was.

"My dear young lady, if we had known—" he said, and he stopped because it would be useless cruelty to complete the sentence. She thought that he would not be cruel unless there were some purpose to be achieved by it. There was even a kindly expression in his eyes at times.

He had explained clearly the situation in which her husband stood. Bert had persuaded the firm to give him an unlimited letter of credit. "That young man has a truly remarkable personality as a

salesman. He had us completely up in the air." He had proposed a gigantic selling campaign in the oil fields, and had so filled Clark & Hayward with his own enthusiasm that they had given him free rein.

The campaign had begun with every promise of astounding success. He had brought huge crowds to hear speakers sent down from the city; had gathered the names of thousands of "leads"; had imported fifty salesmen to canvass these names and bring in prospective buyers. Scores of these had been taken to the land and hundreds more were promised. Clark & Hayward contemplated hiring special trains for them.

But expenses were running into disquieting amounts for the actual results produced. Bert's checks poured in, and there began to be annoying rumors. The firm had begun a quiet investigation and had decided that he was spending too much of their money for personal expenses. Mr. Clark need not go into details. They had withdrawn the letter of credit and advised creditors in Bakersfield that the firm would no longer pay Mr. Kennedy's bills.

Mr. Kennedy had been informed of this. He had taken one of the firm's automobiles and disappeared. Later his check had come in. Clark & Hayward could not make that good, in addition to their other losses. The matter was now entirely out of their

hands. Mr. Clark's gesture placed it in the hands of inscrutable fate. He was more interested in the MacAdams sale and the unexpected appearance of Helen.

However, under her insistence he admitted that if the check were made good, Clark & Hayward could persuade the bank not to press the charge. Of course the warrant was out, but there were ways. He undertook to employ them for her, thoughtfully fingering Nichols' check. As to finding Bert — well, if the police had failed —

Helen asked how much Bert owed the firm. Mr. Clark told her that the sum was roughly five thousand dollars.

"In thirty days! Why — but — how is it possible?"

The amount included the cost of the automobile. The balance was Mr. Kennedy's personal expenses, not included in his arrangement with the firm. "Wine — ah —" Mr. Clark did not complete the trilogy. "Mr. Kennedy's — recreations were expensive." He would have the account itemized?

"Oh, no. It is n't necessary," said Helen. She would like to know only the exact sum. Mr. Clark pressed a button and asked the girl who answered it to look up the amount. "And, by the way, have this sale entered on the books, and a check made out to —?"

"H. D. Kennedy," said Helen.

"To H. D. Kennedy for the commissions. Seven and a half per cent."

"You were paying the other salesmen fifteen per cent.," said Helen.

That was by special arrangement. The ordinary salesmen in the field were paid seven and a half percent. Helen accepted the statement, being unable to refute it. She proposed that she should continue working for the firm on twelve and a half per cent., five per cent. to apply on the amount Bert owed them. Mr. Clark countered by offering her ten per cent. with the same arrangement. She was stubborn, and he yielded.

Helen came out of the office with three hundred dollars in her purse. She saw that the sun was shining, and as she walked through the crowded, familiar streets, passing flower-stands gay with color, feeling the cool breeze on her face, and seeing white clouds sailing over Twin Peaks, she felt that the bright day was mocking her. She understood why most suicides occur on days of sunshine.

Her life was beginning again, in a new way, among strange surroundings. She thought that it would be pleasant to be dead. One would be then as she was, numb, with no emotion, no interest, no concern for anything, and one would not have to move or think. "Cheer up! What's the use of wishing you were dead? You will be some day!"

she said to herself, with an effort to be humorous about it.

She thought that she would go out to the old apartment, pack the things she had left there, and take them with her. There was a hard bitterness in the thought that seemed almost sweet to her. To stand unmoved in that place where she had loved and suffered, to handle with uncaring hands those objects saturated with memories, would be a desecration of the past that would prove how utterly dead it was.

But she did not do it. She telephoned from the station, giving up the apartment and abandoning the personal belongings in it, leaving her address for the forwarding of mail. Then she shut her mind against memories and went back to the oil fields.

CHAPTER XV

DURING the weeks that followed she felt that she was moving in a dream, a shadow among unrealities. She drove across endless yellow plains that wavered in the heat. The lines were lax in her hands, her thoughts hardly moved. Again she had the sensation of gazing upon herself from an infinite distance, and she saw her whole life very small and far-away and unimportant.

It was odd that she should be where she was.— They would reach the watering-trough soon, and then the horse could drink.— The lake she saw rippling upon the burning sand was a mirage.— The horse was not interested in it. Horses must recognize water by smelling it.— The sunlight struck her hands, and they were turning browner. Complexions.— How strange that women cared about them.— How strange that any one cared about anything.

She reached an oil lease, and part of her brain awoke. It worked so smoothly that she felt an impersonal pride in it. It was concerned only with Ripley Farmland Acres. It was intent upon selling them. She tapped at screen doors, and knew she was being charming to tired women exhausted by

heat and babies. She skirted black pools of oil, climbed into derricks,— she had learned to call them “rigs,”— and heard herself talking easily to grimy men beside a swaying steel cable that went eternally up and down, up and down, in the well-shaft.

Selling land, she found, was not the difficult and intricate business she had supposed it to be. California's great estates, the huge Mexican grants of land now passed to the second and third generations, were breaking up under the pressure of growing population and increased land taxes; for the first time in the State's history the land-hunger of the poor man could be satisfied. Deep in the heart of every man imprisoned by those burning wastes of desert was the longing for a small bit of green earth, a home embowered in trees and vines. Her task was to find the workman who had saved enough money for the first payment, the ten or twenty per cent. of the purchase price asked by the subdividing land companies, and having found him to play upon his longing and his imagination until the pictures she painted meant more to him than his hoarded savings.

Half of his first payment was hers; one sale meant to her five hundred or even a thousand dollars. But while she talked she forgot this; she thought only of cool water flowing through fields of alfalfa, of cows knee-deep in grass beneath the shade of oaks, of the fertile earth blooming in harvests. The skill in handling another's thoughts before they took

form, learned in her life with Bert, enabled her to impress these pictures upon her hearer's mind so that they seemed his own, and grimy men in oil-soaked overalls, listening to her without combativeness because she was a woman and not to be taken seriously in business, felt that they must buy this land so temptingly described.

"I'm not really a land-salesman," she said, believing it. "I know I can't *sell* you this land. I can only tell you about it. And then if you want to buy it, you will. Won't you?" She found that she need only talk to a sufficient number of men to find one who would buy, and each sale brought her enough money to give her weeks in which to trudge from derrick to derrick searching for another buyer. All her life had narrowed to that search.

She accumulated a store of facts. Drillers were the best prospects because they earned good salaries and had steady, straight-thinking brains. Tool dressers were younger men, inclined to smartness, harder to handle. Pumpers were lonely and liked to talk; one must not waste too much time on them; they made small wages, but would give her "leads" to good prospects. A superintendent of a wild-cat lease was a good prospect; approach him with talk of a safe investment. Shallow fields were poor territory to work; jobs were longer and wages surer among the deeper wells. At a house ask for a drink of water; on a rig begin conversation by remarking,

"Getting pretty deep, is n't she?" She was known throughout the fields as the Real-Estate Lady.

At twilight she drove back to the hotel. Her khaki skirt was spattered with crude oil; her pongee waist showed streaks of grime where dust had dried in perspiration. There was sand in its folds, sand in her shoes, sand in her hair. Her body seemed as lifeless as her emotions, and her brain had stopped again. She would not dream to-night.

She smiled again at the hotel clerk. Yes, thank you, business was fine! There were letters, no word of Bert. Her mother wrote puzzled and anxious inquiries. What was Helen doing in Coalinga? Was something wrong? What was her husband doing? Mrs. Updike was telling that she had seen in the paper — Helen folded the pages. There were a couple of thin envelopes from Clark & Hayward, announcements of sales. Farm 406 — J. D. Hutchinson; Farms 915-917 — H. D. Kennedy.

It was good to be in bed, feeling unconsciousness creeping over her like dark, cool water, lapping higher and higher.

On her third trip to the land with buyers she met Paul's mother on the main street in Ripley. Mrs. Masters appeared competent and self-assured, walking briskly from a butcher-shop with some packages on her arm. She was bareheaded, carrying a parasol above her smooth, gray hair. Small as she was, there was something formidable in the lines of her

stocky figure and in the crispness of her stiff white shirtwaist. She looked at Helen with shrewd, interested eyes, and Helen realized that her hair was untidy, that there was dust on her shoes and on her blue serge suit. It was dust from the tract where she had just made another sale. Helen supposed there was dust on her face, too, when she perceived Mrs. Masters' eyes fixed so intently upon it.

They shook hands and spoke of the heat. Helen explained that she was selling land. She had just put one buyer on the Coalinga train and was waiting in Ripley for another man to meet her next day.

Mrs. Masters asked her to supper. A realization that meeting her might be embarrassing to Paul flickered through Helen's mind. She made some excuse, which Mrs. Masters overruled briskly. The strain of making a sale had left Helen without energy for resistance. She found they were walking down the street together, and she tried to rouse herself, as one struggles under an anesthetic. Mrs. Masters was the first person to whom she had tried to talk of anything but land, and the effort made her realize that she had been living in something like delirium.

They came to the cottage of which Paul had written her long ago. There was the little white-picket fence, the yard with rose-bushes in it, and the peach-tree. The graveled walk led to a tiny porch ornamented with wooden lace work, and through a

screen door they went into the parlor. The shades were drawn to keep the afternoon sun from the flowered Brussels carpet; the room was cool and dim and rose-scented. There was a crocheted mat on the oak center-table; cushions stood stiff and plump on the sofa; in one corner on an easel was an enlarged crayon portrait of Paul as a little boy.

There was not a detail of the room that Helen would not have changed, but as she looked at it tears came unexpectedly into her eyes. Something was here that she wanted, something that she had always missed. Currents of indefinable emotion rose in her. Her heart ached, and suddenly she was shaken by a sense of irretrievable loss.

"I — I'm very tired. You must forgive me — a very hard day. If I could — lie down a minute?" She could not stop the quivering of her lips. Mrs. Masters looked at her curiously, leading her to the bedroom and folding back an immaculate white spread. Helen, hating herself for her weakness, took off her hat and lay down. She would be all right in a minute; she was sorry to make so much trouble; Mrs. Masters must not bother; she was just a little tired.

She lay still, hearing the rattling of pans and sizzling of meat from the kitchen where Mrs. Masters was getting supper. Voices went by in the street; a dog barked joyously; a shrill whistling passed, accompanied by the rattle of a stick along the picket

fence. The sharp shadows of vine-leaves on the shade blurred into the twilight. Mrs. Masters was singing throatily, "Rock of Ages, cleft for me-e-e," while she set the table.

It was peace and security and rest. It was all that Helen did not have. The crudely papered walls enclosed a haven warmed by innumerable homely satisfactions. How sweet to have no care but the crispness of curtains, the folding away of linen, the baking of bread! She was an alien spirit here, with her aching head and heart, her disheveled hair and dusty shoes. A tear slipped down her cheek and spread into a damp splash on the white pillow.

She rose quickly, knowing that she must be stronger than the longing that shook her. The towel lying across the water pitcher was embroidered. She had always wanted embroidered towels, and she had made dozens of them. They had been left in the apartment. She bathed her face for a long time, dashing cool water on her eyelids.

The gate clicked, and Paul came whistling up the path. She stood clutching the towel, shivering with panic. Had she been mad that she had come to his house? Oh, for anything, anything, that would erase the past hour, and let her be anywhere but here! She heard his step on the porch, the bang of the screen door, his voice. "Hello, Mother? Supper ready?" And at the same time she saw unroll-

ing in her mind the picture of herself and Mrs. Masters on the sidewalk, heard the definite, polite excuse she might have made, saw herself going back to the hotel. She might easily have done that. Why was her life nothing but one blundering stupidity? She waited until his mother had time to tell him she was there. Then she went out, smiling, and met him.

His hand was warm and strong, closing around her cold fingers. He could not conceal the shock her whiteness and thinness gave him. He stammered something about it, and reddened. She saw that he felt he had referred to Bert and hurt her. Yes, she said lightly, the heat in the oil fields was better than banting. She rather liked it, though, really. And selling land was fascinating work. She found that she was clinging to his hand, drawing strength from it, as though she could not let go. She released her fingers quickly, hoping he had not noticed that second's delay, which meant nothing, nothing except that she was tired.

Mrs. Masters sat opposite her at the supper table, and with those polite, neutral eyes upon her it was hard to make conversation. She told the story of the MacAdams sale, making it humorous instead of tragic, trying to keep the talk away from Masonville and the people there. Paul spoke only to offer her food, to advise a small glass of his mother's blackberry cordial, and urge her to drink it, to suggest a cushion for her back. Tears threatened her

eyes again, and she conquered them with a laugh.

He went with her to the hotel. They walked in silence through moon-light and shadow, on the tree-bordered graveled sidewalk. Through lighted cottage windows Helen saw women clearing suppertables, men leaning back in easy chairs, with cigar and newspaper. They passed groups of girls, bare-headed, bare-armed, chattering in the moonlight. They spoke to Paul, and Helen felt their curious eyes upon her. Children were playing in the street; somewhere a baby wailed thinly, and farther away a piano tinkled.

"It's very lovely — all this," she said.

"It suits me," Paul replied. A little later he cleared his throat and said, "Helen — I — I'm sorry."

"I'm all right," she said quickly. It was almost as if she had slammed a door in his face, and she did not want to be rude to him. "I mean — it's good of you to care. I'd rather not talk about it."

"I — sometimes I think I could — I could commit murder!" he said thickly. "When I get to thinking —"

"Don't," she said. It was some time before he spoke again.

"Well, if there is ever any chance for me to do anything — I guess you know I'd be glad to."

She thanked him. When he left her at the door of the hotel she thanked him again, and he asked

her not to forget. If he could help her with her sales or the bank people or anything — She said she would surely let him know.

It was necessary to sleep, because she had another sale, a hard sale, to make next day. But she was unable to do it. Long after midnight she was lying awake, beating the pillows with clenched hands and biting her lips to keep from sobbing aloud. It seemed to her that all of life was torture and that she could no longer bear it.

CHAPTER XVI

RETURNING to Coalinga after the meeting with Paul, Helen ached with weariness. But she was alive again. The haze in which she had been existing was gone. She had risen early that morning, met her prospective land-buyer at the train, and made the sale. It had been doubly difficult, because the salesman for Alfalfa Tracts had met the train, too, and had almost taken the prospect from her, thinking it would be easy to do because she was only a woman. There was a hard triumph in her victory. The sale had reduced Bert's debt by another four hundred dollars, for she could afford now to turn in the entire commission against it.

The jolting of the train shook her relaxed body. Her cheek lay against the rough plush of the chair-back, for she was too tired to sit upright. Against the black square of the window her life arranged itself before her. How many times she had seen her life lying before her like a straight road, and had determined what its course and end would be! But she was older now, and wiser, and able to control her destiny.

She was a land salesman; she was a good sales-

man. This was the only thing she had saved from wreckage. At least she would succeed in this. She would make money; she would clear Bert's name, which was hers; she would buy a little house and make it beautiful. Perhaps Bert would want to come to it some day and she would have it waiting for him. She knew that she would never love him as she had loved him, for she saw him too clearly now, but she felt that their lives were inextricably bound together and that the tie between them was stronger because he needed her.

A letter from Clark & Hayward was in her box at the hotel. She tore it open quickly. As always, she had a wild thought that it contained news of Bert.

It said that the firm had given the oil fields territory to two other salesmen, Hutchinson and Monroe. The oil fields had proved a good territory, and it was too large for her to handle alone. She would turn over to Hutchinson and Monroe any leads she had not followed up. Doubtless she could make arrangements with them as to commissions; the firm hoped she would continue to work in the fields; Hutchinson and Monroe would expect an overage on her sales. Mr. Clark trusted they would work in harmony, and congratulated her on her success.

Her first astonishment changed quickly to a cold rage. Did they think they could take her territory

from her? Her territory, that she had developed herself, alone? After her days and weeks of hard, exhausting work, after her hours of talking, of distributing advertising, of making sales that would lead to more sales, they were coming in and taking the fruits of it away from her? Oh, she would fight!

The clerk told her that Hutchinson and Monroe had arrived that afternoon. She asked him to tell them that she would see them in the parlor at nine o'clock. There would be some slight advantage in making them come to her.

She was sitting in the small, stuffy room, her eyes fixed on a newspaper, when they came in. She felt hard, like a machine of steel, when she rose smiling to meet them.

Hutchinson was a tall, angular man, who moved in an easy-going way as if his body had nothing to do with the loose-fitting, gray clothes he wore. His eyes were frank, with a humorous expression in them, but though his face was lean there were deep lines from his nostrils to the corners of his mouth, and when he smiled, which he did easily, two more deep lines appeared in his cheeks.

Monroe was older, shorter, and stout. There was a smooth suavity in the effect of his neat, dapper person, his heavy gold watch-chain, his eye-glasses. He removed the glasses at intervals, as if from habit, wiping them with a silk handkerchief, and at

such moments his blandly paternal manner was accentuated. His eyes were set too close to the thin bridge of a nose that grew heavy at the tip, but his gray hair, the kindly patronage of his smile, and his soft, heavy voice were impressive.

