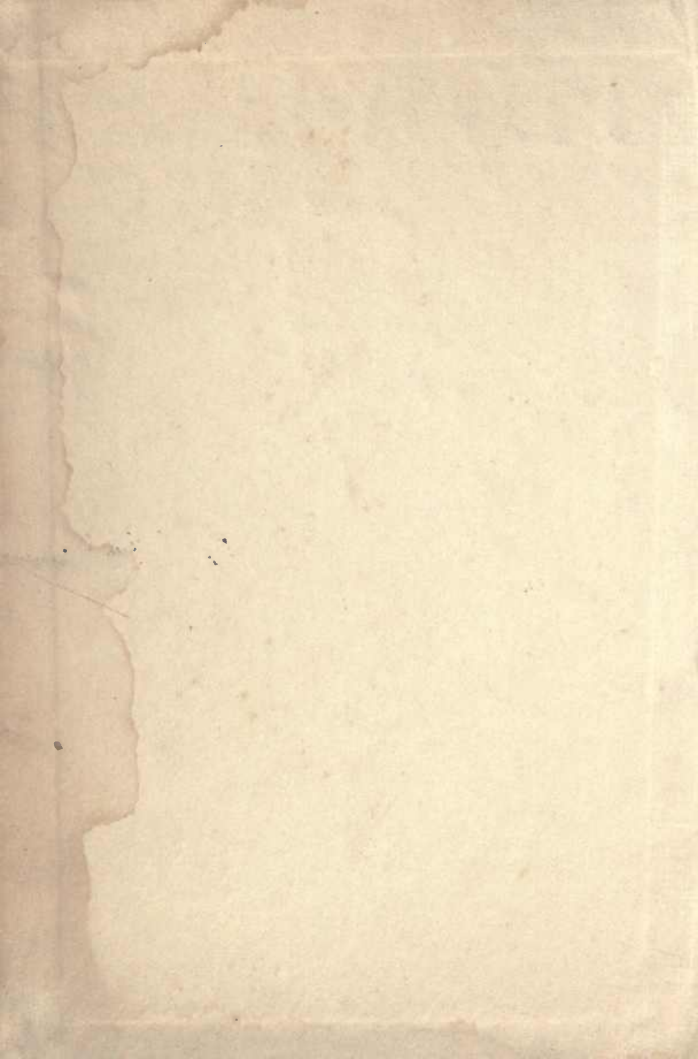
PEGGY-ELISE

Frederic Arnold Kummer
and
Mary Christian



Miss Katherine Walsh
235 West 71 st 35¢
New York City.
off The Gold Digger

Given by
Miss Marguerite Walsh

PEGGY-ELISE

For a sickening moment Peggy wondered if she would be able to do the aria.

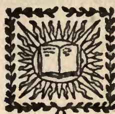
PEGGY-ELISE

BY

FREDERIC ARNOLD KUMMER

AND

MARY CHRISTIAN



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PEGGY-ELISE

CHAPTER I

"GOD!" said Venable to himself, as he watched the pitiful stream of refugees — old men, women, children — struggling through the mud of the road.

The day was raw and sunless. A thick mist hung along the roadsides, causing the bordering poplars to appear vaguely tall and remote. The rolling hills to the right resembled fog-capped mountains in the growing darkness of the afternoon.

Venable, in his mud-splashed motor car, moved ahead slowly, hugging the edge of the road in order to avoid the many vehicles traveling in the opposite direction. They appeared with ghost-like suddenness from the crowding gloom ahead — motors of every sort, innumerable supply lorries, ambulance cars, busses containing officers and men, battery after battery of seventy-fives, and now and then a train of heavy siege artillery. All these grim evidences of the conflict raging so

short a distance ahead moved swiftly, silently northward, toward that fiery fringe of devastation called the front.

Gilbert Venable, with his face set toward Paris, gave but small attention to the endless procession that passed him on the other side of the road. He had left the battle lines but a few hours before; what he had seen during this brief stay there had so dulled sensation, crushed curiosity, that the drab paraphernalia of war left him indifferent. Only the never-ending roar of the distant guns, rising at times to a tremendous crescendo, at times falling to a dull, monotonous rumble, stirred in his brain the crimson memories of the past few days.

The road wound down toward a slender stream, spanned by a concrete bridge. At its near side Venable was obliged to come to a halt. A battalion of infantry was swinging toward him, flowing over the narrow span in a blue-gray, steel-capped flood, filling the roadway from parapet to parapet.

He halted his machine at the side of the road and waited impatiently for the bridge to become clear. He wanted to get back to Paris, to put between him and the horrors of the past week the dulling barrier of distance.

As his eyes swept from the snakelike column of troops to the edge of the road nearest him, he

became suddenly aware of an object which had up to now escaped his attention.

It was a small, almost pitiful, figure in black, sitting huddled upon one of the numberless piles of crushed stone that bordered the edge of the road, evidences of the ceaseless care with which its sorely tried surface was maintained.

The figure that momentarily held his attention was that of a girl — a young girl apparently, to judge from her slender outlines. Her face, Venable could not see, for it rested in the hollow of her right arm, upon her knees.

During his journey to and from the front Venable had seen many such sights. Old men, women both old and young, children, had often jarred his consciousness, hopeless refugees from the crumbling villages to the north, wandering aimlessly, helplessly, away from the bits of earth, of brick and stone and mortar that had until now been their homes. There had been about them all, however, in spite of their apparent helplessness, a certain spirit of defiance, of grim courage, of belief in victory — ultimate victory — that were of the spirit.

This girl, crouched upon the pile of crushed stone, seemed herself crushed, although whether by grief alone or mere physical fatigue or both was not clear.

She was quite close to Venable. He looked

down at her worn and muddy boots, her bedraggled skirt, her pale cheek and neck, and wondered whether she had fallen asleep, there in the rain, she seemed so immovable.

The flood of troops had passed by now, and the road was once more clear. Venable was about to proceed on his way, when he saw the girl stagger to her feet, and, without glancing toward him, step in front of the car and start across the bridge. She moved unsteadily. Venable watched her anxiously, fearing to start his machine until she had safely crossed. Then, to his dismay, he saw her stumble slightly and, half falling, clutch the wide concrete parapet.

Venable sprang from his car at once, and approached the girl, cap in hand.

"May I be of assistance to you, mademoiselle?" he asked in French.

The girl turned her face toward him; Venable was surprised to see that she was, in spite of her pallor, her appearance of suffering, remarkably good looking. Her eyes, deeply gray, rendered preternaturally large by the shadows that fatigue had set beneath them, met his own fearlessly, with a pathetic surprise, resembling that of a child.

"Will you be so good as to tell me, monsieur," she asked, in a voice at once musical and sad, "how far it is to Paris?"

"Paris?" Venable could scarcely believe that he had heard aright. Paris, and she seemed unable to walk a dozen yards! "Why, mademoiselle, it is nearly a hundred miles."

The girl's fingers tightened on the parapet. What she had heard seemed to have sensibly increased her weakness. "A hundred miles!" she gasped. "*Mon Dieu!*" Then looking at Venable again, she tried to smile. The effort, in its pathos, struck at his heart. "I thank you, monsieur," she said, and turned away.

It was perfectly clear to Venable that the interview was at an end. The girl's bravely spoken words of thanks, her turn from him, told him that. And yet he lingered, watching her.

"Are you going to Paris, mademoiselle?" he asked, gently.

"But yes." The girl once more faced him, this time with a faint touch of color in her cheeks.

"On foot?" he persisted.

"How else?" Her glance at her worn and muddy shoes was quite involuntary. She spoke with an air of finality in which there was not the slightest suggestion of appeal.

Venable turned, indicating his car.

"I also am going to Paris, mademoiselle," he said. "If you will permit it, I shall be happy to have you accompany me."

The girl swept him with a quick, appraising

look. From her manner, no less than from her appearance, her voice, Venable knew that he was addressing no peasant girl but a woman of culture, of refinement.

"It is very kind of you," she said, thanking him with her eyes. "I accept most gladly."

"Then get in." He stepped back and flung open the door of the tonneau. "It has begun to rain again. Permit me to wrap you in this rug." In a moment he had tucked the robe about her and then, climbing to his seat at the wheel, set off at as rapid a pace as the growing darkness would permit.