Helen perceived that both of these men were good salesmen, and that their working together made a happy combination of opposite abilities. She saw herself opposing them, an inexperienced girl, and felt that the odds were overwhelmingly against her. But her determination to fight was not lessened.

Upright on a hard red davenport, she argued. The territory was hers. She had come into it first. She had developed it. She conceded their right to work there, but not the justice of their demanding part of the commissions she earned. The stale little room, filled with smells of heat-blistered varnish and dusty plush, became a battle-ground, and the high back of the davenport was a wall against which she stood at bay, confronting these men who had come to rob her.

But she was a woman. They did not let her forget it. They asked her permission to smoke, but not her consent to their business arrangements. They smiled at her arguments. After all, she was of the sex that must be humored. "My dear Mrs. Kennedy," said Monroe, gallantly. "Do let us be — ah — reasonable." Their courtesy was perfect. They would let her talk, since it pleased her to do

so. They would pick up her handkerchief when it slid from her lap. If it was her whim to work in the oil fields they would even indulge her in it. But she struck rock when she spoke of commissions. They would take two and a half per cent. from any sales she made.

It bored Hutchinson to point out the situation to her, but he did it, courteously. The firm had given them the territory. They were experienced salesmen. Naturally, Clark would not leave the territory in the hands of a young saleswoman, however charming personally. This was business, he gently explained. They would take two and a half per cent.

But she was a woman, and a charming one. Their tone implied that some slight sentimentality existed even in business. On sales they made from the leads she gave them, they would be generous. They would give her two and a half per cent. on those.

At this there was an interval when she sat smiling, speechless with rage. But she saw that the situation was hopeless. And every one of those names on her lists was a potential sale that would have paid her twelve and a half per cent. Anger surged up in her, almost beyond her control. However, there was no value in fighting when she was beaten.

They parted on the best of terms; she yielded every point; she would give them the leads in the

morning. She left them satisfied, thinking that women, while annoying, were not hard to handle.

In her room she stood shaken by her anger, by resentment and disgust. "Oh, beastly, beastly!" she said through clenched teeth. Striking her hand furiously against the edge of the dresser, she felt a physical pain that was a relief. She was able even to smile, ironically and wearily. This was the game she had to play, was it? Well — she had to play it.

She sat down and from her note-book copied a list of names and addresses. She chose only those of men to whom she had talked until convinced they were not land-buyers. In the morning she met Hutchinson in the lobby and gave him the list. She also insisted on a written agreement promising her two and a half per cent. commission on sales made to any of those men. Hutchinson gave it to her in patronizing good-humor.

Her buggy was waiting as usual in the shade of the hotel building. She felt grim satisfaction while she climbed into it and drove away toward the Limited lease. Hutchinson and Monroe would work industriously for some time before they perceived her duplicity, and she did not care for their opinion when they did discover it. Her own conscience was harder to handle, but she reflected that she would have to revise her standards of honesty. "My dear Mrs. Kennedy — ah — really — this is business." She hoped viciously that Monroe would see that she

had quite understood his words. She made another good sale before they stopped working on the worthless leads. Their attitude toward her changed abruptly.

"You certainly put one over on us," Hutchinson said without malice, and from that time they regarded her more as an equal than as a woman.

She was surprised to discover the bitterness developing in her.

Often in the evenings she walked in the quiet streets of little houses. Women were watering the lawns. A cool, sweet odor rose from refreshed grass and clumps of dripping flowers. Here and there a man leaned on the handle of a lawnmower, pipe in hand, talking to a neighbor. Children were playing in the twilight. Their young voices rose in happy shouts, and their feet pattered on the pavement. Hardness and bitterness vanished then, and Helen felt only an ache of wistfulness.

Later, lights bloomed through the deepening night, and the houses became dark masses framing squares of brightness. Vaguely beyond lace curtains Helen saw a woman swaying in a rocking-chair, a group of girls gathered at a piano. From dim porches mothers called the children to bed, and at an up-stairs window a shade came down like an eyelid. Helen felt alone and very lonely. She realized that she had been walking for a long time on

tired feet. But she did not want to go back to the hotel. She must remind herself that to-morrow would be another hard day.

In the hotel lobby she encountered Hutchinson or Monroe. Sharpness and hardness came back then. Monroe was able to handle the smart young tool-dressers; his bland paternal manner crushed them into a paralyzing sense of their youth and crudeness. He had got hold of a tool-dresser she had canvassed and hoped to sell. That meant a fight about the commissions, in which, of course, Hutchinson backed Monroe. She was still alone, but now she was among enemies.

"You've got to fight!" she told herself. "Are you going to let them put it over on you because you're a woman?" She lay awake thinking of selling arguments, talking points, ways of handling this prospect and that. Every sale brought her nearer to freedom. Some day she would have a house, with a big gray living-room, rose curtains, dozens of fine embroidered towels and tablecloths. She jerked her thoughts back to her work, angry at herself for letting them stray. But when, triumphantly, she closed the biggest sale yet,—sixty acres!—she celebrated by buying a linen lunch cloth stamped in a pattern of wild roses. She sat in her room in the evenings and embroidered it beautifully with fine even stitches.

When it was finished and laundered, she folded it

in tissue-paper and put it carefully away in one of the cheap, warped drawers of her bureau. Often she took it out, spreading the shining folds over the foot of her bed and looking at it with joy. It lay in her thoughts like a nucleus of a future contentment. But when her sister Mabel wrote from Masonville that she was going to marry the most wonderful man in the world, Bob Mason, "Old Man" Mason's grandson, who was head clerk of Robertson's store, the rose lunch cloth became something Helen could not keep. It was too keenly a symbol of all that she had missed, all that she wanted her little sister to have.

It went to Mabel in a rose-lined white box, with a letter and a check. Mabel's letter, palpitating with happiness and awkwardly triumphant over the splendid match,— "though of course it makes no difference, because I would marry him if he was the poorest man on earth, because money is n't everything, is it?"—had suggested that Helen come home for the wedding. But this would mean facing curiosity and sympathy and whispered discussion of her own tragedy, unforgotten, she knew, in Masonville. She replied that she could not get away from her work, and read Mabel's relief in the light regrets sprinkled through her radiant thanks for the check. "And the tablecloth is beautiful, too, one of the loveliest ones I have."

"After all, it is good to think that it matters so little to her," Helen thought quickly. But the letters had shown her the deep gulf time had dug between her and her girlhood, and the realization increased her loneliness. Her life went by. Business filled it, and it was empty.

One day late in the fall she came in early from the oil fields. Over the level yellow plains a sense of autumn had come, an indefinable change in the air. She felt another change, too, a vague foreboding, something altered and restless in the spirit of the men with whom she had talked. For a week she had not found a new prospect, and two sales had slipped through her fingers. She stopped at the hotel to get a newspaper and read the financial news. Then she walked down Main Street to the little office Hutchinson and Monroe had rented.

Hutchinson was there, leaning back in a chair, his feet crossed on the desk. He did not move when she came in, save to lift his eyes from the sporting page and knock the ashes from his cigar. He accepted her now as an equal in his own game, and there was respect in his voice. "Well, how's it coming?"

"I'm going to get out of the fields," she said. She pushed back her hat with a tired gesture and dropped into a chair.

"The hell you say! What's wrong?" Hutch-

inson set up, dropping the paper, and leaned forward on the desk. His interest was almost alarmed. She was making him money.

"Territory's gone bum. K. T. O. 25 will close down in another two weeks. The Limited's going to stop drilling. I'm going somewhere else."

"What! Who told you?"

"Nobody. I just doped it out."

He was relieved. He cajoled her. She was tired, he said. She was working in a streak of bad luck. Every salesman struck it sometime. Look at him; he had n't made a sale in four weeks, and he had n't lost his nerve. Cheer up!

She had been considering a plan, and she had chosen the moment to present it to him. The obliqueness of real-estate methods had astounded her. She had always supposed that men thought and acted in straight lines, logical lines. That, she had thought, gave them their superiority over irrational womankind. But the waste and blindness of business as she had seen it had altered her opinion of them. Her plan was logical, but she did not count upon its logic to impress Hutchinson. She reckoned on the emotional effect that would be produced by the truth of her prophecy. Letting that prophecy stand, she began to unfold her plan.

The big point in making a land sale was getting hold of a good prospect. That should not be done by personal canvassing. It was too wasteful of time

and energy. It should be done by advertising. Now Clark & Hayward's advertising was all "Whoop 'er up! Come on!" stuff. It made a bid for suckers. Hutchinson smiled, but she went on.

Men who would fall for that advertising were not of the class that had bank accounts. Hutchinson had lost a lot of money trying to sell the type of men who answered those advertisements. She mentioned incidents, and Hutchinson's smile faded.

She proposed a new kind of real-estate advertising; small type, reading matter, sensible, straightforward arguments. She was going into a settled farming community, where land values were high, and she was going to try out an advertising campaign for farmers. It had been a good farming year; farmers had money, and they had brains. She was going to offer them cheap land, and she was going to sell them.

She had the money to pay for the advertising, but she needed some one to work with her. She proposed that Hutchinson come in with her on a fifty-fifty basis. He could have his name on the door; he could make arrangements with the firm for the territory. They would hesitate to give it to her. But he knew she could sell land. Together they could make money.

Hutchinson did not take the proposition very seriously. She had not expected that he would. He thought about it, and grinned.

"I'd have to be mighty careful my wife did n't get wise!" he remarked.

"Cut that out!" she said in a voice that slashed. She unloosened her fury at him, at all men, and looked at him with blazing eyes. He stammered — he did n't mean — "When I talk business to you, don't forget that it's business," she said. She picked up her wallet of maps and left the office. As she did so she reflected that the scheme would work out.

Ten days later word ran through the oil fields that all the K. T. O. leases were letting out men. Hutchinson's inquiries showed that the Limited was not starting any new wells. Monroe, who had saved his money, announced that he would stop work for the winter. Hutchinson, remembering that Mrs. Kennedy had funds for an advertising campaign, decided that her proposition offered a shelter in time of storm.

They talked it over again, considering the details, and Hutchinson went to the city to see Clark. He got a small advance on commission, and the Santa Clara Valley territory.

On the train, leaving the oil fields for the last time, Helen looked back at the little station, the sand hills covered with black derricks, the wide, level desert, and felt that she was leaving behind her the chrysalis of the woman she had become.

CHAPTER XVII

ON a hot July afternoon three years later she drove a dusty car through the traffic on Santa Clara Street in San José, and stopped it at the curb. When she had jumped to the sidewalk she walked around the car and thoughtfully kicked a ragged tire with a stubby boot. The tire had gone flat on the Cupertino road, and it was on her mind that she had put too much air into the patched tube. For two miles she had been expecting to hear the explosion of another blow-out, and had been too weary to stop the car and unscrew the air valve.

“Darn thing’s rim-cut, anyway,” she said under her breath. “I’ll have to get a new one.” She dug her note-book and wallet from the mass of dusty literature in the tonneau and walked into the building.

Hutchinson was telephoning when she entered their office on the fourth floor. A curl of smoke rose from his cigar-end on the flat-topped desk and drifted through the big open window. There were dusty footprints on the ingrain rug, and the helter-skelter position of the chairs showed that prospects had come in during her absence. Hutchinson chuckled when he hung up the receiver.

"Ted's going to catch it when he gets home!" he remarked, picking up the cigar.

"Stalling his wife again?" Helen was running through her mail. "I suppose there is n't a man on earth who won't joyfully lie to another man's wife for him," she added, ripping an envelope.

"Well, Holy Mike! What would you tell her?"

Helen looked up quickly from the letter.

"I'd tell her the —" she began hotly, and stopped. "Oh, I don't know. I suppose he's got that red-headed girl out in the machine again? He makes me tired. If you ask me, I think we'd better get rid of him. That sort of thing does n't make us any sales."

There was silence while she ripped open the other letters and glanced through them. Her momentary anger subsided. She reflected that there were men on whom one could rely. Her thoughts returned to Paul as to a point of security. His appearance in San José a few months earlier had been like the sight of a cool spring in a desert. She had not realized the scorn for all men that had grown in her until she met him again and could not feel it for him.

She glanced from the window at the clock in the tower of the Bank of San José building. Half-past four. He would still be at the ice-plant. This thought, popping unexpectedly into her mind, startled her with the realization that all day she had been subconsciously dwelling on the fact that it was

the day on which he usually came to San Jose since his firm had acquired its interests there.

The clock suggested simultaneously another thought, and she snatched the telephone-receiver from its hook. "Am I too late for the afternoon delivery?" she anxiously asked the groceryman who answered the call. "Oh, thank you. Two heads of lettuce, a dozen eggs, half a pound of butter. How much are tomatoes? Well, send me a pound. Yes, H. D. Kennedy, 560 South Green Street. Thank you!" As the receiver clicked into place, she asked, "Any live ones to-day?"

"Six callers. Two good prospects and a couple that may work up into something," Hutchinson answered. "Say, the Seals are certainly handing it to the Tigers! Won in the fifth inning."

"That's good," she said absently. "Closed the Haas sale yet?"

"Oh, he's all right. Tied up solid." Hutchinson yawned. "How's your man?"

"Dated him for the land next Wednesday. He's live, but hard to handle. Taking him down in the machine."

"Machine all right?"

"Engine needs overhauling, and we've got to get a new rear tire and some tubes. Two blow-outs to-day. Time's too valuable to spend it jacking up cars in this heat. I'm all in. But I can nurse the engine along till I get back from this trip."

She felt that each sentence was a load she must lift with her voice. "I'm all in," she repeated. "Guess I'll call it a day."

However, she still sat relaxed in her chair, looking out at the quaint old red-brick buildings across the street. San José, she thought whimsically, was like a sturdy old geranium plant, woody-stemmed, whose roots were thick in every foot of the Santa Clara Valley. She felt an affection for the town, for the miles of orchard around it, interlaced with trolley-lines, for the thousands of bungalows on ranches no larger than gardens. Some day she would like to handle a sub-division of acre tracts, she thought, and build a hundred bungalows herself.

She brought her thoughts back to the Haas sale, and spoke of it tentatively. It was all right, Hutchinson assured her with some annoyance. The old man was tied up solid. He'd sign the final contract as soon as he got his money, and he had written for it. What did Helen want to crab about it for?

"I don't mean to be a crab," she smiled. "But — do you know the definition of a pessimist? He's a man who's lived too long with an optimist."

Hutchinson covered his bewilderment with a laugh.

"You know, I've often thought I'd look up that word. I see it every once in a while. Pessimist. But what's the use? You don't need words like that to sell land."

She had been stupid again, aiming over his head. He was right. You did n't need words like that to sell land. You did n't need any of the things she liked, to sell land. She was a fool. She was tired. But she returned to the Haas sale. The subject must be handled carefully, for Hutchinson was too good a salesman to offend, though he was lazy. Where was Haas's money? Hutchinson replied that it was banked in the old country, Germany.

"Germany! And he's written for it? For the love of —! You grab the machine and chase out there and make him cable. Pay for the cable. Send it yourself. Tell 'em to cable the money. Have n't you seen the papers?"

Hutchinson, surrounded by scattered sporting sheets, stared up at her in amazement.

"Don't you know Austria sent an ultimatum to Servia? Have n't you ever heard of the Balkan Wars? Don't you know if Russia — Good Lord, man! And you're letting that money lie in Germany waiting for a letter? Beat it out there. Make him cable. I'll pay for it myself. Good Lord, Hutchinson — a fifty acre sale! Don't stop to talk. The cable-office closes at six. Hurry! And look out for that rear left tire!" she opened the door to call after him.

The brief flurry of excitement had raised in her an exhilaration that vanished in a sense of futility and shame. "I'm getting so I swear like — like a land-

salesman!" she said to herself, straightening her hat before the mirror. There was a streak of dust on her nose, and she wiped it off with a towel, and tucked up straggling locks of hair. In the dark strand over one temple a few white lines shone like silver. "I'm wearing out," she said, looking at them and at her skin, tanned to a smooth brown. Nobody cared. Why should she carefully save herself? She shut the closet door on her mirrored reflection, locked the office door, and went home.

The small, brown bungalow looked at her with empty eyes. The locked front door and the dry leaves scattered from the rose-vines over the porch gave the place a deserted appearance. At all the other houses on the street the doors were open; children played on the lawns, wicker tables and rocking-chairs and carelessly dropped magazines made the porches homelike. There was pity in her rush of affection for the little house; she felt toward it as she might have felt toward an animal she loved, waiting in loneliness for her coming to make it happy.

The door opened wide into the small square hall, and in the stirred air a few rose petals drifted downward from the bowl of roses on the walnut table. She unlatched and swung back the casement windows in the living-room. Then she dropped her hat and purse among the cushions on the window-seat, and straightening her body to its full height, relaxed

again in a long, contented sigh. A weight slipped from her spirit. She was at home.