As he peered into the mist ahead, Venable found himself pondering the curious twist of fate that had brought him this unexpected passenger. Her presence, he reflected, was certain to alter his own plans. It had been his intention to push on to Paris that night. He knew that it would be midnight, or later, when he arrived, but that was of small moment. The prospect of a hot and well-cooked meal, a bottle of claret, at his favorite restaurant, provided a sufficient inducement for him to proceed. The bread and meat, the small bottle of red wine in his hamper, would serve, should he feel the pangs of hunger while on the way.

With his passenger, however, it was quite different. She was cold, wet, very tired. If she

had eaten since morning, her pallid face, her trembling limbs, did not indicate it. He felt that she needed warm food, a fire at which to dry herself, rest. The long drive through the night air, in her drenched clothing, might result in a serious illness. It was not to be thought of. With a sigh of regret, he turned to the huddled figure in the rear seat.

"Mademoiselle," he said softly, "would you not like to stop and get something to eat, something hot? You could also dry your clothes —?"

There was no answer. He looked closely at his companion. Either she had fallen asleep, or had suddenly become unconscious. He hesitated no longer. The lights of a village glowed through the mist, a short distance ahead. He would stop at once.

There were few persons about, but from a bent old woman he managed to glean that he was in a town not far from Epernay. There was an inn, the woman told him, the *Maison Chevalier*. Obligingly, she pointed it out.

The door was opened by an enormously stout and competent looking woman of forty-five. She was dressed in black, but its shadow had not dimmed the fire in her eyes, nor softened the resolute, even defiant look with which she gazed out upon the world. Yet in her courage there seemed also an infinite tenderness, as of one who

had looked not only upon life, but upon suffering and death, as well.

Venable had found, to his joy, that his companion was merely asleep. She seemed dazed, uncertain, when he aroused her, but agreed at once, although without enthusiasm, to his suggestion that they dry themselves and sup. Having disposed of the car at one side of the little courtyard into which they had driven, he took the girl by the arm and led her to the door of the inn.

The stout woman, who had opened the door, proved to be Madame Chevalier herself, and as the light from the room fell upon the faces of the two before her she inventoried them with swift yet kindly eyes.

"*Entrez, mes enfants!*" she exclaimed, stepping to one side. "But you are wet, is it not? And tired? Come in."

"Mademoiselle is very fatigued," Venable said to her, closing the door behind him. "She should have dry clothing, something hot to eat. After that, perhaps, a bed. It is too far to go on to Paris, to-night."

The girl turned, gratitude in her eyes.

"It is very kind, very thoughtful of you, monsieur," she whispered. "You are a stranger to me, but be assured I shall not forget your kindness."

" It is nothing," said Venable, turning toward the fire, and searching for his pipe. " Madame will, I am sure, take good care of you, and provide you with what you need."

" This way, my child," bustled the older woman. " There are some things, my daughter's, that will suit you, I feel sure. She does not need them, now — the little Georgette — for she works in the hospital at Châlons." She turned, for a moment, regarding Venable with an eager look. " You come from the front, monsieur? " she inquired.

" From Verdun," Venable replied.

" How goes it with France? "

" There were heavy assaults, yesterday, at the Thiaumont Farm. They were all repulsed. The boches died like flies, but bravely. They fight well."

" Yes — that is true. But the little Pétain will not let them pass. I have seen him. Once, he had coffee, here, in this very room. With him two of my sons have died." She said this quite dispassionately, as one who spoke of events remote, detached, with a splendid and impersonal pride.

The young girl touched her arm.

" My father was also killed — at Le Mort Homme — Captain Lascelles. He —" she hesitated, choking down a sob — " he was all I had.

You have, perhaps, other sons, madame?"

"One. And my man, Raymond. He is in the artillery. Those two are left me. *Le bon Dieu* has indeed been kind. Come! I am chattering here, when you should have dry clothes on your back. And the supper. What shall it be, monsieur? I will prepare it at once."

"Chicken — an omelet — soup, perhaps — whatever you have"— he felt sure his companion had eaten little that day —" and some wine. Red, yes. And coffee."

"Good. You need not wait long. Come, mademoiselle." She led the way into a hall at the rear, and the girl followed her. The warmth, perhaps the woman's words, had brought a bit of color to her cheeks, an erectness to her tired and drooping shoulders.

"The good God has indeed been kind!" Venable, gazing into the fire, revolved the words in his mind. How gloriously the spirit of France spoke in them. How nobly had her women responded to her call. "The good God has indeed been kind —" with two sons dead! Such a nation might be crushed, destroyed; it could not be beaten. And he, an American, was rushing back to Paris, impelled by visions of a well-cooked dinner, a bottle of wine, while men fought, with the courage of heroes, for the sake of an ideal. . . .

The supper of sorrel soup, omelet, roast chicken was deliciously prepared. The wine, a thin claret, was by no means bad. Venable served his companion in silence, while Madame Chevalier bustled about, chattering of the news of the day, which seemed but a reflection of the conflict which was going on so short a distance away. Monsieur Mercier, the village doctor, had been killed last week. The boches fired upon the Red Cross flag, it seemed. Geoffroi Pierre, the notary, had lost both legs. Noel Pitou was blind, but the shell had not effaced his cheerful smile. Madame Chevalier spoke exultantly. Her look, as she referred to some act of self-sacrifice, of heroism, was triumphant. Venable realized that the war was not alone at Verdun, at Rheims, at Ypres, but in the hearts of the people of France. Their baptism of fire had given birth, not to heroes alone, but to heroism, alike in royalist and republican, professor and *gamin*, general and humble *poilu*. Presently, the older woman left them, to attend to the wants of some noisy customers in the taproom, and Venable and Mademoiselle Lascelles were left alone.

He had felt something of a shock, when she had entered the room, with Madame Chevalier beaming over her shoulder. The change of clothing, the simple dress of white, softly open at the throat, the daintily arranged hair, had trans-

formed the girl from a dejected and bedraggled object to a creature of astonishing beauty and charm. The warmth had brought a faint flush to her cheeks, and her eyes, large and luminous, were no longer dull with fatigue. Madame Chevalier, the girl explained, had given her a glass of *quinquina,* to ward off danger of cold. It had made her feel vastly better.

One outstanding fact impressed Venable. The girl, who had seemed speechless with grief, so short a time before, who had spoken of her father, but recently killed, and of her pilgrimage to visit his grave, now seemed brave, self-possessed, almost cheerful. A spirit of optimism spoke in her voice, shone in her eyes. Had it been the short rest, the warmth, the unexpected kindness of strangers that had so changed her? More likely, he thought, it was a reflection of the indomitable spirit of heroism which the older woman had exhibited.

Venable made no reference to her journey or its cause. He thought it might please her to have him tell her something about himself.

"I am glad, mademoiselle," he said, "that I happened to be coming from Verdun, to-day. It was most fortunate. Listen — it is raining hard." The storm was driving in vicious, slashing gusts against the panes of the windows. "I am glad you are not on the road."

" It was most fortunate for me, monsieur," the girl replied, with smiling eyes.

" I had gone to Verdun to see a very dear friend of mine, an American," Venable continued. " He was in the flying corps, and had done splendid work. Last week his machine fell — a broken wing, from shrapnel fire. His injuries were very severe. They could not bring him to Paris. He died last night."

He paused. How stupidly, yet unintentionally, he had brought the conversation around to the very topic he had most wished to avoid. Yet what other topic existed, that did not involve this one? The war, like a huge octopus, had reached out its tentacles until they clutched at every human interest, every human heart.

" I am sorry, very sorry," the girl said sympathetically. Then, after a pause: " Do you live in Paris, monsieur? "

" Yes, mademoiselle. For the present, at least. But my home is in New York. I am an American."

" Yes, I knew that." She met his eyes, a twinkle of amusement in her own, in spite of their shadows.

" Oh — you mean from my accent? " he asked. " But then, I might have been English."

" No. You see, I understand the difference." At once she began to speak in Venable's native

tongue. "My mother was an American — she came from Philadelphia."

"Really!" Venable exclaimed, astonished. "I had thought you to be French — typically French. I can't tell you how glad I am to know that we are — well — half compatriots, at least. Is your mother alive?"