Her lingering glance caressed the rose-colored curtains rustling softly in the faint breeze, the flat cream walls, the brown rugs, the brick hearth on which piled sticks waited for a match. There was her wicker sewing-basket, and beyond it the crowded book shelves. Here was the quaint, walnut desk she had found at a second-hand store, and the big, manish chair with the brown leather cushions. It was all hers, her very own. She had made it. She was at home, and free. The silence around her was like cool water on a hot face.

In the white-tiled bathroom, with its yellow curtains, yellow bath rug, yellow-bordered fluffy bath-towels, she washed the last memory of the office from her. She reveled in the daintiness of sheer, hand-embroidered underwear, in the crispness of the white dress she slipped over her head. She put on her feet the most frivolous of slippers, with beaded toes and high heels.

"You're a sybarite, that's what you are! You're a beastly sensualist!" she laughed at herself in the mirror. "And you're leading a double life. 'Out, damned spot!'" she added, to the brown triangle of tan on her neck.

For an hour she was happy. Aproned in blue gingham she watered the lawn and hosed the last swirling leaf from the front porch. She said a word

or two about roses to the woman next door. They were not very friendly; all the women on that street looked at her across the gulf of uncomprehension between quiet, homekeeping women and the vague world of business. They did not quite know how to take her; they thought her odd. She felt that their lives were cozy and safe, but very small.

Then she went into the kitchen. She made a salad, broke the eggs for an omelet, debated with finger at her lip whether to make popovers. They were fun to make, because of the uncertainty about their popping, but somehow they were difficult to eat while one read. One could manage bread-and-butter sandwiches without lifting eyes from the page. Odd, that she should be lonely only while she ate. The moment she laid down her book at the table the silence of the house closed around her coldly.

She would not have said that she was waiting for anything, but an obscure suspense prolonged her hesitation over the trivial question. When the telephone-bell pealed startlingly through the stillness it was like an awaited summons, and she ran to answer it without doubting whose voice she would hear.

As always, there was some excuse for Paul's telephoning,— a message from his mother, a bit of news from Ripley Farmland Acres,— some negligible matter which she heard without listening, knowing that to both of them it was unimportant. The nickel

mouthpiece reflected an amused dimple in her cheek, and there was a lilt in her voice when she thanked him. She asked him to come to supper. His hesitation was a struggle with longing. She insisted, and when she hung up the receiver the house had suddenly become warmed and glowing.

She felt a new zest while she took her prettiest lunch cloth from its lavender-scented drawer and brought in a bunch of roses, stopping to tuck one in her belt. She felt, too, that she was pushing back into the depths of her mind many thoughts and emotions that struggled to emerge. She shut her eyes to them, and resisted blindly. It was better to see only the placid surface of the moment. She concentrated her attention upon the popovers, and the egg-beater was humming in her hands when she heard his step on the porch.

It was a quick, heavy step, masculine and determined, but always there was something boyishly eager in it.

She called to him through the open doors, and when he came in she gave him a floury hand, pushing a lock of hair back from her eyes with the back of it before she went on beating the popovers. He stood awkwardly about while she poured the mixture into the hot tins and quickly slid it into the oven, but she knew he enjoyed being there.

The table was set on the screened side porch. White passion flowers fluttered like moths among

the green leaves that curtained it, and in an open space a great, yellow rose tapped gently against the screen. The twilight was filled with a soft, orange glow; above the gray roofs half the sky was yellow and the small clouds were like flakes of shining gold.

There came over Helen the strange, uncanny sensation that sometime, somewhere, she had lived through this moment once before. She ignored it, smiling across the white cloth at Paul. She liked to see him sitting there, his square shoulders sturdy in the gray business suit, his lips firm, tight at the corners, his eyes a little stern, but straight-forward and honest. He gave an impression of solidity and permanence; one would always know where to find him.

"You're certainly some cook, Helen!" he said. The omelet was delicious, and the popovers a triumph. She ate only one, that he might have the others, and his enjoyment of them gave her a deep delight.

Across the little table a subtle current vibrated between them, intoxicating her, making her a little dizzy with emotions she would not analyze.

"I certainly am!" she laughed. "The cook-stove lost a genius when I became a real-estate lady." She was not blind to the shadow that crossed his face, but part of her intoxication was a perverseness that did not mind annoying him just a little bit.

"I hate to think about it," he said. His gravity

shattered the iridescent glamor, making her grave, too, and the prosaic atmosphere of the office and its problems surrounded her.

"Well, you may not have it to think about much longer. What do you think? Is there going to be real trouble in Europe?"

"How do you mean?"

"War?"

"Oh, I doubt it. Not in this day and age. We've got beyond that, I hope." His casual dismissal of the possibility was a relief to her, but not quite an assurance.

"I hope so." She stirred her coffee, thoughtfully watching the glimmer of the spoon in the golden-brown depths. "I'll be glad when it blows over. That Balkan situation — If Austria stands by her ultimatum, and Servia does pull Russia into it, there's Germany. I don't know much about world politics, but one thing's certain. If there is war, the bottom'll drop out of my business."

He was startled.

"I don't know what it's got to do with us over here."

"It has n't anything to do with you or your affairs. But farmers are the most cautious class on earth. The minute there is a real storm cloud in Europe every one of 'em'll draw in his money and sit on it. The land game's entirely a matter of psychology. Let the papers begin yelling, 'War!'

though it's eight thousand miles away, and every prospect I have will figure that good hard cash in hand is better than a mortgage with him on the wrong side of it. That means thumbs down for me. It's hard enough to keep up the office expenses and pay garage bills as it is."

Alarm was driven from his face by a chaos of emotions. He flushed darkly, his eyes on his plate. "You ought n't to have to be worrying about such things."

"Oh, I won't mind if it does happen," she said quickly. "In a way, I'd be glad. I'd be out of business anyway; I'd find something else to do. Nobody knows how I hate business — nothing but an exploiting of stupid people by people just a little less stupid."

She caught at the impersonality of the subject, trying to control the intoxication that rose in her again, fed by his silence, by the currents it set vibrating between them once more. She threw her words into it as if their hard-matter-of-factness would break a growing spell.

"Six-tenths of our business can be wiped out without doing any harm. A real-estate salesman has n't any real reason for existing. We're just a barrier between the land and the people who want it. We are n't needed a bit. The people would simply take the land if they were n't like horses, too stupid to know their own strength, letting us grow

fat on their labor. Hoffman, owning the land and making a hundred per cent. on its sale; Clark & Hayward, with their fifty per cent. expenses and commissions; me, with my fifteen per cent., and the salesman under me — we're just a lot of parasites living off the land without giving anything in return. Oh, don't think I don't know how useless these last three years —"

She knew he was not listening. Nothing she was saying set his cup chattering against the saucer as he put it down. The twilight was prolonged by the first radiance of a rising moon, and in the strange, silver-gray light the white passion flowers, the green spray of the pepper-tree on the lawn, took on an unearthly quality, like beauty in a dream. Her voice wavered into silence. Through a haze she became aware that he was about to speak. Her own words forestalled him, still pleasantly commonplace.

"It's getting dark, isn't it? Let's go in and light the lamps."

His footsteps followed her through the ghostly dimness of the house. The floor seemed far beneath her feet, and through her quivering emotions shot a gleam of amusement. She was feeling like a girl in her teens! Her hand sought the electric light-switch as it might have clutched at a life-line.

"Helen, wait a minute!" She started, stopped, her arm outstretched toward the wall. "I've got to say something."

The tortured determination of his voice told her that the coming moment could not be evaded. A cool, accustomed steadiness of nerves and brain rose to meet it. She crossed the room, and switched on the tiny desk-lamp, the golden-shaded light of which only warmed the dusk. But her opened lips made no sound; she indicated the big, leather chair only with a gesture, settling herself on the cushioned window-seat. He remained standing, his hands in his coat-pockets, his gaze on the fingers interlaced on her knees.

"You're a married woman."

A shock ran through her. She had worn those old bonds so long without feeling them that she had forgotten they were there. Why — why, she was herself, H. D. Kennedy, salesman, office-manager, householder.

His voice went on stubbornly, hoarse.

"I have n't got any right to talk this way. But, Helen, what are you going to do? Don't you see I've got to know? Don't you see I can't go on? It is n't fair." He faltered, dragging out the words as though by muscular effort. "It is n't fair to — him. Or me or you. Helen, if — if things do go to pieces, as you said — can't you see I'll — just have to be in a position to *do* something?"

The tremulous intoxication was gone. Her composed self-possession of the moment before seemed a cheap, smug attitude. She saw a naked, tortured

soul, and the stillness of the room was reflected in the stillness within her.

"What do you want me to do?" she said at last.

He walked to the cold hearth and stood looking down at the piled sticks. His voice, coming from the shadows, sounded as though muffled by them. "Tell me — do you still care about him?"

All the wasted love and broken hopes, the muddled, miserable tangle of living, swept over her, the suffering that had been buried by many days, the memories she had locked away and smothered, Bert, and all that he had been to her. And now she could not remember his face. She could not see him clearly in her mind; she did not know where he was. When had she thought of him last?

"No," she said.

"Then — can't you?"

"Divorce, you mean?"

Paul came back to her, and she saw that he was even more shaken than she. He spoke thickly, painfully. He had never thought that he would do such a thing. God knew, he said without irreverence, that he did not believe in divorce. Not usually. But in this case — He had never thought he could love another man's wife. He had tried not to. But she was so alone. And he had loved her long ago. She had not forgotten that? It had n't been easy to keep on all these years without her. And

then when she had been treated so, and he could n't do anything.

But it was n't altogether that. Not all unselfish. "I—I've wanted you so! You don't know how I've wanted you. Nobody ever seems to think that a man wants to be loved and have somebody caring just about him, somebody that's glad when he comes home, and that—that cares when he's blue. We—we are n't supposed to feel like that. But we do. I do—terribly. Not just 'somebody.' It's always been you I wanted. Nobody else. Oh, there were girls. I even tried to think that maybe—but somehow, none of them were you. I could n't help coming back."

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" she said, with tears on her cheeks.

Perhaps, after all, forgetting the past and the things that had been between them, they could come together again and be happy. But he was tortured by a dread of being unfair to Bert. If she did still care for him, if he had any rights.— "Of course he has rights. He's your—I never thought that I could talk like this to a woman who had n't any right to listen to me."

"Hush! Of course I have a right to listen to you. I have every right to do as I please with myself."

The tragedy that shook her was that it was true, that all the passion and beauty of her old love for

Bert was dead, lying like a corpse in her heart, never to be awakened and never utterly forgotten. "I will be free," she promised, knowing that she never would be. But in her deepest tenderness toward Paul she could shut her eyes to that.

The promise made him happy. Despite his doubts, his restless conscience not quite silenced, he was happy, and his happiness was reflected in her. Something of magic revived, making the moment glamorous. She need not think of the future; she need make no promises beyond that one. "I will be free." A year, a year at least. Then they would plan.

For the moment her tenderness enfolded him, who loved her so much, so much that she could never give him enough to repay him. It came to her in a clear flash of thought through one of their silences that the maternal quality in a woman's love is not so much due to the mother in the woman as to the child in the man.

"You dear!" she said.

He had to go at last. The morning train for Ripley, but he would write her every day. "And you'll see — about it — right away?"

"Yes, right away." The leaves of the rose-vines over the porch rustled softly; a scented petal floated down through the moonlight. "Good-by, dear."

"Good-by." He hesitated, holding her hand.

"Oh, Helen,—*sweetheart*—" Then, quickly, he went without kissing her.

She entered a house filled with a silence that turned to her many faces, and switching out the little lamp she sat a long time in the darkness, looking out at the moonlit lawn. She was tired. It was good to be alone in the stillness, not to think, but to feel herself slowly growing quiet and composed again around a quietly happy heart.

Something of the glow went with her to the office next morning, stayed with her all day, while she 'talked sub-soils, water-depths, prices, terms, while she answered her letters, wrote her next week's advertising, corrected proofs. The news in the papers was disquieting; it appeared that the cloud over Europe was growing blacker. How long would it be if war did come before its effects reached her territory, slowly cut off her sales? Ted Collin's bill for gasoline was out of all reason; there was a heated discussion in the office, telephone messages to Clark in San Francisco. Business details engulfed her.

On Wednesday she took her difficult prospect to the Sacramento lands in the machine. He was hard to handle; salesmen for other tracts had clouded the clear issue. She fell back on the old expedient of showing him all those other tracts herself, with a fair-seeming impartiality that damned them by indirection. There was no time for dreaming during

those hard three days; toiling over dusty fields with a soil-augur, skilfully countering objections before they took form, nursing an engine that coughed on three cylinders, dragging the man at last by sheer force of will power to the point of signing on the dotted line. She came exhausted into the Sacramento hotel late the third night, with no thought in her mind but a bath and bed.

Stopping at the telegraph counter to wire the firm that the sale was closed, she heard a remembered voice at her elbow, and turned.

"Mr. Monroe! You're up here too! How's it going?" She gave him a dust-grimed hand.

"Well, I'm not complaining, Mrs. Kennedy — not complaining. Just closed thirty-five acres. And how are you? Fortune smiling, I hope?"

"Just got in from the tract. Sold a couple of twenty-acre pieces."

"Well, well, is that so? Fine work, fine work! Keep it up. It's a pleasure to see a young lady doing so well. Well, well, and so you've been out on the tract! I wonder if you've seen Gilbert yet?" His shrewd old gossip-loving eyes were upon her. She turned to her message on the counter, and after a pause of gazing blindly at it, she scrawled, "H. D. Kennedy," clearly below it. "Send collect," she said to the girl, and over her shoulder, "Gilbert who? Not my husband?"

Yes. Monroe had run across him in San Fran-

cisco, and he was looking well, very well indeed. Had asked about her; Monroe had told him she was in San José. "But if you were on the tract, no doubt he failed to find you?"

"Yes," she said. "I've been lost to the world for three days. Showed my prospect every inch of land between here and Patterson. You know how it is. I'm all in. Well, good-by. Good luck." As she crossed the lobby to the elevator she heard her heels clicking on the mosaic floor, and knew she was walking with her usual quick, firm step.

CHAPTER XVIII

SLEEP was impossible. Helen's exhausted nerves reacted in feverish tenseness to the shock of this unexpected news of Bert. From long experience she knew that in this half-delirious state she could not trust her reasoning, must not accept seriously its conclusions, but she could not stop her thoughts. They scurried uncontrolled through her brain as if driven by a life of their own. She could only endure them until her over-taxed body crushed them with its tired weight. To-morrow she would be able to think.

In the square hotel room, under the garish light that emphasized the ugliness of red carpet and varnished mahogany furniture, she moved about as usual, opening the windows, hanging up her hat and coat, unfastening her bag. She did not forget the customary pleasant word to the bell-boy who brought ice water, and he saw nothing unusual in her white face and bright eyes. This hotel saw her only on her return trips from the tract, and she was always exhausted after making or losing a sale. She locked the door behind him, and began to undress.

Paul must not be involved. She must manage to shield him. A sensation of nausea swept over her. The vulgarity, the cheap coarseness of it! But she must not think. She was too tired. Why had she blundered into such a situation? What change had the years made in Bert? Her thoughts, touching him, recoiled. She would not think of Paul. To have the two in her mind together was intolerable, it was the essence of her humiliation. Married to one man, bound to him by a thousand memories that rushed upon her, and loving another, engaged to him! No fine, self-respecting woman could be in such a position. But she was. She must face that fact. No, she must not face it. Not until she was rested, in command of herself.

She bathed, scrubbing her skin until it glowed painfully. Cold-cream was not enough for her face and hands. She rubbed them with soap, with harsh towels. At midnight she was washing her hair. If only she could slip out of her body, run away from herself into a new personality, forget completely all that she was or had been!

This was hysteria, she told herself. "Only hold on, have patience, wait. The days will go past you. Life clears itself, like running water. It will be all right somehow. Don't try to think. You're too tired."

At dawn her eyelids were weary at last, and she fell asleep. She prolonged the sleep consciously,

half waking at intervals as the day grew brighter, pulling oblivion over her head again to shield herself from living, as a child hides beneath a quilt to keep away darkness.

Outside the world had awakened, going busily about its affairs while the day passed over it. The noise of the streets, voices, automobile-horns, rumbling wheels, came through the open windows with the hot sunshine, running like the sound of a river through her sleep. She awoke in the late afternoon, heavy-lidded, with creased cheeks, but once more quietly self-controlled.

Refreshed by a cold plunge, crisply dressed, composed, she ate dinner in the big, softly lighted dining-room, nodding across white tables to the business men she knew. Then, led by an impulse she did not question, she went out into the crowded streets. With her walked the ghost of the girl who had come down from Masonville, dazzled, wide-eyed, so pitifully sure of herself, to learn to telegraph.

Sacramento had changed. It had been a big town; it was now a city, radiating interurban lines, thrusting tall buildings toward the sky, smudging that sky with the smoke of factories and canneries. Its streets were sluggishly moving floods of automobiles; its wharves were crowded with boats; across the wide, yellow river spans of new bridges were reaching toward each other.

All the statistics of the city's growth, of the great reclamation projects, of the rich farms spreading over the old grain lands, were at Helen's finger-tips. A hundred times she had gone over them, drawn conclusions from them, pounded home-selling arguments with them, since she had added Sacramento valley lands to the San Joaquin properties she handled. But more eloquently her reviving memories showed her the gulf between the old days and the new.