"No." The girl's eyes were again veiled with shadows. "She died when I was but fourteen. I am quite alone, now. You see, my father, when the war broke out, was a musician, a violinist. He played in the orchestra at the Opéra, and had some pupils as well. When he went to join his regiment, over two years ago, I was left alone. He had saved a little, but it did not last long. I have been working, in the factories where the new uniforms are made. It is hard work, of course, but I have been glad to do what I could. Last Saturday a message came to me from one of the hospitals. Henri Musset, the actor at the Comédie, who was one of my father's best friends, and in his regiment, sent to me, asking me to come to see him. He had been struck by a piece of shell, and it had shattered his hip. He was very ill. When I went to the hospital, he told me that my father, Captain Lascelles, had been shot at Le Mort Homme. He could not say whether he had been killed or not, for in a mo-

ment he himself lay with his hip broken. That was all he knew.

"I left Paris at once. Through a friend at the Ministry of War I secured an order, permitting me to go to the front. It was most unusual. Women are not allowed, as a rule, to go. But I had to find out about my father. So I went.

"I did not have much money, but it was enough to get me to St. Menehould. I was not permitted to go farther. There is a hospital there for those who are so severely wounded that they cannot be moved beyond. I spent three days inquiring for news of my father. When at last I was successful, I found that he had been shot through the breast, and had lived but a few hours. He had been buried in the cemetery there. I found his grave. I put some flowers on it — wild flowers that I gathered in the woods. Then I started back. I had very little money, and, therefore, I walked. I think it was easier to walk. It all seemed so terrible — I hardly knew what I was doing. You know how it is, monsieur, when one is very nervous, very sorrowful: it seems better to move, to walk, to be in the air.

"There was a letter for me, that my father had left. He had written it before the attack in which he was killed. Also, they had given him

the Croix de Guerre. He saved a line of trenches by operating a machine gun, alone, until reinforcements came. He was found, lying across the gun, shot through the breast. I wish I could have seen him before he died, but I was too late."

"You have indeed a splendid inheritance, mademoiselle."

"Yes. And now, monsieur, be so good as to tell me more of yourself."

"I am afraid there is very little to tell," replied Venable. "I came to Paris five years ago. I am a sculptor, a pupil of Voisin. He has encouraged me — I hope that I may justify his praise. I have been working, all these months, while my friends have gone to the front, have fought. Paris is very lonely. I have felt, since I stood at Harding's grave, that it would be better were I, too, to serve France. There is something almost trivial in the work of the artist, when destiny is fashioning so vast a tragedy but sixty miles away. We artists attempt to picture, in some lame fashion, the ideal. What does it amount to when, on a thousand sections of the front, the ideal is daily being lived?"

Mademoiselle Lascelles regarded him with a comprehending smile. "That may be so," she agreed, "and yet, it is through the arts, monsieur, that the masses come to understand the ideal. 'The Marseillaise' did not celebrate vic-

tory — it inspired it. It is not the generals, the soldiers, who lead. It is the thinkers, the idealists. They must point out the way. Napoleon did not create the Revolution; Voltaire, Rousseau, had done that before him. Do not despair of your work, my friend. It is the man of genius who guides the world — is it not?"

"You encourage me, mademoiselle," he said. "I go back to my work with less of the feeling that I am a shirker."

The clatter of rain against the windows of the room had sensibly increased. Venable lit a cigarette.

"I had intended, mademoiselle," he said, "to return to Paris to-night, but it is out of the question. You will take a room here, of course, and in the morning we will continue our journey."

The girl faced him with a grateful smile.

"I can do nothing else, monsieur," she said. "And yet, I have but seven francs. If my dinner, the lodging for the night, and breakfast come to more than that, you will, of course, allow me to repay you."

"Of course," Venable agreed courteously. "It is an affair of chance that I happen to have the necessary money with me. Do not, I beg of you, let the matter cause you concern. To be of service to you, in this emergency, is a great pleasure."

"Then I think I shall go to my room," the girl said. "I am very tired. We meet in the morning?"

"In the morning." Venable put out his hand and clasped his companion's slender fingers in his. "May you rest well, mademoiselle. Good night!"

CHAPTER II

VENABLE had tried to work all day, but he could not bring his mind to the task. The devils of unrest possessed him. The moist clay, instead of responding to his touch, seemed to mock him. He turned away in disgust.

The afternoon he spent puttering aimlessly about the studio. At last, in desperation, he began to write some long deferred letters; but even this attempt at industry was presently frustrated by the ringing of the doorbell.

Venable opened the door. A young girl stood upon the threshold.

For a moment he stared. Then recognition came to him.

"Mademoiselle Lascelles!" he exclaimed, holding out his hand.

The girl took it, gently, firmly, a grave smile upon her face.

"How do you do, Mr. Venable," she said in English. Venable, in a confused way, realized once more her astonishing charm.

"Won't you come in?" he invited. "I did not know you, at first. I am glad that you — remembered me."

"How could I forget you, monsieur?" the girl replied, her eyes very bright. "There are not so many who are kind."

She moved toward a chair he indicated. Venable looked at her in surprise. She seemed singularly different from the girl of the Verdun road. There was a buoyancy about her, a youthful effervescence, that had been lacking at their previous meeting.

She wore a dress of black silk, very plain, and, because of its plainness, very becoming. Her figure, which had seemed slim, almost angular, in the drenched garments she had worn when he first saw her, now appeared pleasingly youthful and round. She sparkled with the joy of living, the vivacity of youth.

"I meant to come before, monsieur," the girl said, "but I have been very busy."

"Yes. I have wondered about you. I hope you feel better."

"Oh, much better. I have come to ask you a question."

"A question? What is it?"

"Have you need for a model, monsieur?"

"A model?" Venable glanced toward the partially completed figure of Phryne that stood, swathed in moist cloths, upon his modeling stand. "You are not a model, mademoiselle?"

"No, monsieur, that is true. But I find my-

self under the necessity to earn some money. If I can do so, by posing, it will make me very happy.

"You have never posed before?" Venable asked.

"No. Never. But why should I not? I have good lines — many persons have told me that."

Venable frowned dubiously. The suggestion did not impress him favorably. The figure of Phryne, upon which he was engaged, was a nude one, a representation of the famous courtesan as she stood, naked, before the Athenian tribunal.

"I have already a model for the statue, mademoiselle," he said; "although," he added, with a smile, "she has not been entirely satisfactory."

"Then will you not let me take her place? I have the best of reasons for desiring to do this work."

"May I ask, mademoiselle, what your reasons are?"

"Certainly. My mother's sister, Mrs. Austen, in America, has written to me, asking me to come to her, to make my home with her family in the future. I feel that I should go. But I have not the money — I need at least five hundred francs for the journey, monsieur. It is a great sum. To secure it I must work at something that will pay better than making uniforms. You see, I

have studied for opera, but now — there is no demand for singers, except those who will give their services for nothing. I, too, would gladly sing for the soldiers; but I must earn money — much money. That is why I have come to you."

"Ah! I see. Five hundred francs. . . . It is, as you say, a large sum. I give two francs an hour to my models. They think that excellent pay. It would take you a long time, mademoiselle, to earn five hundred francs at that rate."

The girl's face fell. She made no effort to conceal her disappointment.

"I might be able to do with less," she said, with a dismayed smile. "Four hundred francs, perhaps. How many hours a day do you work, monsieur?" She quite evidently had not abandoned hope.

"It depends on how I feel," Venable laughed. "Of late, I have done very little. I have felt no inspiration, no surety of touch. But, when things are going well, I sometimes work for five or six hours a day. It is hard work, mademoiselle — posing for such a length of time. I doubt if you could endure it."

"I am not afraid of hard work, monsieur," the girl replied. She paused, making some sort of mental calculation. "Six hours a day would be twelve francs, monsieur. That is much more

than I could earn in any other way, in these terrible times. In less than two months, I could save enough, I am sure, to go to America. I will take the position if you think I can fill it satisfactorily."

Venable was conscious of an extreme embarrassment. Professional models he was able to regard quite impersonally. They posed, as a matter of course, free from any questions of propriety. But here was a girl of his own class — in the conventional phrase, a lady. Such work was wholly new to her. He feared she had underestimated its difficulties.