Mrs. Brown's little restaurant and the room where Helen had lived, were gone. In their place stood a six-story office building of raw new brick. That imposing street down which she had stumbled awkwardly after Mrs. Campbell was now a row of dingy boarding-houses. Mrs. Campbell's house itself, once so awe-inspiring, had become a disconsolate building with peeling paint, standing in a ragged lawn, and across the porch where she and Paul had said good-by in the dawn there was now a black and gold sign, "Ah Wong, Chinese Herb Doctor." She went quickly past it.

For the first time in the hurried years her thoughts turned inward, self-questioning, and she tried to follow step by step the changes that had taken place in her. But she could not see them clearly for the memory of the girl that she had been, a girl she saw now as a piteous young thing quite outside herself, a lovely, emotional, valiant young struggler against

unknown odds.. She felt an aching compassion, a longing to shield that girl from the life she had faced with such blind courage, to save her youth and sweetness. But the girl, of course, was gone, like the room from which she had looked so eagerly at the automobile.

It was eleven o'clock when she walked briskly through the groups in the hotel lobby, took her key from the room clerk and left a call for the early San Francisco train. She would reach the city in time to get the final contracts for the sale she had made yesterday, to take them to San José and get them signed the same day. The thought of Bert lay like a menace in the back of her mind, but she kept it there. She could not foresee what would happen; she would meet it when it occurred. Meantime she would go about her work as usual. Her attitude toward the future, her attitude toward even herself, was one of waiting. She fell quietly asleep.

On the train next morning she bought the San Francisco papers. The headlines screamed the news at her. It was war. She missed one train to San José in order to talk to Mr. Clark. The news had made no change in the atmosphere of Clark & Hayward's wide, clean-looking office, where salesmen lounged against the counters, their elbows resting on plate glass that covered surveyor's maps and photographs of alfalfa fields. The talk, as she stopped to speak to one and another, was the usual

news of sales made and lost, quarrels over commissions, personal gossip. She waited her turn to enter Mr. Clark's office, and when it came she looked at him with a keenness hidden under the friendliness of her eyes.

She liked to talk to Mr. Clark. Three years of working with him had brought her an understanding of this nervous, quick-witted, harassed man. There was comradeship between them, a sympathy tempered by wariness on both sides. Neither would have lost the slightest business advantage for the other, but beyond that necessary antagonism they were friends. She watched with pleasure the quick play of his mind, managing hers as he would have handled the thoughts of a buyer; she was conscious that he saw the motives behind her method of counter-attack; a business interview between them was like a friendly bout between fencers. But he spoke to her sometimes of the wife and children whose pictures were on his desk; she knew how deeply he was devoted to them. And once, during an idle evening in a Stockton hotel, he had held her breathless with the whole story of his business career, talking to her as he might have talked to himself.

To-day there seemed to her an added shade of effort in his briskly cheerful manner. The lines around his shrewd eyes had deepened since she first knew him, and it struck her, as she settled into the chair facing his across the flat desk, that his hair

was quite gray. With the alert, keen expression taken from his face he would appear an old man.

This expression was intensified when she spoke of the war, questioned its effect on the business. It would have no effect, he assured her. The future had never been brighter; Sacramento lands were booming; fifty new settlers were going into Ripley Farmland Acres that fall. Chaos on the stock market would make the solid investment values of land even more apparent. If the war lasted a year or longer the prices of American crops would rise.

"I was wondering about the psychological effect," she murmured. Mr. Clark ran a nervous hand through his hair.

"Oh, that's all right. High prices will take care of the buyer's psychology."

She laughed.

"While you take care of the salesman's." A twinkle in his eyes answered the smile in hers, but she spoke again before he replied. "Mr. Clark, I'd like to ask you something — rather personal. What do you really get out of business?"

A quizzical smile deepened the lines around his mouth.

"Well, I got two million dollars out of it in the Portland boom! It's a game," he said after a moment. "Just a game. That's all. I've made two fortunes — you know that — and lost them. And now I'm climbing up again. Oh, if I had it to

do over again, I —” He changed the words on his lips,—“ I ’d do the same thing. No doubt about it. We all think we would n’t, but we would. We don’t make our lives. They make us.”

“ Fatalist? ”

“ Fatalist.” They smiled at each other again as she rose and held out her hand. He kept it a moment in a steadying grasp. “ By the way, have you heard that your husband’s around? ”

“ Yes.” She thanked him with her eyes. “ Good-by.”

She was oppressed by a sense of futility, of the hopeless muddle of living, while the train carried her down the peninsula toward San José. To escape from it she concentrated her attention on the afternoon papers.

They were filled with wild rumors, with names of strange towns in Belgium, a mass of clamoring bulletins, confusing, yet somehow making clear a picture of gray hordes moving, irresistible as a monstrous machine, toward France, toward Paris. She was surprised by her passion of resistance. Intolerable, that the Germans should march into Paris! Why should she care so fiercely, she who knew nothing of Paris, nothing but chance scraps of facts about Europe?

“ I must learn French,” she said to herself, and was appalled by the multitude of things she did not know, both without and within herself.

The unsigned contracts in their long manila envelope were like an anchor in a tossing sea. She must get them signed that night. It was something to do, a definite action. She telephoned from the station, making an appointment with the buyer, and felt the familiar routine closing around her again while the street-car carried her down First Street to her office.

Bert was sitting in her chair, smoking and talking enthusiastically to Hutchinson, when she opened the door. The shock petrified them all. The two men stared at her, Hutchinson's expression of easy good humor frozen on his face; Bert's hand, extended in the old, flashing gesture, suspended in the air. The door closed behind her.

Later she remembered Hutchinson's blood-red face, his awkward, even comical, efforts to stammer that he had n't expected her, that he must be going, his blind search for his hat, his confused departure. At the moment she seemed to be advancing to meet Bert in an otherwise empty room, and though she felt herself trembling from head to foot her hands and her voice were quite steady.

"How do you do?" she said, beginning to unbutton her gloves.

Though she had not been able to remember his face, it was as familiar as if she had seen it every day; the low white forehead with the lock of fair hair across it, the bright eyes, the aquiline nose,

the rather shapeless mouth — No, she had not remembered that his mouth was like that. Her experienced eye saw self-indulgence and dissipation in the soft flesh of his cheeks, the faint puffiness of the eyelids. Her trembling was increasing, but it did not affect her. She was quite cool and controlled.

She heard unmoved his cajoling, confident expostulation. That was a nice way to meet a man when he'd come — she brushed aside his embracing arm with a movement of her shoulder. "We'd better sit down. Pardon me." She took the chair he had left, her own chair, from which she had handled so many land-buyers.

"God, but you're hard!" His accusation held an unwilling admiration. She saw that the way to lose this man was to cling to him; he wanted her now, because she had no need of him. Memories of all the wasted love, the self-surrender and faith she had given him, for which he had not cared at all, which he had never seen or known how to value, came back to her in a flood of pain. Her lips tightened, and looking at him across the desk, she said:

"Do you think so? I'm sorry. But — just what do you want?"

He met her eyes for a moment, and she saw his effort to adjust himself, his falling back upon his old self-confidence in bending other minds to his

desires. He could not believe that any one would successfully resist him, that any woman was impervious to his charm. And suddenly she felt hard, hard through and through. She wanted to hurt him cruelly; she wanted to tear and wound his self-centered egotism, to reach somewhere a sensitive spot in him and stab it.

He wanted her, he said. He wanted his wife. She heard in his voice a note she knew, the deep, caressing tone he kept for women, and she saw that he used it skilfully, aware of its effect.

He had gone through hell. "Through *hell*," he repeated vibrantly. He did not expect her to understand. She was a woman. She could not realize the tortures of remorse, the agonies of soul, the miseries of those years without her. He sketched them for her, with voice and gestures appealing to her pity. He had been a brute to her; he had been a yellow cur to leave her so. He admitted it, magnificently humble.

He had promised himself that he would not come back to her until he was on his feet again. He had reformed. He was going to work. He was going to cut out the booze. Already he had the most glittering prospects. Fer de Leon, the king of patent-medicine men, was going to put on a tremendous campaign in Australia. Fer de Leon had absolute confidence in him; he could sign a contract at any time for fifteen thousand a year.

He wanted her to come with him. He needed her. With her beside him he could resist all temptations. She was an angel; she was the only woman he had ever really loved and respected. With her he could do anything. Without her he would be hopeless, heartsick. God only knew what would happen. "You'll forgive me, won't you? You won't turn me down. You'll give me another chance?"

She was looking down at her hands, unable any longer to read what her eyes saw in him. Her hands lay folded on the edge of the desk, composed and quiet, not moved at all by the sick trembling that was shaking her. The desire to hurt him was gone. His appeal to her pity had dissolved it in contempt.

"I'm sorry," she said with effort. "I hope you — you will go on and — succeed in everything. I know you will, of course." She said it in a tone of strong conviction, trying now to save his egotism. She did not want to hurt him. "I know you have done the best you could. It's all right. It is n't anything you've done. I don't blame you for that. But it seems to me —"

"Good God! How can you be so cold?" he cried.

Even her hands were shaking now, and she quieted them by clasping them together. "Perhaps I am cold," she said. "You see already that we

could n't — make a success of it. It is n't your fault. We just don't — suit each other. We never did really. It was all a mistake." Her throat contracted.

"So it's another man!" he said. "I might have known it."

"No." She was quiet even under the sneer. "It is n't that. But there was never anything to build on between you and me. You think you want me now only because you can't have me. So it will not really hurt you if I get a divorce. And I'd rather do that. Then we can both start again — with clean slates. And I hope you will succeed. And have everything you want." She rose, one hand heavily on the desk, and held out the other. "Good-by."

Her attempt to end the scene with frankness and dignity failed. He could not believe that he had lost this object he had attempted to gain. His wounded vanity demanded that he conquer her resistance. He recalled their memories of happiness, tried to sway her with pictures of the future he would give her, appealed to generosity, to pity, to admiration. He played upon every chord of the feminine heart that he knew.

She stood immovable, sick with misery, and saw behind his words the motives that prompted them, self-love, self-assurance, baffled antagonism. She

felt again, as something outside herself, the magnetism, the force like an electric current, that had conquered her once.

"I really wish you would go," she said. "All this gains nothing for either of us." At last he went.

"You women are all alike. Don't think you've fooled me. It's another man with more money. If I were not a gentleman you would n't get away so easily with this divorce talk. But I am. Go get it!" The door crashed behind him.

She did not move for a long moment. Then she went into the inner office, locked the door behind her, and sat down. Her glance fell on her clenched hands. She had not worn her wedding ring for some time, but the finger was still narrowed a little, and on the inner side a smooth, white mark showed where it had been. Quietly she folded her arms on the desk and hid her face against them. After a little while she began to sob, rough, hard sobs that tore her throat and forced a few burning tears from her eyes.

An hour went by, and another. She was roused, then, by the sound of steps in the outer office. Doubtless a prospect had come in. She lifted her head, and waited, without moving, until the steps went out again. The noise of the streets came up to her as usual; street-cars clanged past, a newsboy cried an extra. Across the corner the hands of the

clock in the Bank of San José building marked off the minutes with little jerks.

It was six o'clock. An urgent summons knocked at a closed door in her mind. Six o'clock. She looked at her wrist-watch, and memory awoke. She had an appointment at six-thirty, to close the final contracts on the forty-acre sale. Hutchinson was depending on her to handle it. Below the window the newsboy cried "War!" again.

Wearily she bathed her face with cold water, combed her hair, adjusted her hat. Contracts in hand, she locked the office door behind her, and her face wore its necessary pleasant, untroubled expression. The buyer's wife was charmed by her smile, and although the man was already somewhat disturbed by the war news, Helen was able to persuade them to sign the contracts.

A week later she announced to Hutchinson that she was going to stop selling land. She could give him no reasons that satisfied his startled curiosity. She was simply quitting; that was all. He could manage the office himself or get another partner; her leaving would make little difference.

He protested, trying half-heartedly to shake her determination. The shattering of accustomed and pleasant routine shocked him; he was like a man thrown suddenly from a boat into the unstable water.

"But what do you want to do it for? What's the idea? Are n't we getting along all right?" He was longing to ask if she were going to Bert, whose arrival and immediate departure had not been explained to him. The whole organization, she knew, was discussing it, and Hutchinson, on the very scene of their meeting, was in the unhappy position of being unable to give the interesting details. But he did not quite venture to break through her reserve with a direct question. He scouted her suggestion that the war would affect business. "Why, things have never looked better! Here we've just made a forty-acre sale. Sacramento's booming, and so is the San Joaquin. Fifty new settlers are going into Farmland Acres this fall. There's going to be a boom in land. Folk are going to see what a solid investment it is, the way stocks are tumbling. And the farmers are going to make money hand over fist if the war lasts a couple of years."

"Oh, well, maybe you're right," she conceded, remembering the twinkle in Mr. Clark's eye when she had accused him of taking care of the salesman's psychology. She still believed that spring would see a slump in real-estate business. She had learned too well that men did not handle their affairs on a basis of cool logic; too often in her own work she had taken advantage of the gusts of impulse and unreasoning emotion that swayed them.

There would be a period when they would be afraid ; no facts or arguments would persuade them to exchange solid cash for heavily mortgaged land. But the point no longer interested her.

She felt a profound weariness, an unease of spirit that was like the ache of a body too long held motionless. Business had rested on her like a weight for nearly four years. She could bear it no longer. She must relax the self-control that held her own impulses and emotions in its tight grip. The need was too strong to be longer resisted, too deep in herself to be clearly understood. "I'm tired," she said. "I'm going to quit."

An agreement dividing their deferred commissions must be drawn up and filed with the San Francisco office. Hutchinson took over her half-interest in the automobile she had left to be repaired in Sacramento. Already his mind was busy with new plans. Since she would no longer write the advertising he would cut it out. "Want ads'll be cheaper and good enough," he said.

Thus simply the bonds were cut between her and all that had filled her days and thoughts. She went home to the little bungalow, put the files of her land advertisements out of sight, hung her hat and coat in the closet.

The house seemed strange, with early-afternoon sunlight streaming through the living-room windows. It was delightfully silent and empty. Long

hours, weeks, months, stretched before her like blank pages on which she might write anything she chose.

She went through the rooms, straightening a picture, moving a chair, taking up a vase of withering flowers. The curtains stirred in a cool breeze that poured through the open windows and ruffled her hair. It seemed to blow through her thoughts, too; she felt clean and cool and refreshed. With a deep, simple joy she began to think of little things. She would discharge the woman who came to clean; she would polish the windows and dust the furniture and wash the dishes herself. To-morrow she would get some gingham and make aprons. Perhaps Mabel and the baby would come down for a visit; she would write and ask them.

She was cutting roses to fill the emptied vase when she thought of Paul. He came into her thoughts quite simply, as he had come before Bert's return. She thought, with a warmth at her heart and a dimple in her cheek, that she would telephone him to come next Sunday, and she would make a peach shortcake for him.

CHAPTER XIX

THE shortcake was a triumph when she set it, steaming hot and oozing amber juice, on the table between them. "You certainly are a wonder, Helen!" Paul said, struck by its crumbling perfection. "Here we have n't been in the house an hour, and with a simple twist of the wrist you give a fellow a dinner like this! Lucky we are n't living a couple of centuries ago. You'd been burned for a witch." His eyes, resting on her, were filled with warm light.

Already he seemed to irradiate a glow of contentment; the hint of sternness in his face had melted in a joy that was almost boyish, and all day there had been a touch of possessive pride in his contemplation of her. It intoxicated her; she felt the exhilaration of victory in her submission to it, and a sense of her power over him gave sparkle to her delight in his nearness.

Her bubbling spirits had been irrepressible; she had flashed into whimsicalities, laughed at him, teased him, melted into sudden tendernesses. Together they had played with light-hearted absurdities, chattering nonsense while they explored a

rocky canyon in Alumn Rock Park, a canyon peopled only with bright-eyed furtive creatures of the forest whisking through tangled underbrush and over fallen logs. They had looked at each other with dancing eyes, smothering bursts of mirth like children hiding some riotous joke, when they came down into the holiday crowd around the hot-dog counters at the park gate, and side by side with Portuguese and Italians, they had bought ice-cream cones from a hurdy-gurdy and listened to the band.

Now she looked at him across her own dinner-table, and felt that the last touch of perfection had been given a happy day. She laughed delightedly.

"It's a funny thing when you think of it," he went on, pouring cream over the fruity slices. "Here you're working all week in an office — just about as good a little business woman as they make 'em, I guess — and then on top of it you come home and cook like 'mother never did. It beats me."

"Well — you see I like to cook," she said. "It's recreation. Lots of successful business men are pretty good golf players. Besides I'm not a business woman any more. I've left the office. Shall I pour your coffee now?"

"Left the office!" he exclaimed. "What for? When?"

"The other day. I don't know why. I felt —

oh, I don't know. I just quit. Why, Paul!" She was startled by his expression.

"Well — it would rather surprise anybody," he said. "A sudden change like this. You didn't give me any idea —" There was a shade of reproach in his tone, which shifted quickly to pugnacity. "That partner of yours — what's-his-name? He has n't been putting anything over on you?"

"Why, no, of course not! I just made up my mind to stop selling land. I'm tired of it. Besides, it looks as though there'd be a slump in the business."

"Well, you can't tell. However, you may be right," he conceded. He smiled ruefully. "It's going to be pretty hard on me, though — your quitting. It's a long way to Masonville."

"To Masonville?" she repeated in surprise.

"Are n't you going there?"

"Why on earth should I go to Masonville?" She caught at the words, not quite quickly enough to stop them. "Oh, I know — my mother. Of course. But, to tell the truth, Paul, I'm fond of her and all that, you know I've been up to see her a good many times, — but after all we've been apart a long time, and my life's been so different. She does n't exactly know what to make of me. I honestly don't think either of us would be very happy if I were to go back there now. She has Mabel,

you know, and the baby. It is n't as though —" Floundering in her explanations, she broke through them, with a smile, to frankness. "As a matter of fact, I never even thought of going back there."

There was bewilderment in his eyes, but he repressed a question.

"Just as you like, of course. Naturally I supposed,—but I'm glad you are n't going. Two lumps, please."

"As though I would n't remember!" she laughed. But as she dropped the sugar into his cup and tilted the percolator, a memory flashed across her mind. She saw him sitting at a little table in a dairy lunch room, struggling to hide his embarrassment, carefully dipping two spoonsful of sugar from the chipped white bowl, and the memory brought with it many others.

The iridescent mood of the afternoon was gone, and reaching for the deeper and more firm basis of emotion between them, she braced herself to speak of another thing she had not told him.

Constraint had fallen upon them; they were separated by their diverging thoughts, and uneasily, with effort, they broke the silence with disconnected scraps of talk. Time was going by; already twilight crept into the room, and looking at his watch, Paul spoke of his train. Helen led the way to the porch, where the shade of climbing rose-vines softened the last clear gray light of the day. There was sadness

in this wan reflection of the departed sunlight; the air was still, and the creaking of the wicker chair, when Helen settled into it, the sharp crackle of Paul's match as he lighted his after-dinner cigar, seemed irreverently loud. With a sudden keen need to be nearer him, Helen drew a deep breath, preparing to speak and to clear away forever the last barrier between them.

But his words met hers before they were uttered.

"What are you going to do, then, Helen? — If you are n't going home?" he added, before her uncomprehension.

"Oh, that! Why — I have n't thought exactly. I'd like to stay at home, stay here in my own house. There's so much to do in a house," she said, vaguely. "I've never had time to do it before."

His voice was indulgent.

"That'll be fine! It's just what you ought to have a chance to do. But, see here, Helen, of course it's none of my business yet, in a way, but naturally I'd worry about it. It takes an income to keep up a house, you know. I'd like — you know everything I've got is — is just the same as yours, already."

"Paul, you dear! Don't worry about that at all. If I needed any help I'd ask you, truly. But I don't."

"Well, we might as well look at it practically," he persisted. "It's going to figure up maybe more

than you think to keep this house going. Not that I want you to give it up if you'd rather stay here," he parenthesized, quickly. "I'd rather have you here than in Masonville, and I'd rather have you in Ripley than here, for that matter. Say, why could n't you come down there? I could fix up that little bungalow on Harper Street. And every one knows you're an old friend of mother's."

"I might do something like that," she said at random. She was troubled by the knowledge that their hour was slipping past and the conversation going in the wrong direction.

"It would cost you hardly anything to live there. And we could —"

"Yes," she said. "I'd love that part of it. You know how I'd like to see you every minute. But there's plenty of time. I'll think about it, dear."

"That's just the point. There is so much time. A whole year and more before I can — and it would be just like you to half starve yourself and never say a word to me about it."

"O Paul!" she laughed, "you are so funny! And I love you for it. Well, then, listen. I have a little over twelve hundred dollars in the bank. Not much, is it, to show for all the years I've been working? But it will keep me from growing gaunt and hollow-eyed for lack of food, quite a little while. And if I really did need more there's a whole world

full of money all around me, you know. So please don't worry. I promise to eat and eat. I promise never to stop eating as long as I live. Regularly, three times a day, every single day!"

"All right," he said. His cigar-end glowed red for a minute through the gathering dusk. She put her hand on his sleeve, and it moved beneath her fingers until its firm, warm grip closed over them. Palm against palm and fingers interlaced, they sat in silence. "It's going to be a long time," he said. After a long moment he added gruffly, "I suppose you've — begun the thing — seen a lawyer?"

"I'm going to, this week. I — hate to — somehow. It's so —"

"You poor dear! I wish to heaven you didn't have to go through it. But I suppose it won't be — there won't be any trouble. Tell me, Helen, honestly. You do want to do it? You aren't keeping — anything from me?"

"No. I do want to. But there's something I've got to tell you. He's come back." He was instantly so still that his immobility was more startling than a cry. At the faint relaxing of his hand, her own fled, and clenched on the arm of her chair. Quietly, in a voice that was stiff from being held steady, she told him something of her interview with Bert. "I thought you ought to know. I didn't want you to hear it from some one else."

"I'm glad you told me. But — don't let's ever

“speak of him again.” His gesture of repugnance flung the cigar in a glowing arc over the porch railing, and it lay a red coal in the grass.

“I don’t want to.” She rose to face him, putting her hands on his shoulders. “But, Paul, I want you to understand. He never was anything to me, really. Nothing real, I mean. It was just because I was a foolish girl and lonely and tired of working — and I did n’t understand. We never were really *married*.” She stumbled among inadequate words, trying to make him feel what she felt. “There was n’t any reality between us, any real love, nothing solid to build a marriage on. And I think there is between you and me.”

“The only thing I want,” he said, his arms around her, “the only thing I want in the world is just to take you home and take care of you.”

She kissed him, a hushed solemnity in her heart. He was so good, so fine and strong. With all her soul she longed to be worthy of him, to make him happy, to be able to build with him a serene and beautiful life.

The days went by with surprising slowness. In the mornings, waking with the first twittering of the birds in the vines over the sleeping porch, she started upright, to relax again on the pillows and stretch luxuriously between the cool sheets, with delicious realization that the whole, long day was hers. But

her body, filled with energy, rebelled at inaction. She rose, busying her mind with small plans while she dressed and breakfasted. At ten o'clock she could think of nothing more to do to the house or the garden, and still time stretched before her, prolonged indefinitely, empty.

The house, lamentably failing as an occupation, became a prison. She escaped from it to the streets. She shopped leisurely, comparing colors and fabrics and prices, seeking the bargains she had been obliged to forego while she was working. An afternoon spent in this way might save her a dollar, and her business sense grinned at her sardonically. She might meet an acquaintance, a woman who lived near her, and over ices elaborately disguised with syrups and nuts they could talk of the movies, the weather, the stupidities of servants. Time had become an adversary to be destroyed as pleasantly as possible. In the long, lazy afternoons she sat on a neighboring porch, listening to talk about details, magnified, distorted, handled over and over again, and while her fingers were busy at an embroidery hoop, stitching bits of thread back and forth through bits of cloth, her mind yawned with boredom.

At night, letting down her hair, she looked back at a day gone from her life, a day spent in sweeping and dusting and making pleasant a house that must be swept and dusted and made pleasant on the morrow, a day that had accomplished several inches of

scalloping on a tablecloth, and she was overwhelmed with a sense of futility. "After all, I've rather enjoyed it," she said. "To enjoy a day — what more can one do with it?" The argument rang hollow in her mind, answered only by an uneasy silence.

If she were with Paul the days would mean more, she told herself. But it seemed best to remain in San José until the first legal formalities were done. The case, her lawyer told her, would come on the court calendar in four or five weeks. She would have no difficulty in getting a decree. "But can't you charge something to make it more impressive? No violence? He never hit you or threw anything at you?" The lawyer's eyes filled with a certain eagerness. Wincing, she told him with cold fury that she would charge nothing but desertion. No, she wanted no alimony. When, disappointed, he had jotted these details on a pad and tried with professional jocularly to make her smile, she escaped, shrinking with loathing.

Something like this she must endure again, upon a witness-stand in open court. Better to face it alone, to finish it and push it behind her into the past before she went to Ripley to meet the shrewd interest of Mrs. Masters and the warmth of Paul's sympathy. Meantime her life seemed motionless as a treadmill is motionless, and a vague irritation nagged at her nerves.

She began to frequent the public library. In a

locked room, to which the librarian gave her the key after an embarrassed scrutiny, she found on forbidden shelves a history of marriage, and curled among the cushions on her window-seat, she spent an afternoon absorbed in tracing that institution from the first faint appreciation of the property value of women into the labyrinth of custom and morality to which it led. She became interested in marriage laws, and discovered with amazement the contracts so blithely entered upon by men and women who would not so unquestioningly subscribe to any other legal agreement. When she wearied of this subject, she turned to others and, with an interest sharpened by the European news, she devoured history and floundered beyond her depths in economics. She bought a French dictionary and grammar and, finding them but palely alluring in themselves, she boldly attacked *La Livre de Mon Ami*, digging the meaning from its charming pages eagerly as a miner washing gold. But the nights found her still haunted by a restlessness as miserable and vague as that of unused muscles. "I wish I were doing something!" she cried.

CHAPTER XX

TWO weeks after she left the office her feet took her back to it, as if by volition of their own. The familiar walls, covered with photographs of alfalfa fields and tract maps painted with red ink, closed around her like the walls of home. Hutchinson sat smoking at his desk; nothing had changed. She said that she had only dropped in for a moment. How was business? Her eye automatically noted the squares of red on the maps. "Hello! That three-cornered piece by Sycamore Slough's gone! Who sold it?"

"Watson," said Hutchinson. "He's uncovered a gold mine in the Healdsburg country, selling the farmers hand over fist. Last week he brought down a prospect who —" She heard the story to its end, capped it with one of her own, and two hours had passed before she realized it.

In another week it had become her habit to drop in at the office every time she came down town, to discuss Hutchinson's difficulties with him, even on occasion to help him handle a sale. Business prospects were not brightening; the prune market was disrupted by the European War, orchardists were

panic stricken; already a formless, darkening shadow hung over men's minds. In any case she had no intention of going back into business; she told herself that she detested it. And she continued to go to the office.

Hutchinson awaited her one day with a bit of news. A man named MacAdams had been telephoning; he was coming to the office; he wanted to see her. "MacAdams?" she repeated. "Odd — I seem to remember the name."

MacAdams came in five minutes later, and the sight of his square, deeply lined face, the deep-sunken eyes under bushy gray brows, brought back to her vividly all the details of her first sale. She met him with an out-stretched hand, which MacAdams ignored. "I'd like a few words with you, miss."

She led him into the inner office, closed the door, made him sit down. He sat upright, gnarled hands on his knees, and badly, in simple words, laid his case before her. The land she had sold him was no good. It was hard-pan land. After he bought it he had saved his money for a year and moved to that land. "They told me I could make the payments from the crops." He had leveled the forty acres, checked it, seeded it to alfalfa. The alfalfa had begun to die the second year. That fall he plowed it up and sowed grain. He made enough from that to pay for seed and meet the water-tax.

In the spring he and his boy had planted beans. The boy had cultivated them, and he had worked out, making money enough for food. The irrigation ditch broke; they could get no water for the beans when they needed it. The beans had died. He was two years behind in his payments; he could not meet the interest; he owed a hundred dollars in grocery bills.

"I put three thousand dollars into that land. I went to see your firm about it. They said they would give me more time to pay the rest if I would keep up the interest. But I want no more farming; I'm done. They can have the land. It's no good on God's earth. I'm blaming nobody, miss. A man that is a fool is a fool. But I want back some of the money, so I can move my family to the city and live till I get a job. It is no more than justice, and I come to ask you for it."

She heard him to the end, one hand supporting her cheek, the other drawing aimless pencil marks on the desk blotter. His request was hopeless, she knew; even if Clark had wanted to return the money, it had gone long ago in overhead and in payments to the owners of the land. No one could be compelled to return any part of the payment MacAdams had made on the contract he had signed. Clearly before her eyes rose the picture of the little tract office, the smoky oil lamp, Nichols in his chair, and she herself awaiting the word from Mac-

Adams' lips that would decide her fate and Bert's. Parrot-like words, repeated many times, resaid themselves. "I'm sorry. Of course you know that in any large tract of land there will be a few poor pieces. I acted in perfectly good faith; you saw the land, examined it—" She met Mac-Adams's eyes. "I'll give back all the money I made on it," she said.

She wrote a check for six hundred dollars, blotted it carefully, handed it to him. His stern face was as tremulous as water blown upon by the wind, but he said nothing, shaking her hand with a force that hurt and going away quickly with the check. After the door closed behind him she remembered that she had got only three hundred dollars from the sale. The remainder had gone to cover Bert's debts. At this, shaken by emotions, she laughed aloud.

"Well, anyway, now you'll have plenty to do!" she said to herself. "Now you'll get out and scurry for money to live on!" She felt a momentary chill of panic, but there was exhilaration in it.

She would not return to selling land. Her determination was reinforced by the possibility that if she did she would find herself penniless before she had made a sale. No, she must earn money in some other way. She walked slowly home, wrapped in abstraction, searching her mind for an idea. It was like gazing at the blankness of a cloudless sky, but

her self-confidence did not waver. All about her men no wiser, no better equipped than she, were making money.

Sitting at the walnut desk in her sunny living-room she drew a sheet of paper before her and prepared to take stock of her equipment. Her thoughts became clearer when they were written. But after looking for some time at the blank sheet, she began carefully to draw interlacing circles upon it. There seemed nothing to write.

She was twenty-six years old. She had been working for eight years. Telegraphing was out of the question; she would not go back to that. Her four years of selling land had brought her nothing but a knowledge of human minds, a certain cleverness in handling them, and a distaste for doing it. And advertising. She could write advertisements; she had records in dollars and cents that proved it. What she needed was an idea, something novel, striking and soundly valuable, with which to attack an advertiser. Her mind remained quite blank. Against the background of the swaying rose-colored curtains picture after picture rose before her vague eyes. But no idea.

Suddenly she thought of Paul, of her plan of going to Ripley, now demolished. She could not work there; if Paul suspected her difficulty he would insist upon helping her. He would be hurt by her refusal, however carefully she tried not to hurt him. "Oh,

you little idiot! You have made a mess of things!" she said.

Half-formed thoughts began to scamper frantically through her mind. This was no way to face a problem, she knew. She would think no more about it until to-morrow. Smiling a little, she began a letter to Paul, a long, whimsical letter, warmed with tenderness, saying nothing and saying it charmingly. An hour later, rereading it and finding it good, she folded it into its envelope and put a tiny kiss upon the flap, smiling at herself.

Lest her perplexities come back to break the contentment of her mood, she barricaded herself against the silence of the house with a magazine. It was the "Pacific Coast," a San Francisco publication of particular interest to her because of its articles on California land. She had once wished to write a series of reading-matter advertisements to be printed in it, but Clark had overruled her idea, favoring display type.

She was buried in a story of the western mining camps when from the blank depths of her mind the idea she had wanted sprang with the suddenness of an explosion. What chance contact of buried memories had produced it she could not tell, but there it was. As she considered it, it appeared now commonplace and worthless, now scintillating with bright possibilities. In the end, composing herself to sleep on the star-lit porch, she decided to test it.

Early the next afternoon she arrived at the San Francisco offices of the "Pacific Coast" and asked to speak to the circulation manager.

She was impressed by the atmosphere of dignity and restraint in the large, bland offices. Sunshine streamed through big windows over tidy desks and filing-cabinets; girls moved about quietly, carrying sheaves of typewritten matter in smooth, ringless hands; even the click of typewriters was subdued, like the sound of well-bred voices. Her experiences of newspaper offices had not prepared her for this, and her pulses quickened at this glimpse of a strange, uncharted world.

The circulation manager was a disappointment. He was young, and desirous of concealing the fact. His manner, a shade too assertive, betrayed suppressed self-distrust; being doubtful of his own ability he sought to reassure himself by convincing others of it. Had she been selling him land, she would have played upon this shaky egotism, but here the weapon turned against her. He was prepared to demonstrate his efficiency by swiftly dismissing her.

Drawing upon all her resources of salesmanship, she presented her plan. She wished to organize a crew of subscription solicitors and cover the state, section by section. She would interview chambers of commerce, boards of trade, business men, and farmers, gathering material for an article on local

conditions; she would get free publicity from the newspapers; she would stimulate interest in the "Pacific Coast."

"Every one likes to read about himself, and next he likes to read about his town. I will see that every man and woman in the territory knows that the "Pacific Coast" will run articles about his own local interests. Then the solicitors will come along and take his subscription. The solicitors will work on commission; the only expense will be my salary and the cost of writing the articles. And the articles will be good magazine features, in addition to their circulation value."

His smile was pityingly superior.

"My dear young lady, if I used our columns for schemes like that!" She perceived that she had encountered a system of ethics unknown to her. "We are not running a cheap booster's magazine, angling for subscriptions." And he pointed out that every article must interest a hundred thousand subscribers, while an article on one section of the state appealed only to the local interest. The talk became an argument on this point.