"I cannot tell, mademoiselle," he said slowly, "whether you would suit me or not, without seeing your undraped figure. This is the piece of work I am doing." He drew the moist cloths from the partly finished Phryne. "It has not gone well. I am greatly dissatisfied with it. Should I make a change in models, I must of necessity start the figure over. But I should not regret that, for the pose does not suit me." He had called the girl's attention to the statue in this way, hoping that when she fully realized the type of work upon which he was engaged she would change her mind. This, however, did not prove to be the case. She regarded the clay figure with eager eyes.

"It is exquisite," she said. "I have seen

only one other Phryne — a small ivory one, in the Louvre. The pose is quite different. I like yours much better."

"Why?" Venable asked, wondering whether his companion spoke from any real conviction or merely to please him. Her next words enlightened him.

"The one in the Louvre," she said, "has the face averted, the hands clasped in an attitude of modesty. I do not think Phryne would have felt that way. She was a courtesan. I have read that she took delight in exhibiting herself before the Athenians, in the character of Aphrodite, rising from the sea. Instead of being ashamed, when she stood nude before the judges, I think she would have been, as you have shown her, proud of her beauty, almost defiant."

Venable gazed at her with keen interest. That this young girl should so instantly have grasped his conception of the famous Greek hetæra, was little short of amazing.

"You know the story of Phryne, I see," he remarked.

"Yes. My father and I were great readers. He thought of composing an opera, once, with Phryne as the leading character, but he never did it. He had great ambitions, but he had to work very hard, and did not have much time to compose." She hesitated for a moment. "Well,

monsieur," she asked, at length, "shall I try the pose? Then you can tell whether or not I would suit you."

Venable was puzzled by the girl's attitude. She showed no embarrassment. It was as though, with the instincts of the true artist, she could dissociate herself completely from the task before her, regarding it, in a way charmingly naïve, as a necessary means to an end.

"Very well, mademoiselle," Venable said, turning to the rear of the room. "You can make yourself ready, here." He indicated a low couch, in a recess behind an embroidered Japanese screen. This couch constituted Venable's bed, at night. During the day, it was used by his models, when removing their street clothing, or when resting during the intervals in long and trying poses.

Mademoiselle Lascelles followed him, without any observable hesitation, and vanished behind the screen. Venable lit a cigarette, fastened a sheet of paper upon his drawing board, and hunted up some bits of charcoal. If the girl suited the purposes of his work, and he saw no reason why she should not, he concluded that he might as well utilize the time by making some sketches of her in various poses. Her remarks concerning the character of Phryne had interested him greatly; he was anxious to improve

his previous conception of the figure. The former pose had lacked spirit, been unconvincing. He had realized this, himself — vaguely — and as a result his interest in his work had flagged.

After what seemed an astonishingly short time, he heard Mademoiselle Lascelles speaking to him.

" I am ready, monsieur," she said.

Venable looked up. She stood before the screen, the milk whiteness of her body outlined in delicately graceful curves against the background of embroidered black satin.

Her figure, as Venable instantly realized, was exquisitely molded, possessing the rare combination of tender youthful lines, with the superb grace of well-developed, vigorous womanhood. His former model, a splendid creature, physically, now seemed in retrospect heavy and commonplace, betraying in every line her peasant origin. He thanked the good fortune that had brought him so perfect a subject for his work.

Going to the model stand, he threw a bit of silk drapery across its wooden surface.

" Stand here, if you please, mademoiselle," he said, endeavoring to conceal both his surprise and his pleasure. He felt that it would please her to have him appear totally unconscious of the fact that this experience, an every-day one to him, was quite another matter to her. That her calmness was assumed, he very well knew.

He found himself admiring her singular courage.

The mellow afternoon glow, filtering through the skylight, rested tenderly, lovingly, upon the girl's round full throat, her firm, upturned breasts, her slender, almost boyish, hips, and gave to her smooth skin the quality of pale, polished ivory. A trace of color crept into her cheeks, as she felt Venable's gaze upon her. He caught her eyes. In them he glimpsed not shame, not embarrassment, but a fine clear glow of bravery, of determination.

"Will you indicate the pose, mademoiselle," he said, "that you had in mind when you spoke a few moments ago? What you said interested me very much. You see," he added, with a smile, "I am asking you to help me."

Mademoiselle Lascelles acknowledged the compliment with a flush of pleasure. It delighted her to think that Venable had really found her suggestions worthy of attention.

"I — I think it might have been something like this," she said hesitatingly. Then she dropped her arms at her sides, extended forward very slightly, as though in appeal. Yet the appeal was dominated by a look of pride, of confidence in the power of her beauty. Her chin was raised a trifle, her glance bent upward toward the imaginary judges with an enigmatic smile. Her face, her manner, her whole pose seemed to

say: "I am the most beautiful woman in Greece. You will not dare condemn me."

Venable realized instantly that the pose for which he had so vainly sought, during the past few weeks, had been almost miraculously given to him. He trembled lest the girl move before he had had an opportunity to record it in black and white.

"That is splendid — splendid!" he exclaimed. "Do you think you can stand just that way, for a few moments?"

"Yes. It is not hard. My arms, you see, are in a perfectly natural position, so that there is no strain." She stood, immovable, a thing of beauty.

Venable, rapidly sketching the lines of her figure, thought that it was indeed the very naturalness of the pose, the easy grace, the absence of all striving for effect, that made it so perfect. Inspired, he worked rapidly, eagerly, forgetting everything in his absorption in his work. A front view completed, he moved to another position, and made a second, and later, a third sketch.

"Are you tired, now?" he asked.

"Not very." Mademoiselle Lascelles lowered her head with a sigh. The effort to remain perfectly still had proven a strain. "I'll be all right again, in a moment or two."

"You had better sit down and rest awhile." Venable handed her a kimono, and lit a cigarette. "I cannot tell you, mademoiselle, how much you have helped me. Look." He showed her the sketches he had made. "It is just the pose for which I have been looking."

The girl had thrown the kimono about her and sat in a low chair, gazing quietly up at him.

"I am glad, very glad, if I have helped," she said. "Do you want to start, again? I 'm quite rested, now." She rose and went toward the model stand.

"I sha'n't be able to do any more, to-day," Venable replied. "You see, I must break down this thing"— he pounded the wet clay —"and arrange to start all over again. Anyway, it 's much too late. I usually go to dinner at half-past six."

"Surely it is n't that late, now?"

"No." Venable consulted his watch. "Only a little after five. But I must dress." He glanced down at his smock. "If you will do me the honor, mademoiselle, I should be very happy to have you dine with me."

The girl shook her head.

"I am sorry, monsieur. It would have been a pleasure. But I must work."

"Work?" said Venable, surprised.

"But, yes, monsieur. I have arranged to sew,

every evening, from eight until ten, for the Red Cross. So many bandages are needed — you can understand, of course. And when our men are fighting so hard, out there at the front, it seems almost — heartless — to do nothing to help. Don't you think so? Oh, I love pleasure, monsieur — I love music, and the theatre, and to dance. But not now." With a quick smile, she passed behind the screen.

Venable turned and began to fill his pipe. He felt disappointed at the thought of having her go. Drawing a two-franc piece from his pocket, he placed it on the table. Mademoiselle Lascelles was still dressing.

Presently, she came from behind the screen, her face eager, animated, her eyes sparkling.

"I did not ask you, monsieur, whether I suited you or not? It seems I merely assumed it. Do you want me for a model? Will I really do?"

Venable took the two-franc piece from the table and placed it in her hand.

"Mademoiselle," he said, with smiling eyes, "you will not only do, but, should you feel inclined to ask it, I would willingly pay you not only two francs an hour, but four — five, rather than lose you. I believe that, with you as my model, this Phryne will be a masterpiece. So,

you see, mademoiselle, you have me in your power."

The girl joined in his laugh, her voice very clear and bell-like.

"I am not sufficiently conceited to think any such thing, monsieur. If I can earn the two francs an hour, I shall be very grateful indeed. At what time shall I come, in the morning?"

"At — let us say ten o'clock," Venable replied. "Will that suit you?"

"Perfectly, monsieur. Or earlier, if you like. I shall have nothing to do, after breakfast."

"Then suppose we say nine."