"But towns have characters, like people. Every town in California is full of stories, atmosphere, romance, color. Why, you could n't write the character of one of them without interesting every reader of your magazine!"

He ended the interview with a challenge.

"Well, you bring me one article that will pass one of our readers and I may consider the scheme." He turned to a pile of letters, and his gesture indicated his satisfaction in dismissing her so neatly and finally.

It left a sting that pricked her pride and made her nerves tingle. She was passed outward through the suave atmosphere of the offices, and every shining wood surface affected her like a smile of conscious superiority.

She went to see Mr. Clark, who welcomed her with regrets that she had left the organization, and at her suggestion readily promised her a place in his office at a moderate salary. But to take it seemed a self-confession of failure. Mr. Clark's offer was left open, and she returned to San José smarting with resentful humiliation.

The sun was low when she alighted at the station. Amber-colored light lay over the green of St. James Park, and the long street beyond glowed with the dull, warm tone of weathered brick. The tall windows and gabled roofs of the old business blocks threw back the flames of the level sun-rays. In the gray light below them the bell of El Camino Real stood voiceless at the corner of the old Alameda beside a red fire-alarm box, and around it scores of farmers' automobiles fringed the wide cement sidewalks.

Here, within the memory of men yet living, fields

of wild mustard had hidden hundreds of grazing cattle and vaqueros, riding down to them from the foot-hills, had vanished in seas of yellow bloom; here the padrés had trudged patiently on the road from Santa Clara to Mission San José; here pioneers had broken the raw soil and lined the cup of the valley with golden wheat fields, and Blaine had come in the heyday of his popularity, counseling orchards.

Now, mile after mile to the edge of the blue hills, prune-trees and apricots and cherries stood in trim rows, smooth boulevards hummed with the passing of motor-cars, and where the vaqueros had broken the wild mustard, San José stood, the throbbing heart of all these arteries reaching into past and present and future.

"And he says there's nothing of interest here!" she cried. "Oh, if only I could write it! If I could write one tenth of it!"

Midnight found her sitting before her typewriter, disheveled, hot-eyed, surrounded by crumpled sheets of paper, pondering over sentences, discarding paragraphs, by turns glowing with satisfaction and chilled by hopelessness. "I could write an advertisement about it," she thought. "I could interest a buyer. Magazine articles are different. But human beings are all alike. Interest them. I've got to interest them. If I can just make it human, make them see — Oh, what an idiot that man was!" Absorbed in her attempt to express the

spirit of San José, she still felt burning within her a rage against him. "I'll show him, anyway, that there are some things he does n't see!"

Next morning she read her work and found it worthless.

"I'll write it like a letter," she thought, and pages poured easily from the typewriter. She spent the next day slashing black pencil-marks through paragraphs, shifting sentences, altering words. The intricacy of the work fascinated her; it allured like an embroidery pattern, challenged like a land sale, roused all her energies.

When she could do no more, she read and re-read the finished article. She thought it hopelessly stupid; she thought it as good as some she had read; a sentence glinted at her like a ray of light, and again it faded into insignificance. She did not know what she thought about it. The memory of that irritating young man decided her. "It may be done absurdly, but it will prove my point. There is something here to write about." She sent it to him.

After five empty days, during which she struggled in a chaos of indecisions, she tore open an envelope with the "Pacific Coast" imprint. "Perhaps that plan will go through, after all," she thought. She read a note asking her to call, a note signed "A. C. Hayden, Editor."

The next afternoon she was in his office. It was a quiet room, lined with filled bookcases, furnished

with comfortable chairs and a huge table loaded with proofs and manuscripts piled in orderly disorder. Mr. Hayden himself gave the same impression of leisurely efficiency; Helen felt that he accomplished a great deal of work without haste, smiling. He was not hurried; he was quite willing to discuss her circulation scheme, listening sympathetically, pointing out the reasons why it was not advisable. Her article lay on the desk. It had brought her a pleasant interview. After all, there was no reason why she should not accept Clark's offer.

"Now this," Mr. Hayden said, unfolding her manuscript. "We can use this, simply as a story, if you want to sell it to us. With the right illustrations and a few changes it will make a very good feature. Our rates, of course—" Helen had made no sound, but some quality in her breathless silence interrupted him. He looked at her questioningly.

"You don't mean — I can write?"

He was amused.

"People do, you know. In fact, most people do — or try. You'd realize that if you were a magazine editor. Have you never written before?"

"Well — reader advertisements and letters, of course. I have n't thought of really writing, not since I was a school girl." She was dazzled.

"Advertisement! That accounts for it. You cramp your style here and there. But you can write.

You have an original viewpoint; you write with a sense of direction, and you pack in human interest — human interest's always good. And you know the values of words."

"When you're paying three dollars and eighty cents an inch for space you do think about them!" she laughed. His words revealed the unmeasured stretches of her ignorance in this new field, but the blood throbbed in her temples. Her mind became a whirl of ideas; she saw the world as a gold mine, crammed with things to write about. Eagerly attentive, she listened to Mr. Hayden's criticisms of the manuscript.

Her lead was too long. "You spar around before you get to the point. The story really begins here." His pencil hovered over the page. "If you don't object to our making changes?"

"Oh, please do! I want to learn."

An hour went by, and another. Mr. Hayden was interested in her opinions on all subjects; he led her to talk of land selling, of advertising, of the many parts of California that she knew. He suggested a series of articles similar to the one he held in his hand. He would be glad to consider them if she would write them. If she had other ideas, would she submit them?

She left the office with a check in her purse, and her mind was filled with rainbow visions. She saw a story in every newsboy she met, ideas clothed with

romance and color jostled each other for place in her mind, and the world seemed a whirling ball beneath her feet. For the first time since the interview with MacAdams she longed to rush to Paul, to share with him her glittering visions.

CHAPTER XXI

PAUL was aggrieved. He stood in the dismantled living-room of the little bungalow, struggling between forbearance and a sense of the justice of his grievance. "But look here!" he said for the hundredth time, "why could n't you let a fellow know? If I'd had a chance to show you how unreasonable, how unnecessary —" He thrust his hands deep into his coat-pockets and walked moodily up and down between the big trunk and the two bulging suitcases that stood on the bare floor.

Helen, drooping wearily on one of the suitcases, contritely searched her mind for a reply. It was bewildering not to find one. On all other points of the discussion her reasons were clear and to her convincing. But surely she should have informed him of her plans. He had never for a moment been forgotten; the knowledge of him continually glowed in her heart, warming her even when her thoughts were furthest from him.

She could not understand the disassociation of ideas that had caused this apparent neglect of him. There was no defense against her self-accusation.

"I'm terribly sorry," she murmured inadequately.

He had already passed over the point, beginning again the circling argument that had occupied them since his unexpected arrival.

"Can't you see, dear, there's no reason under the sun for a move like this? You'll no more than get settled in the city before—" His moodiness vanished. "Oh, come on, sweetheart! Chuck the whole thing. Come on down to Ripley. It's only for a little while. Why should you care so much about a little money? You'll have to get used to my paying the bills some time, you know; it might as well be now. No? Yes!" His arm was around her shoulders, and she smiled up into his coaxing, humorous eyes.

"You're a dear! No, but seriously, Paul, not yet. It's all arranged—the "Pacific Coast" is counting on me, and I've got the new series started in the "Post." Just think of all the working girls you'd rob of oodles of good advice that they won't follow! Please don't feel so badly, dear." Her voice deepened. "I'll tell you the real reason I want to go. If I can get really started, if I can get my name pretty well known— A name in this writing game, you know, is just like a trade-mark. It's established by advertising. Well, if I can do that, I can keep on writing wherever I am, even in Ripley. And then I'll have something to do and a little income. I—I would like that. Don't you see how beautiful it would be?"

"It may be your idea of beautifulness, but I can't say I'm crazy about it," he replied. He sat on the suitcase, his hands clasped between his knees, and stared glumly at his boots. "Why do you want an income? I can take care of you."

"Of course!" she assured him, hastily. "I did n't mean —"

"And when it comes to something to do — you're going to have me on your hands, you know!" he continued, with a troubled smile.

"I do believe he's jealous!" She laughed coaxingly, slipping a hand through the crook of his unyielding arm. "Are you jealous? Just as jealous as you can be? Jealous of my typewriter?" She bent upon him a horrific frown. "Answer to me, sir! Do you love that electric plant? How dare you look at dynamos!"

He surrendered, laughing with her.

"You little idiot! Just the same — oh, well, what's the use? Just so you're happy."

It was the first time there had been a sense of reservations behind their kiss. But he seemed not to know it, radiating content.

"All right, run along and play in San Francisco. I don't care. I do care. I do care like the devil. But it won't be long. Only I warn you, I'm not going to be called Mr. Helen Davies!"

She laughed too, rising and tucking up her hair.

“As if I wanted you to be! I’ll never be so well-known as that, don’t fear! Now if I were a real writer —” The trace of wistfulness in her voice was quickly repressed. “Then, young man, you’d have reason to worry! But I’m not. I wonder if that expressman’s never coming!”

“You ought n’t to be trying to manage all this yourself,” he said. “I wish I’d known in time. I could have come up and done it for you.”

She was touched by his whole-hearted acceptance of her plans, and she felt a twinge of regret, a longing to acquiesce in his. But some strong force within herself would not yield. She could not be dependent upon him, not yet. Later — later she would feel differently.

There were six months between her and final legal freedom. The miserable half hour that had given her an interlocutory decree of divorce had been buried by the rush of new events; routine completion of the court’s action had no vital meaning for her. She had in reality been long divorced from the past she wished to forget. The date six months in the future meant only the point at which she would face the details of a new life. Until that time she need not consider them too closely. It was enough to know that she and Paul loved each other. All difficulties when she reached them would be conquered by that love.

She turned a bright face to him.

"Let's go out and walk in the sunshine. An empty house is so sorrowful. And I have heaps of things to tell you."

They walked slowly up and down the pleasant tree-shaded street, passing the homelike porches at which she no longer looked wistfully. Her mind was filled with the immediate, intoxicating future, and she tumbled out for Paul's inspection all her anticipations.

Mr. Hayden had refused her last story, about immigration conditions on Angel Island, and she had sent it to an Eastern weekly. Would n't it be splendid if they took it! And was n't it a bit of luck, getting the "Post's" city editor to take her idea of a department for working-girls' problems?

And the new series — the series that was taking her to San Francisco. "O Paul, if I can only do it half as well as I want to! I'm just sure Mr. Hayden would take it. 'San Francisco Nights.' Bagdad-y stuff, you know, Arabian Nights. You've no idea how fascinating San Francisco is at night. The fishing fleet, going out from Fisherman's Wharf over the black water, with Alcatraz Light flashing across the colored boats, and the fishermen singing 'Il Trovatore.' Honestly, Paul, they do. And the vegetable markets, down in the still, ghostly, wholesale district at three o'clock in the morning, masses of color and light, the Italian farmers with their blue jackets and red caps, and

the huge, sleepy horses, and the Chinese peddlers pawing over the vegetables, with their long, yellow fingers."

"At three o'clock in the morning! You don't mean you're dreaming of going down there?"

"I've already been," she said guiltily. "With one of the girls, Marian Marcy. I told you about her last week. The girl on the "Post," you know?"

"Well, I hope at least you had a policeman with you."

"Naturally one would have," she replied diplomatically. Absorbed in the interest of these new experiences, she had not thought of being fearful; without considering the question, she had felt quite capable of meeting any probable situation. But she perceived that she was alarming Paul.

It seemed safer to discuss the little house she had rented, the little house that hung like a swallow's nest on the steep slopes of Russian Hill, overlooking the islands of the bay and the blue Marin hills. Eager to take Paul's imagination with her, she described it minutely, its wood-paneled walls, its great windows, the fireplace, the kitchenette where they would cook supper together when he came to see her.

"And you'll come often? Every week?" she urged.

"You'll see me spending the new parlor wallpaper for railroad fares!" he promised.

"Just as well. I don't want wall-paper there, anyway!"

When the expressman had come and gone, she locked the door of the bungalow for the last time, with a sense of efficient accomplishment.

"Now!" she said, "We'll play until time for the very latest train for San Francisco."

Their delight in each other seemed all the brighter for the temporary disagreement, like sunshine after a foggy morning. Her heart ached when the evening ended and he had to put her on the train.

"I'll be glad when I'm not saying good-by to you all the time!" he told her almost fiercely.

"Oh, so will I!"

She sprang lightly up the car steps, seeing too late his effort to help her, and regret increased the warmth of her thanks while he settled her bags in the rack, hung up her coat, adjusted the footstool for her. These unaccustomed services embarrassed her a little. She was aware of awkwardness in accepting them, but for a little while longer they kept him near her.

He lingered until the last minute, leaning over the red plush seat, jostled by incoming passengers, gazing at her with eyes that said more than lips or hands dared express under the harsh lights and glances of passengers.

"Well — good-by."

“Good-by. And you’ll come to see the new house soon?”

She watched his sturdy back disappear through the car-door. Her fancy saw the sure, quick motion with which he would fling himself from the moving train, and with her face close against the jarring pane, she caught a last glimpse of his eager face and waving hat beneath the station lights.

Smiling, she saw the street lamps flash past, vanish. Against rushing blackness the shining window reflected her own firm mouth, the strong curve of her cheek, the crisp line of the small hat. The swaying motion of a train always delighted her; she liked the sensation of departure, and the innumerable small creakings, the quickening click-click-click of the wheels, gave her the feeling of being flung through space toward an unknown future. Her cheek against the cool pane, she shut out the shimmering lights and gazed into vague darkness.

Her heart was warm with contentment; her love for Paul lay in it like a hidden warmth. She thought of the articles she meant to write, of the brown cottage on Russian Hill, of the little group of women she might gather there, Marian Marcy’s friends. With something of wistful envy she thought of the affection that held them together; she hoped they would like her, too. The friendship

of women was a new thing to her, and the bond she had glimpsed among these girls appeared to her special and beautiful.

Wondering, she considered them one by one, so widely differing in temperament and character, and yet so harmonious beneath their heated arguments. One would say they quarreled at the luncheon table where they met daily, flinging pointed epigrams and sharp retorts at each other, growing excited over most incongruous subjects,—the war, poems, biology, hairdressers,—arguing, laughing, teasing each other all in a breath. But their good humor never failed, and affection for each other burned like an unflickering candle flame in all their gusts of controversy.

“It’s a wonderful crowd,” Marian Marcy had said inclusively, and Helen knew that her invitation to lunch with them indicated genuine liking. A stranger among them, she felt herself on trial, and a hope of gathering them all at her fireside and perhaps becoming one of their warm circle had been her strongest motive in taking the cottage.

Her days were full of work. With a kind of fury she threw herself into the task of conquering the strange world before her. There was so much to learn and so very little time. Her six months became a small hoard of hours, every minute precious. In the earliest dawn, while the sky over the Berkeley hills blushed faintly and long silver lines lay on the

gray waters of the bay, she was plunging into her cold tub, lighting the gas beneath the coffee-pot, tidying the little house. The morning papers gave her ideas for stories,—already she had learned to call everything written “a story”—and she rode down the hill on the early cable-car with stenographers and shopgirls, thinking of interviews.

Her business sense, sharply turned upon magazine pages and Sunday papers, showed her an ever-widening market. She saw scores of stories on innumerable subjects; they came into her mind dressed in all the colors of fancy, perfect, clear-cut, alive with interest. Then at her typewriter she set herself to make them live in words, and through long afternoons she toiled, struggling, despairing, seeing fruitless hours go by, knowing at last that she had produced a maimed, limping thing. Her bookcases now filled her with awe. All those volumes so easily read, apparently produced so effortlessly, appeared in this new light tremendous, almost miraculous achievements.

“I can never write real books,” she said. “I am not an artist.”

She was not embarking upon an artistic career; she was learning a trade. But seeing about her so many newspapers, so many magazines, carloads of volumes in the department stores, she reflected that it was a useful trade. These miles of printing brought refreshment and wider viewpoint to mil-

lions. "If I can be only a good workman, producing sound, wholesome, true things, I will be doing something of value," she consoled herself.

Mr. Hayden accepted the first story in the "San Francisco Nights," series, refused the second. She began on a third, and when her article on immigration was returned from the East she sent it out again. She had better fortune with a story on California farming conditions, which sold to a national farm paper. Establishing a market for her work was her hope for the future; if she succeeded she could still work in Ripley, and the work would be something entirely her own.

She did not analyze this need to keep a fragment of life apart for herself, but quite plainly she saw the value of having her own small income. Her relation to Paul had nothing to do with money; in their love they were equal, and when Paul added the fruit of his work to the scale the balance would be uneven. She knew too well the difference between earning money and caring for a house to believe that her tasks would earn what he must give her.

Working against time, she poured her energies into building an acquaintance with editors, into learning their requirements. Meantime her department in the "Post" gave her the tiny income that met her expenses. Late at night she sat opening letters and typing prudent replies for its columns.

"And the unions are striking for an eight-hour day!" she said to Marian, encountering her amid clattering typewriters in the "Post's" local room. "Me, I'd strike for forty-eight hours between sun and sun!"

"The best of all ways to lengthen your days is to steal a few hours from the night, my dear!" Marian quoted gaily. Her piquant, kitten-like face, with its pointed chin and wide gray eyes beneath a tangle of black hair, was white with fatigue. She straightened her hat, and dabbed at her nose with a powder puff. "The crowd's going over to the beach at Tiburon for a picnic supper. Come along?"

"I'd love to!"

"Then run out and get some pickles and things while I finish this story. Mother-of-Pearl! If those club women knew what I really think of most of 'em!" The typewriter keys clacked viciously under her flying fingers.

Smiling, Helen obeyed, and while she explored a delicatessen and loaded her arms with packages, she felt a flutter of pleased anticipation. It would be good to lie on the beach under the stars and listen to more of the curious talk of these girls. "But I must contribute something," she thought. "I must make them like me if I can."

When they assembled at the ferry, however, she found that they were not inclined to talk. Almost silently they waited for the big gates to open,

surged with the crowd across the gang-plank and found outside seats where the salt winds swept upon them.

"Tired, Marian?" said Anne Lester.

"Dead!" Marian answered. She rearranged the packages, took off her coat, put it on again, and began to walk restlessly up and down the deck.

"She lives on sheer nerve," Anne remarked. "Never relaxes." Her own long, thoroughbred body was a picture of reposeful lines. She said nothing more.

"How beautifully they let each other alone!" Helen thought, and in the restful silence she too relaxed, idly studying the others. They all worked. Beyond that she could see nothing in common; even their occupations differed widely. She checked them off, startled a little at the incongruity.

Anne, high-bred, imperious, with something of untamed freedom in every gesture — Anne was a teacher of economics! Beside her Willetta, demure, brown-eyed, brown-haired, knitting busily, had come from unknown labors in social service work. Across the aisle Sara and Mrs. Austin — they called her Dodo — were discussing samples of silk. And Sara was a miniature painter, Dodo executive secretary of an important California commission.

"I give it up!" Helen said to herself, marvelling again at the obvious affection that held them together. Turning her face to the keen cool wind

blowing in through the Golden Gate she watched the thousand white-capped waves upon the bay and the flight of silvery-gray seagulls against a glowing sunset sky, drinking in the beauty of it all without thinking, letting the day's burden of effort slip from her.

Around the camp-fire on the white half-moon of beach beyond the fisherman's village of Tiburon the talk awoke again, idle talk, flippant, serious, bantering, dropping now and then into silence.

Sara sat on a bit of driftwood, her long, sensitive hands clasped around her knees, her eyes full of dreams. "How beautiful it is!" she said at intervals, lifting her face to the dark sky full of stars, or indicating with a nod the lights flung over the Berkeley hills like handfuls of jewels. Anne, stretched on the sand, spoke with passion of labor unions and I. W. W.'s, of strikes and lockouts, and the red glimmer of her cigarette sketched her gestures upon the darkness. Argument raged between her and Dodo, cross-legged like a boy, her fine, soft hair let down upon her shoulders. Hot words were exchanged. "Oh, you don't know what you're —" "If you'd read the reports of your own commission!" "Let me tell you, Anne Lester, — where are the matches?" The twinkling flame lighted Dodo's calm, unruffled brow as a thin curl of smoke came from her serious lips. "Just let me tell you, Anne Lester —" In the circle of fire-

light Marian was busily gathering up paper napkins, bits of string, wrapping paper. "Marian's got to tidy the whole sea-shore!" they laughed, reaching lazily to help her. After a long silence they spoke of the war.

"It did n't get me so much at first — it was like an earthquake shock. But lately —" "One feels like doing something. I know. What is a little Red Cross work here at home, when you think —"

"Oh, it's all too horrible!" Sara cried.

"Yes. But lots of things are horrible. War is n't the worst one. One has to —" "Yes, get up and face them. And do something. As much as you can."

The words echoed Helen's own feeling. In the folds of her coat, curled against a drift log, she listened, quiet, adding a word occasionally. She felt now the charm of this companionship, demanding nothing, unconstrained, full of understanding. It was freedom, relaxation, without loneliness. Like a plant kept too long in constricting soil and now transplanted to friendlier earth, she felt stirring within her innumerable impulses reaching out for nourishment.

"You know," said Dodo suddenly, putting a warm hand over Helen's. "I like you."

Helen flushed with delight.

"I like you too."

She remembered the words for long months, remembered the glow of fire-light, the white, curving line of foam on the sand, the far lights scattered on a dozen hills, and the cool darkness over the bay. That evening had made her one of the group, given her the freedom of the luncheon table reserved for them in the quiet little restaurant, opened for her the door of a new and satisfying relationship.

She could always find one or two of the girls at the table, rarely all of them. They dropped in when they pleased, sure of finding a friend and sympathetic talk. When she had an idle half hour after luncheon she might go shopping with Willetta, always hunting bargains in dainty things for the little daughter in a convent. She learned the tragedy that had shattered Willetta's home, and the reason for the cynicism that sometimes sharpened Dodo's tongue. If they wondered about her own life they asked no questions, and they accepted Paul's Sunday visits without comment.

Any other evening in the week might see Willetta running up the steps, knitting in hand, to spend an hour curled among the cushions on the hearth or to depart blithely if Helen were busy. Dodo's voice might come over the telephone. "Tickets for the concert! Want to come down?" The crackling fire might blaze upon them all, gathered by chance, chattering like school-girls while Marian speared

marshmallows with a hat-pin, toasting them and her tired, sparkling face at the same time. But Sunday found Helen tacitly left to Paul.

His unexpected coming upon the whole group broke ever so slightly the charm of their companionship. She had felt the same thing in entering her office when all the salesmen were there. Some intangible current of sympathy was cut, an alien element introduced. One thought before speaking, as if to a stranger who did not perfectly comprehend the language.

"There is a subtle division between men and women," she thought, talking brightly to Paul while they climbed Tamalpais together or wandered in Golden Gate park. "Each of us has his own world." After a silence, passing some odd figure on the trail or struck breathless by a vista of heart-stopping beauty, she sought his eyes for the flash of intimate understanding she expected, and found only adoration or surprise.

She felt that the shortening summer was rushing her toward a fate against which some blind impulse in her struggled. Paul's eager happiness, his plans, his confident hand upon her life, were compulsions she tried to accept gladly. She should be happy, she told herself; she was happy. Searching her heart she knew that she loved Paul. His coming was like sunshine to her; she loved his sincerity, his sweet, clean soul, the light in his eyes, the touch of his hand.

When he went away her heart flew after him like a bird, and at the same time some almost imperceptible strain upon her was gone. Alone in her silent house she felt herself become whole again and free.

"You're feeling like a girl again!" she told herself. The watch on her wrist ticked off the night hours while she sat motionless, staring at the red embers of the fire crumbling to ashes. She saw the twilight of a long-dead summer's day and a girl swept by tides of emotion, struggling blindly against them.

But it was not Paul's kisses that she shrank from now. She wanted them. She was no longer a girl caught unawares by love's terrible power and beauty. She was a woman, clear-eyed, deliberately choosing. Why, then, did she feel that she was compelling herself to do this thing that she wanted to do? "It's late, and I'm tired. I'm getting all sorts of wild fancies," she said, rising wearily, chilled.

With passionate intensity she wrung all the joy from every moment of these happy days. She loved the changing colors of the bay, the keen, cool dawns when she breakfasted alone on her balcony with the morning papers spread beside her plate and an unknown day stretching before her. She loved her encounters with many sides of life; the talk of the Italian waiter in a quaint Latin Quarter café; her curious friendship with a tiny Chinese mother who lived in the Wong "family house," the shadowy

corridors of which were filled with a constant whispering shuffle of sandaled feet; the hordes of ragged, adorable Spanish children who ran to her for cakes when she climbed the crazy stairs that were the streets of Telegraph Hill.

And there were evenings at the Radical Club, where she heard strange, stimulating theories contending with stranger ones, and met Russian revolutionists, single-taxers, stand-pat Marxian socialists, and sensation seekers of many curious varieties, while next day at a decorous luncheon table she might listen to a staid and prosperous business man seriously declaring, "All these folks that talk violence — all those anarchists and labor men and highwaymen — ought to be strung up by a good old-fashioned vigilance committee! I'm not a believer in violence and never was, and hanging's too good for those that do." The romance of life enthralled her, and she felt that she could never see enough of it.

Best of all she loved the girls, that "wonderful crowd" that never failed her when she wanted companionship, and never intruded when she wished to be alone. In the evenings when they gathered around her fireplace, relaxing from the strain of the day, among her cushions in the soft light of the purring flames, talking a little, silent sometimes, she was so happy that her heart ached.

Sitting on a cushion, she sewed quietly by the light

of a candle at her shoulder. Willetta's knitting needles clicked rhythmically while she told a story of the department-store girls' picnic; Anne, flung gracefully on the hearth-rug, kept her finger between the pages of a "History of the Warfare of Science and Religion in Christendom," while she listened, and on the other side of the candle Dodo, chin propped on hands, and feet in the air, obviously read Dowson, reaching out a hand at intervals for a piece of orange Sara was peeling with slender, fastidious fingers.

"Orange, Helen?" She shook her head.

"Girls, just look what Helen's doing! Is n't it gorgeous?"

"Too stunning for anything but a trousseau," Marian commented. "One of us'll have to get married. I tell you, Helen, put it up as a consolation prize! The first one of us —"

"No fair. You've decided on your Russian," remarked Dodo, turning a page.

"Mother-of-pearl! I should say not! I don't know why I never seem to find a man I want to marry —" she went on, plaintively. "One comes along, and I think,—well, maybe this one,—and then —"

They laughed.

"No, really, I mean it." She sat up, the firelight on her pretty, serious face and fluffy hair. "I'd like to get married. I want a lovely home and chil-

dren, as much as anybody. And there've been — well, you girls know. But always there's something I can't stand about them. Nicolai, now — he has just the kind of mind I like. He's brilliant and witty, and he's radical. But I could n't live with his table manners! Oh, I know I ought to be above that. But when I think, — three times a day, hearing him eat his soup — Oh, why don't radical men ever have good table manners? I'm radical, and I have."

"Oh, Marian, you're too funny!"

"The real reason you don't marry is the reason none of us'll marry, except perhaps Sara," said Anne.

Sara's defensive cry was covered by Helen's, "What's that, Anne?"

"Well, what's the use? We don't need husbands. We need wives. Some one to stay at home and do the dishes and fluff up the pillows and hold our hands when we come home tired. And you would n't marry a man who'd do it, so there you are."

"Oh, rats, Anne!"

"All right, Dodo-dear. But I don't see you marrying Jim."

Dodo sat up, sweeping her long, fine hair backward over her shoulders.

"Of course not. Jim's all right to play around with —"

"But when it comes to marrying him — exactly. There are only two kinds of men, strong and weak. You despise the weak ones, and you won't marry the strong ones."

"Now wait a minute!" she demanded, in a chorus of expostulation. "The one thing a real man wants to do is to shelter his wife; they're rabid about it. And what use have we for a shelter? Any qualities in us that needed to be shielded we've got rid of long ago. You can't fight life when you give hostages to it. We've been fighting in the open so long we're used to it — we like it. We —"

"Like it!" cried Willetta. "Oh, just lead me to a nice, protective millionaire and give me a chance to be a parasite. Just give me a chance!"

"Willetta's right, just the same," Dodo declared through their laughter. "It's the money that's at the root of it. You don't want to marry a man you'll have to support — not that you'd mind doing it, but his self-respect would go all to pieces if you did. And yet you can't find a man who makes as much money as you do, who cares about music and poetry and things. I'm putting money in the bank and reading Masefield. I don't see why a man can't. But somehow I've never run across a man who does."

"Well, that's exactly what I'm driving at, only another angle on it." Anne persisted. "The trouble is that we're rounded out, we've got both

sides of us more or less developed. It all comes down to the point that we're self-reliant. We give ourselves all we want."

"You are n't flattering us a bit, are you?" said Marian. "I only wish I did give myself all I want."

"I don't know what you're all talking about," Sara ventured softly. "I should think — love — would be all that mattered."

"We are n't talking about love, honey. We're talking about marriage."

"But are n't they the same things — in a way?"

"You won't say that when you've been married three years, child," said Dodo, with the bitterness that recalled her eight-years'-old divorce.

"Not exactly the same things, I suppose," Helen said quickly. "Marriage, I'd say, is a partnership. It's almost that legally in California. You could n't build it on nothing but emotion — love. You'd have to have more. But Anne, why can't you make a marriage of two 'rounded out' personalities?"

"Because you can't make any complete whole of two smaller ones. They don't fit into — Look here. When I was a youngster down in Santa Clara we had two little pine-trees growing in our yard. I was madly in love then — with the music-teacher! Well, I used to look at those trees. They grew closer together, not an inch between their little stems, and their branches together made one perfect pine-

tree. I was a poetic fool kid. These trees were my idea of a perfect marriage. I fell out of love with the music-teacher because he was so unreasonable about scales, I remember! But that's still my notion of marriage, the ideal of the old, close, conventional married life. And — well, it can't be done with two complete and separate full-grown trees, not by any kind of transplanting."

"Well, maybe —" The fire crackled cheerfully in the silence.

"But if you break it up,— free love and so on,— what are you going to do about children?" said Marian.

"Good Lord, I'm not going to do anything about anything! I'm only telling you —"

"Any one of us would make a splendid mother, really. We have so much to give —"

"Going to waste. When you think of the thousands of women —"

"Simply murdering their babies!" cried Willetta. "Not to mention giving them nothing in inspiration or proper environment."

"I'm not so sure we'd make good mothers. Just loving children and wanting them does n't do it. There were six of us at home, and I know. I tell you, it's a question of sinking yourself in another individuality, first the husband and then the child. There's something in us that resists. We've been ourselves too long. We want to keep ourselves to

ourselves. No, not want to, exactly — it's more that we can't help it."

"If you're right, Anne, it's a poor outlook for the race. Think of all the women like us — thousands more every year — who don't have children. We're really the best type of women. We're the women that ought to have them."

"We are not!" said Dodo. "We're freaks. We don't represent the mass of women. We go around and around in our little circles and think we're modern women because we make a lot of noise. But we are n't. We're of no importance at all, with our charity boards and our social surveys and our offices. It's the girls who marry in their teens — millions of 'em, in millions of the little homes all over America — that really count."

"In America!" Anne retorted. "You won't find them in their homes any more in France or England. The girls are n't marrying in their teens over there, not since the war. They're going to work — just as we did. They're going into business. Already French women are increasing the exports of France — *increasing* them! We may be freaks, Dodo, but we're going to have lots of company."

"It's interesting — what the war will do to marriage." They were silent again, gazing with abstracted eyes at the opaque wall of the future.

"Just the same," Sara insisted softly, "You leave

out everything that 's important when you leave out love."

Anne's small exclamation was half fond and half weary.

"We 'll always have love. Every one of us has some one around in the background, sending us flowers. A woman without a man who loves her feels like a promissory note without an endorsement. But marriage!"

"And there's always the question — what *is* love?" Helen roused at the little flutter of merri-ment, and after a moment she joined it with her clear laugh.

"Why, love is just love," said Sara, bewildered.

"Of course. There's only one definition. It's something that is n't there when you're trying to analyze it. And every one of us would," said Dodo. "Give me an orange, Sara darling, and tell us about the new pictures."

It was their last evening together in the little house. Precious as each moment of it was to Helen, with the coming change in her own life hanging over it, she had no more premonition than the others of the events that would so soon whirl them apart.

CHAPTER XXII

MARIAN rushed in upon them at luncheon next day, glowing with excitement, to announce that she would leave that night for New York on her way to France.

"I'm going as a correspondent, of course. I never dreamed that I could pull it off! But the United Press has come through with credentials. Girls, when I get over there, stories or no stories, I'm going to do something to help. I'm going to find a place where I'll be useful."

"Wait till to-morrow," said Dodo, quietly. "I'll go with you as far as Washington." Smiling at their stunned faces, she explained, still unruffled: "I've been thinking about it for some time. My assistants can keep things going here till I can arrange to put in some one else. I don't know whether this country's going into the war or not, but if it does, I want to be in the heart of things. I'd be no good in France, but I can do something in our own Department of Labor."

Two days later they were gone. Helen's own wistfulness was echoed in Willetta's mournful exclamation: "Lucky dogs! What would n't I give! But there's no use. The East is no place

to bring up children, even if I could afford to take a chance, with the infant to think about. Oh, well, you girls 'll come back twenty years from now to find me in the same old grind."

"Never mind, Willie dear. I 'll be right here the rest of my life, too," said Helen, and for a moment Paul's name was on her lips. She felt that speaking of him would be a defense against her own illogical depression, and these girls would understand. It would not even occur to them that legally she was still another man's wife. But Willetta's "Oh, you! You 're going to leave all the rest of us a million miles behind!" silenced her.

"None of us have developed the way you have in this one year," said Willetta. "If you knew what I hear everywhere about your work!" Though she knew in her heart that she would never be a great writer, praise for her work always gave Helen a throb of deep delight.