"Very well. Nine. I am very thankful to you. Now, I shall be able to go to America."

The thought of her going did not arouse in Venable any feelings of enthusiasm. With a model, such as this, what might not a man do? Her mere presence was an inspiration.

"Why, mademoiselle," he asked, "are you so very anxious to leave France?"

"I will tell you. Here, there is no room for empty mouths. I can get a little pension from the government, it is true, but I prefer to leave even that small sum for others who may need it more. As for work — I can sew uniforms, yes, or something of the sort, but there are many to do that who are able to do nothing else. I feel

that I *am* able, monsieur. I have ambitions. In your so rich country, there is, I am told, a greater opportunity. That is why I wish to go. My aunt, Mrs. Austen, would have sent me the passage money, I suppose, but she could not have thought that I was penniless. I shall write to her, telling her that I cannot come until July. That should give me time, do you not think? I will work very hard, monsieur; and at home I will practice the pose, so that my muscles may become accustomed to it, and not grow tired. Oh — I am very industrious. You will see." With a smile, she adjusted her hat.

"I do not doubt it, mademoiselle. And you will dine with me, some time, will you not? Perhaps you do not sew for the hospitals on Sunday?"

"No. If it would please you, monsieur, I could dine with you on Sunday."

"It would please me very much. We will start early and go to St. Cloud. What do you say?"

"It would be delightful, but —" she hesitated, as though she feared to hurt his feelings —"do you usually dine with your models, monsieur?"

Venable flushed. The question annoyed him.

"While in my studio, mademoiselle, you are my model, it is true. But, outside it, I should

be very happy if you will consent to be — my friend." He put out his hand.

Mademoiselle Lascelles took it in her firm, cool grasp.

"I am honored, monsieur, that you should wish it. I will come to-morrow at nine. Good day." With a charming smile she left him. Venable sat for an hour thinking and smoking. Then he dressed and went to dinner.

CHAPTER III

GILBERT VENABLE was a sculptor because he most desired to be a sculptor, which was — as such things go — rather an unusual circumstance.

The elder Venable had been a lawyer, a man of unusual intelligence. When Gilbert, at the age of ten, began to exhibit tendencies toward an artistic career, by carving tiny heads from soapstone, or modeling grotesque figures in putty or wax, Mr. Venable did not assert that art was not only long but highly unprofitable — although he may have realized it. Instead, he encouraged the boy's early efforts, took him to art galleries and museums, saw that he had special courses in drawing and modeling at school, and later, when his college courses had been completed, sent him to Paris to study under one of the most celebrated sculptors in France. Some thwarted ambitions in his own youth had made him kind.

Luckily Gilbert was an only child, and Mr. Venable, being a widower, was able at his death to leave his son sufficient money to pursue his artistic career in reasonable comfort. The results had been excellent. The young man, in-

stead of consuming his energies in an attempt to earn a living through his art while still striving to master it, had been able to devote these energies exclusively to the latter end. It was hinted, through the studios, that Gilbert Venable had before him a brilliant future.

His father's advice concerning the affairs of life had been brief but explicit. "Put success above money," he had said. "Do not marry. To do so is apt to spell disaster, for the artist. If, however, you find that you must take a wife, wait at least until you have first achieved success."

Venable hearkened to this rather worldly advice, largely because he had not met a woman who attracted him sufficiently to tempt him to disregard it. He considered himself a confirmed bachelor. His life, in the brilliant French capital, had been the life of the artist. His occasional affairs of the heart had been with models, *cocottes,* the women of the Quarter; they had been no more enduring than the bubbles in a glass of champagne. Other women, women of his own world, he rarely saw. An occasional one from the States, anxious to be shown the sights of the city, to dine in restaurants which did not figure in the guide books, comprised his experience with them. For the rest, he worked a great deal, played a little, and looked upon marriage

as a bourgeois attempt to chain romance to a humdrum fireside.

There flitted occasionally through his dreams the vision of an ideal woman, one who might be as interesting mentally as she was desirable physically — a wife who could be at the same time, mistress, adviser, comrade, inspiration, critic, and friend — but he had never met such a woman, and at heart he gravely doubted that any such really existed.

This creature of his dreams, usually so evanescent, so remotely in the background, had undergone a momentary materialization in the person of Mademoiselle Lascelles. He found himself picturing her, not as a temporary visitor to his studio, but as its permanent occupant. She was as alone in the world as he was. Why should she be obliged to go to America, to become a dependent upon the charity of her relatives? He laughed at himself, as he brushed the vision aside, but it persisted in troubling him.

Just what Mademoiselle Lascelles herself thought, he did not know. In spite of her deceptive candor, he found the girl singularly reserved. For a woman so unusually attractive, she appeared to be quite unaware of the fact that her charms might be used to her advantage. Venable had supposed that all women made use of the power of sex attraction to influence men

in their favor, even if only through such minor devices as dress, smiles, coquettish glances. But Mademoiselle Lascelles seemingly knew nothing of such artifices. She wore her plain black frocks with an air, but she seemed sublimely unconscious of the fact. There was in her manner toward him not the slightest trace of appeal. She smiled when she was amused, which was often, but she did not smile either to flatter or please him. Venable wondered whether this attitude toward his sex was a natural one, or one she had assumed, in his particular case, more effectually to preserve the footing of employer and employee. He attempted, in various little ways, to find out; but his efforts met with complete failure. Could his newly found model be so superlatively clever, that she was attempting to arouse in him, by a pretended indifference, an interest which she could never have produced by the more usual methods of her sex? It was an interesting speculation. He frequently occupied his mind with it.

Mademoiselle Lascelles had appeared promptly, the first morning, at nine, and had assumed the pose of the afternoon before without great difficulty. He had been obliged to help her a little, to touch her white, cool flesh, to bend her arm a trifle, to turn one shoulder toward the light. She shrank from his touch; then in-

stantly recovered herself, as though she had been unaware of it. Venable thought the more of her because of her sensitiveness, without fully realizing the terror with which she faced her task. Perhaps it required courage on her part of an order no less high than that which had filled the breast of Captain Lascelles, when he faced that gray-coated flood at La Mort Homme.

The opportunities for conversation, during the hours of work, were limited. It was only when the girl was resting that Venable was able to talk to her. These periods of rest he insisted upon with far greater frequency than he would have had she been a professional model. He knew, instinctively, that the girl would drop from fatigue before she would ask for a breathing spell, and to her unaccustomed muscles the task was necessarily very trying.

He asked her, once, how she liked the work. Her answer surprised him.

"I cannot say that I like it at all, monsieur," she said, with her quick smile. "I am happy, truly, to help you create a masterpiece, but to be a model all my life — no, that I should not like."

"Have you ever thought of marriage, mademoiselle?" he said, with an odd, cynical smile. "Most women look to that as an escape from the struggle for existence."

"I should think it a pity, monsieur, to regard

it in that way. Truly, I should rather remain a model than take a husband for such a reason. Marriage is far more than just to exist. My father and mother were very happy because they loved each other. Can one live, always, without love, monsieur?"

"Love need not necessarily imply marriage," observed Venable, watching the girl closely. He was anxious to see what effect his cynicism would have upon her.

The result was disappointing. The idea seemed neither to shock her, nor to elicit any expression of agreement.

"That is as one pleases," she said calmly. "Certainly, people do not love because they are married. But they marry, I think, when they love — and the man would, necessarily, wish to give both the woman he loved, and their possible children, the respect of society, the protection of the law."

Venable found the argument unanswerable enough, from a practical standpoint, at least. He smiled to himself as his companion went on.

"Perhaps, monsieur, you have never experienced love."

"I think you may be quite right," he asserted. "Have you, mademoiselle?"

"No. Not yet. I have known so few men. I fear I do not understand them. You see, my

mother died when I was only fourteen — that is five years ago. After that, I had to take her place; my father needed me to care for him. You may know, monsieur, that musicians are not what you call — practical. If he had a few francs, it filled him with joy — he was rich. I was obliged to manage everything. It made him very happy. We had a little apartment. I cooked, of course, and paid out the money, and mended his clothes, and then, we read together, and I nursed him when he was sick — which was quite often, monsieur, because he could not stand wine very well. And his friends — well, you know how musicians, artists, are. He said I was a great comfort to him." She turned away, and Venable felt, rather than saw, that her eyes had filled with tears. "I have known scarcely any men, monsieur. There was one, after my father went away with his regiment — a young man, who played the 'cello. He was lame and could not go into the army. He wished me to marry him, but I did not love him, so of course I could not. I was sorry, for he seemed to be very unhappy,— but what could I do?"

It was on their excursion to St. Cloud that Venable saw a new side of his companion's nature. Under the influence of the spring sunshine the serene gravity of the girl of the studio

vanished. She became light hearted, gay, altogether charming.

They arranged to leave Paris in the forenoon, taking a luncheon to eat in the woods. Mademoiselle Lascelles had insisted upon preparing this luncheon herself; Venable, equally insistent, furnished the money for it. Carrying a dainty basket, she had met him at the studio, her smiling eyes doing much to relieve the somberness of her mourning costume.

They made the trip by one of the darting little river steamers. There were not many persons on the boat — a few women, children, old men. Mademoiselle Lascelles displayed all the eager interest of a child. She had not been to St. Cloud for over three years. She regretted that the fountains would not be playing, until Venable told her that he had already seen them.

"Mademoiselle," he said, with his whimsical smile, "I have suddenly realized, to my surprise, that I do not know your first name. Tell me what it is."

"I thought you would ask me that — it has seemed strange, always, to have you call me 'mademoiselle.' I have two names, monsieur. The first, my mother gave me. It is Marguerite."

"I like Marguerite," Venable interrupted. "It suits you very well — at times."

"Perhaps it does — at times. But my other name, monsieur, the one that my father gave me, is Elise."

"'Elise,'" Venable repeated the name softly to himself. "That, too, I like. But — what do people call you — those who — who know you well?"

Mademoiselle Lascelles gave a little laugh.

"It is funny, about my name," she said. "My mother, it seems, began by calling me Peggy. She said it was quite American. But my father preferred Elise. So, in the end, I came always to be called Peggy-Elise, just as though it were one name. Is it not droll, monsieur?"

"Droll, and very charming as well," Venable replied. "Peggy-Elise. It suits you admirably. At times you seem just — Peggy, to me, when you are merry, and light-hearted, as you are to-day; and then, at other times, you seem — Elise. If you do not mind, I shall call you by both your names, Peggy-Elise."

"I shall like that, monsieur."

"But, in return, you must call me by *my* first name. I don't think much of it, but it 's the only one I have — Gilbert."

The girl murmured the name to herself: "'Gilbert.' Do you really think I ought to take so great a liberty with my — my employer?" she asked, archly.

"You promised to forget all that, to-day," Venable reminded her.

"And I will keep my promise. Look — there are the fountains." She pointed to the sloping hillside.

Venable, carrying the basket, helped her ashore, and presently they were mounting the beautiful winding road that led toward Sévres.

The close of the month had seen an end to the cold rains, and the trees were bravely, boisterously green. All along the roadside spring blossoms lay half hidden in the grass. They did not stop to gather any of them, but pushed on to the summit, and their objective, the park.

The selection of a spot at which to eat their luncheon, was the subject of much debate. From the Lanterne there was, of course, the view; but Mademoiselle Lascelles, after they had rested from their climb and feasted their eyes upon the magnificent panorama, decided that it would be nicer to find a cool and shaded spot in the forest, and in this Venable heartily concurred. He was filled with the spirit of the spring, and thought of himself as some twentieth-century Pan, suddenly released from the bondage of bricks and mortar, plunging into the dim, forest glades with a charming dryad.

They found a rustic bench, along a little path bordered with splendid oaks. Through the

trunks of the trees they caught an occasional glimpse of the silver ribbon of the Seine.

Mademoiselle Lascelles ran to the bench with a cry of delight.

"Oh!" she cried. "It's lovely! Let us eat our luncheon here — Gilbert!" It was the first time she had used the name, and she hesitated charmingly over the unaccustomed syllables.

"Yes, Peggy-Elise," Venable laughed, putting down the basket. "Shall I help you to set the table?"

"No — no. I will do that. You can gather some flowers to decorate it. This is an occasion, monsieur. Our first meal together. We must not omit the formalities."

"Nor the informalities," he added, smiling, then began to hunt through the grass for violets. There were not many to be found, but he picked nothing else. When he presently returned to the bench, with a small handful, he found his companion impatiently awaiting him.

"Come, Monsieur Gilbert," she cried. "Everything is ready."

"Very well, Mademoiselle Peggy-Elise." He laid the little bunch of violets beside her plate. "These are all I could find."

"How did you know I liked violets best!" The girl buried her face in the tender blossoms.

"An inspiration, perhaps — you inspire

me continually, you know, in many ways."

Lunch over, they strolled along the path to a little ravine, through which ran a miniature stream. The sun-flecked slope was inviting. Venable threw himself upon the grass, and leaning against the trunk of a tree lit his pipe. Mademoiselle Lascelles stretched herself lazily upon the turf and lay, her eyes half closed, gazing down toward the Seine. Her features, in repose, were intensely interesting to Venable; he noted with satisfaction the fine forehead under its crown of tawny hair, the thin, sensitive nostrils, the high Gallic cheekbones, the firm, intelligent mouth and chin. Mademoiselle Lascelles was undeniably a woman of character. Then, as she turned her full face toward him, he realized what a singular difference there was between the front view and the profile. The former was gay, almost childlike, in its youth and innocence; the latter, in repose, seemed that of a saddened woman. It was a remarkable difference, and Venable was fascinated by it. The girl presented to him two distinct personalities: Peggy, his buoyant, delightful companion on this care-free May day; and Elise, the sorrowful woman of the Verdun road.

Impelled by some pagan note in the spring air, Venable laid aside his pipe and threw himself upon the grass at the girl's side. Her head

rested upon her outstretched arm, and Venable's hand, as he lay beside her, touched her fingers. The momentary contact set his brain whirling. Impulsively he gripped her hand in his own.

She offered no resistance. Her hand lay in his, quite impassive, unresponsive. He wondered whether this curious child was devoid of feeling, of passion, or whether she merely slept.

Facing her, as he now was, their eyes met with but a score of inches between. In her expression was a suggestion of surprise, as though what she saw in his own had startled her. Venable thought of kissing her, but something checked him. He released her slender fingers, annoyed. Here was a woman he did not understand at all.

"Are you enjoying our picnic, Peggy-Elise?" he asked presently.

"Yes. I am very happy. I love the sun, and the grass, and the flowers. In the spring, one seems filled with wonderful dreams. I have been dreaming, monsieur."

"Of what?"

"Of life — of my own life, I suppose. When one has so little in the past to dream of, one must of necessity dream of the future."

"And that, with a woman, means love."

"Yes — perhaps. Love, and — and achievement. You see, monsieur, as I have told you before, I have ambitions."

"What are they?" asked Venable, amused.

The girl answered him at once, without hesitation.

"To have the love of the man I love, and to do, successfully, what I am able to do."

"And who is the man you love?"

"That I cannot tell you, monsieur. Perhaps I shall know, when the time comes."

"And the work you are able to do? What is that?"

"I hope to sing, monsieur. It is said that I have a voice. And I was so fortunate as to have a great teacher, from the beginning — Clémentine Simon, herself, taught me — she was a dear friend of my father, and very kind. I had to work hard to satisfy her — she never permitted a mistake to pass. It was a wonderful training, monsieur. Tell me — is there not a great opportunity for the singer, in America?"

"Yes — and no," Venable laughed. "In America, the public is apt to demand of artists that they have the foreign *cachet*. For those who are unknown, who have not what we call in my country a 'pull,' it is difficult to get ahead."

"And what is this 'pull'?"

"Oh — influence — some especial power with the management —"

"Money, perhaps?"

"No. Not money, always. It is difficult to

explain. But I am afraid that if you went there, unheralded, you would find yourself confronted by a wall of stone."

"Oh — but you must not discourage me. How do you expect, yourself, to succeed, in your own country?"

"By first making a success, here. By getting my work into the Salon. Then I shall go to America, with colors flying."

"It may, then, be a long time."

"You are hardly encouraging."

"Oh, you must not misunderstand me. I — I meant something quite different."

"What?" Venable demanded, feeling that he had at last surprised the girl into an admission of some sort.