Two weeks later she sat in Mr. Hayden's office listening to a suggestion that left her breathless.

"Why don't you go to the Orient?" Mr. Hayden's eyes, usually faintly humorous, were quite serious. "There 's a big field there right now. The undercurrents in Shanghai, Japan's place in the war, the developments in Mesopotamia or Russia. France is done to death already. Every one's writing from there. But the East is still almost untouched. There 's a big opportunity there for some one."

"Do you think I could handle it?"

"Of course you could. It's a matter of being on the ground and reporting. All it needs is the ability to see things clearly and tell them graphically. You have that. It would take money, of course. I don't know how you're fixed for that."

She thought quickly, her pulses leaping.

"With these last two checks — and I have a little coming in from deferred land commissions — I'd have not quite a thousand dollars."

"Hm — well, it's not much, of course. It would be something of a gamble. If you want to try it, we'll give you transportation and letters and take a story a month. And I don't think you'd have any difficulty finding other markets in the East."

For a moment she tried to consider the question coolly, while pictures of Chinese pagodas, paper-walled houses of Japan, Siberian prairies, raced dizzily before her eyes. Then, with a shock of self-accusation, she remembered.

"I could n't go. Other arrangements."

"Don't decide too quickly. Think it over. There's a great opportunity there, and I believe you could handle it. It would make you, as a magazine writer. If you make up your mind to go, let me know right away? There's a boat on the twentieth. If you sailed on that, it would give us time to announce the series for the winter, when our renewals are coming in."

"I'll think about it," she promised. "But I'm quite sure I can't go."

She walked quickly down the windy street toward Market. The whirling dust-eddies over the cobbles, the blown scraps of paper, the flapping of her skirts, seemed part of the miserable confusion in her own mind.

How could she have forgotten Paul even for a moment? She had been heartless, head-strong, foolish to stay on in San Francisco, trifling so with the most precious thing in her life. Paul had been superhumanly patient and kind and unselfish to let her do it. She had never loved him more deeply than at that moment when with a dim sense of fleeing to him for refuge she hurried toward a telephone. Her voice trembled unmanageably when at last his came thin and faint across the wires. She had to speak twice to make him hear.

"Paul? Oh, Paul! It's Helen.—No, nothing's the matter. Only—I want to see you. Listen—I want to get away—Can you hear me? I say, I want to come down there for a while. Would your mother have room for me?—Right away. I could take the next train.—No, nothing, only I want to see you." The joy in his voice hurt her. "Why, don't you know I've always wanted that? You dear!—To-morrow morning, then.—I'll be glad, too,—so glad! Of course.—Truly, honest and true.—Foolish!—Good-by—till to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXIII

AT the end of a long, warm summer day Helen lay in a hammock swung between two apricot-trees. From time to time, with a light push of a slippered foot on the grass, she set the hammock swaying, and above her head the pale, translucent leaves and ruddy fruit shifted into new patterns against a steel-gray sky.

The mysterious, erie hush of twilight was upon her spirit. Murmuring voices came vaguely through it; across the street two women were sitting on the porch of a bungalow, and on its lawn a little girl played with a dog. The colors of their dresses, of the dog's tawny fur, of geraniums against brown shingles, were sharp and vivid in the cold light.

"Mother seems to be staying quite a while at Mrs. Chester's," said Paul. He moved slightly in the wicker chair, dislodging the ashes from his cigar with a tap of his finger, and she felt his caressing eyes upon her. She did not turn her head, saying nothing, holding to the quietness within her as one clings to a happy dream when something threatens

sleep. A puff of smoke drifted between her and the leaves.

"It is pleasant outdoors, this time of day," he persisted after a moment. Her low murmur, hardly audible, left him unsatisfied.

"Well, did you have a good time this afternoon?" His voice was brisker now, full of affectionate interest. She felt his demand for her response as if he had been tugging at her with his hands.

"Pretty good. Oh, yes, a very good time."

"What did you do?" She might have said, "Please let me alone. Let's be quiet." But Paul would be worried, hurt; he would not understand; he would ask questions. She turned a bright face to him.

"Oh, your mother and I went down town, and then we came home, and Mrs. Lamson came in."

"She's a fine little woman, Mrs. Lamson."

"Yes? Oh, I suppose so. I don't care much for her."

"You will. You'll like her when you know her better." The definiteness of his tone left her no reply. She felt that it was proper to like Mrs. Lamson, that he expected her to like Mrs. Lamson, that she must like Mrs. Lamson. A flash of foolish, little-girl anger rose in her; she would have liked to stamp her foot and howl that she would *not* like Mrs. Lamson. The absurdity of it made her smile.

"What are you smiling at, dear?"

She sat up, setting the hammock swinging.

"Oh, I don't know. Let's go somewhere," she said restlessly. "Let's take a long walk."

"All right." He was eager to please her. "I'll tell you something better than that. I'll get the car, and we'll ride down to Merced and get a sundae. Run put on your coat. You'll need it, with that thin dress."

His pride in the new car was deep and boyish. It was quite the most costly, luxurious car in town; it was at once the symbol of his commanding place in the community, and a toy to be endlessly examined and discussed. She would not think of telling him that at the moment she would rather walk than ride in it. Like an obedient child she went for her coat.

The house was dim and quiet. She closed the door of her room behind her with a little quick gesture, and stood for a moment with her back against it. She thought that it would be pleasant to stay there. Then she thought of a long, silent walk under the stars, all alone, quiet, in the darkness. Then she realized quite clearly that she did not like Mrs. Lamson, and she thought of the reasons why that amiable, empty-headed little woman bored her. At that moment the automobile-horn squawked. Paul was waiting. Hastily she seized her coat and ran out to the curb.

When the purring machine turned into the bril-

liantly lighted business district and the arched sign, "WELCOME TO RIPLEY," twinkled upon them, tawdry against the pale sky, she felt that she could not bear to go to Merced. "Let's just run up the boulevard, where it's cool and quiet, away from people," she said coaxingly.

"Well, if you want to." The car ran smoothly up the long gray highway hedged with ragged eucalyptus trees. Between their gaunt trunks she caught glimpses of level alfalfa fields, and whiffs of sun-warmed perfume swept across her face with the rushing air. In the brimming irrigation canals, shimmering like silver mirrors across the green fields, bright-colored caps bobbed and white arms splashed. Beside her Paul talked with enthusiasm of the car.

"Is n't she a beauty? She'd make eighty miles easy if I wanted to let her out. And see how flexible! Watch, now."

"Yes, dear. Wonderful!" She was not accustomed to being with people all day, that was the trouble. Those hours of making conversation with women who did not interest her seemed to have drained her of some vital force. When she had her own house she could be alone as much as she liked. Poor boy, he had been working all day; of course he wanted her companionship now. "You must let me take it out some day soon, will you?"

"Why, it's a pretty big car, Helen. I'd rather you'd let me drive it."

She laughed.

"All right, piggy-wig, keep your old car! Some day I'll get a little Blix roadster and show you how I drive!"

She was astonished at the shadow that crossed his face. His smile was a bit forced.

"I only meant it would be pretty heavy for a woman to handle. Of course you can drive it if you want to."

They ran past the gateway of Ripley Farmland Acres, and gazing at the little town, the thriving farms, and the twinkling lights scattered over the land that had been a desolate plain, she forgot his words in a thrill of pride. She had helped build these homes. When he spoke again she groped blindly for his allusion.

"I don't think you realize, Helen. I wish you would n't say things like that."

"Like what?"

"About the roadster. I wish you would say 'we' sometimes. Last night at the minister's you said, 'I think I'll buy a little farm and see what I can do with apricots.' I know you did n't realize how funny it sounded. It sort of hurts, you know."

"Oh, my dear!" Her cry of pain, her words of miserable apology, made even more clear to her the chasm between them. How could she apologize

for this, a thing she had done without knowing she was doing it? Gray desolation choked her like a fog.

"All right. It's all right. I know you did n't mean to," he said cheerfully. He took one hand from the wheel to put an arm around her shoulders. "Never mind. You'll learn." His tone confidently took possession of her, and in a heartsickening flash she saw his hope of making her what he wanted his wife to be. She felt his hand upon her tastes, her thoughts, her self, trying to reshape them to his ideal of her. "You suit me, sweetheart. I know what you are, my wonderful girl!"

Her heart stopped, and she felt that her lips were cold under his forgiving kiss. He talked happily while they swept on through the gathering darkness, and she responded in tones that sounded strange to her. Mysterious darkness covered the wide level land, farm-house windows glowed warmly yellow through it, and a great moon, rising slowly over the far hills, flooded the sky with pale light and put out the stars. At last they rode into Ripley, past the piles of raw lumber and stone that were to be their bungalow, and down the quiet street. The wheels crunched the gravel of the driveway. Paul's warm hand clasped hers, and she stumbled from the running-board into his arms. His lips were close against his cheek.

"Love me, sweetheart? Tell me. It's been a

long, long time since you said it." She stood rigid, voiceless. "Please?"

In a passion of pity and wild pain she held him close, lifting her face to his kiss in the darkness. She felt that her heart was breaking.

"You do," he said in deep content. "My dear, my dear!"

When she could reach her room she turned on the full glare of the electric lights and went softly to the mirror. She stood for a long time, her hands tight against her breast, looking into the eyes that stared back at her. "He does n't love you," she said to them. "He does n't want you. It's some one else he wants—the girl you used to be. O Paul, how can I hurt him so! You'll hurt him more cruelly if you marry him. You can't be what he wants. You can't. You're some one else. You could n't stand it. You can't make yourself over. After all these years. O Paul, my dear, my dear, I did n't mean to hurt you!"

Some hours later she remembered that a boat sailed for the Orient on the twentieth. She would have to act quickly, and it was good that there was so much to do.

CHAPTER XXIV

EARLY on the morning of the nineteenth she climbed the steps to the little brown house on Russian Hill. She had traveled all night from Masonville, awake in her berth, and she was very tired. She was so tired that it seemed impossible to feel any more emotion, and she looked indifferently at the sunny, redwood-paneled room so full of memories. A score of disconnected thoughts worried her mind; her mother's tearful face, the telegram to Washington for her passports, the steamer-trunk she must buy, Mabel looking at her enviously over the baby's head.

Brushing a hand across her blurry eyes, she sat down at her desk. She must write to Paul. She must tell him that she was going away; make him understand that their smiling farewell at the Ripley station was her good-by. She must try to show him that it was best, so that he would not hold her memory too long.

When she had finished, she folded the sheet carefully, slipped it into its envelope, and sealed the flap. It was done. She felt that she had torn away a part of herself, leaving a bleeding empti-

ness. Her brain, wise with experience of suffering, told her that the wound would heal, would even in time be forgotten, but her wisdom did not dull the pain.

A thousand memories rushed upon her, torturing, unbearable. She rose, trying to push them from her, reaching in agony for the anodyne of work. Her trunks must be packed; there were shelves of books to give away; she must telephone the tailor and the expressman. A horde of such details stretched saving hands to her, and a self-control strengthened by long use took her through them, with her chin up and a smile on her lips.

The luncheon table had never seen her gayer, amid the excited congratulations of the girls, and she rushed through an afternoon of shopping to meet them all for tea, and to spend a last intimate, warm, half-tearful evening with them around the fire.

"The old crowd's breaking up," they said. "Marian in France, and Dodo in Washington, and now Helen's going. Nothing's going to be the same any more."

"Nothing ever is," she answered soberly. "We can't keep anything in the world, no matter how good it is. And hasn't it been good — all this! The way we've cared for each other, and our happy times together, and all you've meant to me — I can't tell you. I don't think there's anything in the

world more beautiful than the friendship of women. It's been the happiest year of my whole life."

"It's been lovely, all of it," Sara murmured, curled in a heap of cushions on the floor by Helen's low chair. She laid her long, beautiful artist's hand on Helen's. "It's terrible to see things end."

The fire settled together with a soft, snuggling sound. In the dusk Willetta's face was dimly white, and the little spark of red on Anne's cigarette-tip glowed and faded. They sat about the dying fire in a last communion of understanding that seemed threatened by the darkness around them. Already the room had taken on something of the forlornness of all abandoned places, a coldness and strangeness shared in Helen's mind by the lands to which she was going, the unknown days before her.

The dull ache at her heart became pain at a sudden memory of Paul's face. She straightened in her chair, closing her fingers more warmly around Sara's.

"I'm sure of one thing," she said earnestly. "It hurts to—to let go of anything beautiful. But something will come to take its place, something different, of course, but better. The future's always better than we can possibly think it will be. We ought to know that—really *know* it. We ought to be so sure of it that we'd let go of things more easily, strike out toward the next thing. Like swimming, you know. Confidently. We ought to

live *confidently*. Because whatever's ahead, it's going to be better than we've had. I tell you, girls, I know it is."

She arrived breathlessly at the docks next day, rushing down at the last minute in a taxicab jammed with bundles. Sara and Willetta were part of the mad whirl of the morning, dashing with her to straighten out a last unexpected difficulty with the passports, hounding a delaying express company, telephoning finally for a taxicab to carry the trunks to the docks. Willetta had gone with it to see that the trunks got aboard; Sara had made coffee and toast and pressed them upon Helen while she was dressing. The telephone had rung every moment.

It was ringing again when Helen, clutching her bag, her purse, her gloves, slammed the door of the little house and ran down the stairs of Jones Street to the waiting cab. Bumping over the cobbles, with Sara beside her, and the bags, the hat-box, an armful of roses, the shawl-strapped steamer-rug, jostled in confusion about her, she looked through the plate-glass panes at San Francisco's hilly streets, Chinatown's colorful vegetable markets and glittering shops, Grant Avenue's suave buildings, and felt nothing but a sense of unreality. Incredible that these would still be here when she was gone! Incredible that she was going, actually going!

"You have the keys, Helen dear?" Sara's lips quivered.

"Yes — I think so." She dug them from her purse. "Give them to Willetta for me, will you? I'm afraid I'll forget. I hope she'll be happy in the little house." For the hundredth time she glanced at her wrist-watch. "If you hear who it was that was telephoning, explain to them that I simply had to run or I'd miss the boat, won't you dear? And you'll write." How inadequate, these commonplace little remarks! Yet what else could one say?

The taxicab stopped in the throng of automobiles about the wharves, the man must be paid, bags and steamer-rug and flowers pulled out. Willetta was there, laughing with tears in her eyes. The little Chinese woman was there and Anne and Mr. Hayden. She was surrounded, laughing, shaking hands, saying something, anything.

They were at the gang-plank, across it, on the deck of the steamer now, in the packed crowd. All around them were tears and laughter, kisses, farewells. She was shaking hands again. Miss Peterson, the stenographer from the "Post," was pressing a white package into her hands; two little girls from Telegraph Hill had come down to bring a hot, wilted bunch of weed-flowers; Mary O'Brien, from the settlement house she had written about, and others, acquaintances she had hardly remem-

bered, men with whom she had danced at the Press Club—"Oh, Mr. Clark! How good of you to come—! Good-by!—Good-by!" "Hope you have a fine trip." "Oh, thank you!—Thank you!—Good-by!"

The whistle blew; the crowd eddied about her. A last hug from Sara, tremulous kisses, Willetta's damp cheek pressed against hers, a sob in her throat. The last visitors were being hurried from the ship. Some one threw a bright paper ribbon, curling downward to the wharf. Another and another, scores of them, hundreds, sped through the sunshine, interlacing, caught by the crowd below, while others rose in long curves to the deck, till the steamer was bound to the shore by their rainbow colors.

Another whistle. Slowly, with a faint quivering of its great hulk, the ship awoke, became a living thing beneath her feet. The futile, bright strands parted, one by one, curled, fell into the water. The crowd below was a blur of white faces. Brushing her hand across her eyes, she found her own little group, Willetta, Anne, Sara, close together, waving handkerchiefs. Across the widening strip of water she waved her roses, waved and waved them till the docks were blots of gray and she could no longer see the answering flutter of white. The ship was slowly turning in the stream, heading out through the Golden Gate.

When the last sight of the dear gray city was lost, when the Ferry Tower, the high cliffs of Telegraph, the castle-like height of Russian Hill, the Presidio, Cliff House, the beach, had sunk into grayness on the horizon, she went down to her stateroom. It was piled with gifts, long striped boxes that held flowers, baskets of fruit, square silver-corded packages that spoke of bonbons, others large and small. She had not known that so many people cared.

A blind impulse had brought her into this little place where she could lock a door behind her and be alone. She had felt that she could give way there to all the tears she had not shed. But she felt only a sense of peace. She laughed a little, wiping away the few tears that did brim over her lashes, thinking of the girls who still loved her and would love her wherever she was.

Deliberately she thought of Paul, and already the deep hurt was gone. He would be reading her letter now; she felt a pang of sharp pain because she had made him suffer. But he would forget her now. In time there would be another girl, such a girl as she had been,— the girl he had loved and that no longer lived in her.

“That’s why it hurt me so!” she thought, with sudden illumination. “Not because I wanted him, but because I wanted to be all that I had been, and to have all that I have missed and never will have. Marriage and home and children. No, I can’t ever

fit into it now. But — there 's all the world, all the world, outside, waiting for me! ”

Her thoughts turned forward to it.

THE END

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