"I meant, monsieur, that since I am leaving Paris in July, it may be a long time before I shall see you again." She spoke calmly. Venable wondered whether beneath her calm there might not be more of fire than he had supposed. It pleased his vanity to think so.

"Would you regret that, Peggy-Elise?"

"Do you not know? Have we not been good friends? In all my life, monsieur, I have not so enjoyed the sunshine as I have enjoyed it, to-day. I have been almost happy, to-day. Whether I shall be happy in America, I do not know. My aunt is not what you would call rich, I think.

Her husband, my uncle, is the editor of a magazine. I do not wish to be a dependent in their house. I must find work, monsieur. I shall be lonely, there, it may be. So I shall be glad to see you — my friend — again."

She spoke with a simplicity that disarmed him. This girl absolutely refused to flirt with him. Doubtless, he thought, she would have disappointed him if she had. Her cool, level honesty pleased him more, and yet it left him entirely at sea. Had Mademoiselle Lascelles fallen in love with him, or did she, in reality, regard him only as a friend? Just why he so greatly desired an answer to this question, he did not know. In one way, of course, he might find out — he could ask her. But to do that meant to declare love on his own part, love that would presuppose marriage — and he did not wish to marry. Yet to suggest anything else, in spite of his continental attitude toward life, seemed out of the question.

Pan, at his elbow, whispered pagan thoughts in his ear. Why not kiss those tempting lips, so short a distance away? Youth, after all, must be served. The determination had just crystallized in his mind, when his companion rose.

The sun sent long purple shadows through the woods. Already the valley of the Seine was beginning to grow dark, wrapped in a murky mist. A few lights shot through the violet haze.

"Shall we return, monsieur?" the girl asked, smiling at him. "I must see that you get back in time for your dinner."

"Not *my* dinner. Ours," he said. "Remember, you promised to dine with me, to-day."

"I should love to," she told him gaily. "Somewhere with music and many lights."

"Would you not prefer to remain here, under the stars?" he asked.

"Ah, yes, monsieur. That, too, I should love. But not to-night."

"Why not to-night?" He rose and stood close to her, so close that the odor of the little bunch of violets at her waist ascended faintly to his nostrils. "Why not to-night?" He reached out, encircling her shoulders with his arms. "What night could be more made for love?"

She faced him fearlessly.

"The night is perfect, monsieur. It is we, who are a little out of tune." She laid her hands gently upon his restraining arms. "Monsieur," she said, simply, "it is not the giving that troubles those who love — it is the knowing when to give." Gently, she pressed his arms downward, releasing herself.

A wave of annoyance swept over Venable. His gay companions at the café, had they known, would have composed ribald verses at his expense, deriding the lack of courage of the youth

who took a *jeune fille* Maying, and, with his arms about her, feared to kiss her. They always kissed the girls who went to gather spring flowers with them; it was as much a part of the day as the luncheon, the wine. And yet, Venable, with Mademoiselle Lascelles' gray eyes looking into his, could no more have kissed her than he could have tossed her over the edge of the hill. He picked up the lunch basket, and together they made their way down the road to the little landing.

A strained silence lay between them on the journey back to the city. Venable tried to bridge it by talking of his work, but his companion gave him scant help. It was not that she appeared to be in any way displeased with him; he felt that there had been no occasion for that, but she seemed depressed.

Venable had intended to take her to dinner at the café in the Boulevard St. Michel. Armstrong, the old English painter, would be there, and little Bosquet, the one-armed poet, and Vernet of the *Revue*. He had told them of his amazing new model, and had thought it would be agreeable to exhibit her to these boon companions for their approval. Yet, somehow, now that the hour approached, he felt a certain uneasiness. He decided a dozen times, during the boat ride, to carry out his plan, but his mind

wavered. He had told his friends that he would bring her. They would be awaiting him, eager, expectant. He would achieve a little triumph, he knew. None of the women about whom they wrote extravagant verses could compare with Peggy-Elise. Yet, when they reached the Pont Neuf, and managed to find a cab, he ordered the old man who drove it to take them to the Ambassadeurs.

CHAPTER IV

DURING all his career, Venable had never worked with so sure a hand as now. In part this was due to the enthusiasm with which the successful pose had filled him. He knew that his work was good; he hoped that it might even be great, and secretly believed that it would be. An additional reason lay in the inspiration he derived from the presence of Mademoiselle Lascelles. With the usual model, he would not have experienced any such feeling; with Peggy-Elise, he drove ahead, with the knowledge that they were creating this thing of beauty, together; that she, no less than he, was putting into it her personality. He began to understand, better, the stories of the Quarter, in which this, that, or the other successful artist was held to owe his most significant triumph to the influence of some woman. There were many such tales — some true, some palpably apocryphal. At least, Venable thought, the model must be more than a lay figure, if results out of the ordinary were to be obtained.

During these weeks he found himself no nearer a solution of the problem presented by Peggy-

Elise than he had been on the first day of their acquaintance. The girl might lay bare her body, but her soul she hid from him behind an impenetrable veil. What she thought, he came gradually to know; what she felt, he remained ignorant of; his efforts to force from her some expression of her feelings met with unvarying failure.

Had she come to love him? His masculine vanity, eked out by various little evidences on her part of a constant thought of him, his wishes, his needs, made him at times certain that she had. A moment later, with baffling subtlety, she eluded him, confronting him in the guise of a sincere friend.

She had asked him, on one occasion, why he had not married. The question served him as a text upon which to deliver an elaborate dissertation concerning the folly of marriage on the part of those engaged in creative work.

"I have time, energy, love, for but one thing — my art," he had announced, rather grandiloquently. "She is a stern mistress, demanding all my efforts. Later on, perhaps, when I have made my success, I might consider marriage, but why should I do so, now? Think of being tied, interminably, to some one whom I should forever be obliged to please, to consider, to entertain. There is but one purpose in marriage — children. I feel no need for them. Suppose I had a wife, a

family. I should require larger quarters, a costly establishment, my movements would be hampered, I should be compelled to fritter away at least half my time and energy upon trifles, to the destruction of my ambitions as an artist. And since the expense would be so great, I should no doubt be forced to do a vast amount of work of which I should be ashamed."

Peggy-Elise regarded him with an inscrutable smile. She seemed impressed by what he had said, but she vouchsafed no reply.

"Don't you agree with me?" Venable asked.

"Ah! monsieur,"— she raised her hand in a little gesture of appeal —"do not let us be so serious! You will spoil my humor. To-day, I feel gay — almost happy."

"Why 'almost'?"

"Because I have saved almost three hundred francs," the girl replied merrily.

The remark was one of many that caused Venable gradually to reach the conclusion that Peggy-Elise was perhaps a bit shallow, material. He had supposed she was going to attribute her happiness of the day to a delightful little luncheon they had had together at a near-by *brasserie*. Venable was nothing, if not vain. It annoyed him that his continual efforts to impress the girl with his admiration for her, left her cold. Never had he felt that she wanted him to take

her in his arms, to kiss her. It piqued his vanity. By all the rules of the game, she should have desired it. Her liking for him was palpable enough. She rarely appeared, in the morning, without bringing him a few flowers, a *boutonnière* of violets or pansies. She seemed especially solicitous about his creatural comforts, insisted on filling his pipe for him, when his hands were wet with the moist clay, had even explored the mysteries of his wardrobe — mending, darning, and sewing on innumerable buttons. After luncheon, which they frequently had in the studio, he was in the habit of going out for a short walk. On his return, he invariably found that Peggy-Elise had put the place to rights, had swept, dusted, and garnished it until it fairly shone. His tools were always clean and in order, his papers neatly arranged, his breakfast dishes washed and put away. She explained these activities on the ground that she hated to be idle, which was true. She had the keen instinct of the Frenchwoman for order and economy. No wonder, Venable thought, her father had depended upon her.

Apart from the studio, he knew little of her life. The small apartment she had shared with her father had long ago been given up, together with the few articles of furniture it had contained. She now occupied a tiny room near the

Place de la Republique, and made the long journey between it and the studio, on foot, each morning and evening. Venable had found difficulty in inducing her to dine with him. Only on Sundays would she do so, and then but seldom. Their first dinner, at the Café des Ambassadeurs, had been rather a grand affair; but Peggy-Elise, at sight of the officers — French, Belgian, English — who sat all about them, had been reminded too poignantly of her father. She preferred much simpler fare, she said, and refused to accompany him again to one of the big restaurants. To his own favorite dining place, Venable would not take her, although she had asked him to do so. His failure to appear with his beautiful model, on that first Sunday night, had aroused a deal of curiosity on the part of his friends; but Venable decided that he did not want any of these men to meet Peggy-Elise — they might not understand her. So he spoke of her but seldom, and pretended that she quite failed to interest him, except in a professional way.

One day, early in July, Venable threw down his tools with an exclamation of relief. For a long time he stood staring at the statue.

Peggy-Elise, with an expression singularly like his own, stood staring at him.

Because of the heat, he had taken off his

smock, and stood in thin white shirt, open at the neck, with his sleeves rolled up above his elbows. His skin was olive-brown and very smooth, his arms muscular, full of nervous strength. His features were in profile, his chin carried with a characteristic upward tilt that always made Peggy-Elise think of the head of an Arab. Absorbed in contemplation of his work, he remained quite unaware of her scrutiny; she concluded, as she had many times concluded before, that Gilbert Venable was the handsomest man she had ever seen.

There was a certain brown quality about him that fascinated her. The clear tan of his skin seemed intensified manyfold in his eyes and hair. And his voice, too, held this warm note. She loved to hear him talk. She gazed hungrily at him, now, fearing the words she felt he was about to say.

Suddenly, he turned from the statue, and met her glance with a smile.

"It's done, Peggy-Elise," he said. "If I touch it again I shall spoil it."

The girl stepped from the model stand and wrapped herself in her kimono. Then she joined him at the other end of the room. Venable observed that she moved with a certain listlessness, as though the heat, the long hours in one position,

had tired her. A moment later, they both faced the completed statue.

It was of life size, a superbly executed piece of work. The daring, almost defiant, loveliness of the pose, the cynical yet alluring smile, the splendid modeling of the torso and limbs, gave to the work the quality of greatness. Venable, too, felt this. He had not the least doubt concerning its reception by the critics.

"Do I really look like that?" Peggy-Elise asked at length.

"Well," Venable smiled at her, "the expression of the face is different, of course. You certainly have not that cynical smile. And I have made the figure a trifle heavier, more mature. Phryne, at this time, must have been a woman of thirty, at least."

"I hope I never *shall* have a smile like that," Peggy-Elise said with a little shudder. "It reminds me, in a way, of the Mona Lisa. It is wonderful, of course, but it is n't — nice."

"Neither was her profession," Venable remarked. "Women get to look that way, who sell themselves. So you like the thing, do you?"

"Like it! Why — it is amazing — superb. I hope you will get a gold medal, and I am sure you will."

"I hope so." He turned toward his compan-

ion, gazing at her with a look of regret. "Our work, together, is over, Peggy-Elise."

"Yes." She breathed the word, rather than spoke it, and the listlessness which Venable had before observed seemed more apparent. She leaned against the back of a chair, as though to support herself. "It has been very wonderful, to be here with you, all these days. I had not thought, at first, that it would be so — so easy for me. I am sorry that it is over."

"Need it be over?" Venable exclaimed, turning impulsively to her. "Why should you go? Why not stay here — always?"

Peggy-Elise shook her head.

"Alas, monsieur," she replied, with a trace of bitterness, "I am not ambitious to acquire the smile of the Phryne."

Venable stopped, regarding her angrily.

"Why do you assume that I mean *that?* Have I ever suggested such a thing?"

"You have told me many times, *mon ami,* that marriage is not for the artist. In what other way could I remain here — always?" Her eyes met his, gravely disconcerting.

"I merely gave expression to a sincere wish. I said what I did, because I felt it, and meant it. I thought nothing of how or why. I realized only that you are going to leave me, and that I do not want you to go. I shall miss you very,

very much. I wish that you would remain."

Peggy-Elise, when he began to speak, swayed almost imperceptibly toward him, and her hands fluttered forward in a manner of appeal not unlike that of the statue itself. She hung on his words as though awaiting some irrevocable sentence.

"I also, monsieur," she whispered, "shall regret."

He interrupted her, crushing her hands in his.

"Don't go," he said, his voice harsh with feeling. "Don't go!"

For a moment, the girl seemed about to yield. Then she tore her hands away, and beat back his passionate attempts to embrace her. He saw, with astonishment, that her eyes were filled with tears.

"Peggy!" he muttered, "Peggy-Elise!"

She interrupted him quickly, savagely. It was the first time, since they had met, that her feelings had mastered her.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she gasped, staring at him. "Am I then a fool? Do not touch me, monsieur, I beg of you." She turned and went swiftly toward the recess behind the screen.

Venable made no effort to detain her. He was angry with himself, with her. He affected no abstract standards of morality. If Peggy-Elise, loving him, had decided to merge her life in his,

he would have accepted her sacrifice readily. Such arrangements were common enough, not alone among the lesser lights of the studios, but among the famous ones of the earth — the men and women who had achieved. Love would have been a sufficient justification for their life together, and he believed that he loved her.

Now it appeared, because he had been honest, frank, because he had said what was in his heart, he had roused this girl's anger. What right had she to put him in this position? Venable failed to realize that Peggy-Elise's anger was directed far more against herself than against him. She despised weakness in others, and had suddenly discovered it in herself. Venable, sulking angrily, concluded that she was merely a commonplace, conventional girl, pretending the usual and conventional indignation. He lit his pipe and, throwing himself into a chair, sat glowering at the beautiful figure of her he had created.

Presently he heard her moving near him; he knew that she had come from behind the screen, and was putting on her hat, yet he did not turn.

"Gilbert," she said, "I have made the necessary arrangements for my passage. I am sailing on *La Patrie,* next Tuesday. I have already written to my aunt, Mrs. Austen. I am sorry —" She hesitated.

Venable turned and faced her.

"Peggy-Elise," he asked, "are you angry with me?"

"Oh, no — no! Surely you must understand. How could I be angry with you?"

"Dear," he rose and went up to her, a sudden determination flaming in his mind. "Will you stay, little Peggy-Elise, if we are married?"

She held the edge of the table for support. Her eyes were strangely bright.

"No," she said.

"You — you won't?" Venable cried. "Why not? Don't you love me?"

"That, monsieur, if I did, would be the best of reasons not to marry you."

He was about to speak, but she stopped him.

"Not now, my friend. I am very tired. I must go home."

"Will you return, to-morrow?"

"No, monsieur. Not to-morrow. I am going away, to-morrow. On Monday I shall return."

"But — where are you going?"

"To St. Menehould, Gilbert — to the grave of my father. I am leaving France for a long time — perhaps forever — one never knows. . . . I cannot go, without first making that little devotion. No," she divined what he was about to say, "I prefer to go alone. I will come, on Monday, to see you. Until then, good-by."

He stood staring at the door, long after she had gone.

CHAPTER V

VENABLE, his work for the time being completed, spent the greater part of the next two days thinking of Peggy-Elise.

Singularly enough, he analyzed her as a woman without passion, a creature well-nigh as cold as the clay figure he had made of her. The conclusion was scarcely a tribute to his intelligence, although it was a very great tribute to Peggy-Elise's power of self-control. The girl, all flame, all fire, at least where he was concerned, had hidden her emotions beneath a mask; she uttered commonplaces, not daring to let him know that she adored him. Such knowledge, on his part, might prove far too dangerous — for her. She was waging a bitter fight with herself. At times, she feared that she would not win; were she to permit *his* strength to be added to the forces against her, she was certain she would not.

She had determined to go away, to leave France and Venable — the two things she most loved. The alternative, to stay, meant exactly what Venable had said: love, perhaps; happiness of a sort, perhaps; and ultimately disillusion-

ment — and the Mona Lisa smile. She knew she could not marry Venable as long as he was convinced that marriage would ruin his career. Besides, she felt that he did not love her. His offer of marriage had been forced, half-hearted. Had he really loved her, she said to herself, he would have swept her into his arms and held her there for all time, in spite of herself, himself, or his career.

She made her way, almost unseeing, from Venable's studio to her room, tugging against the desire to return to him, to cast herself into his arms, as she might have tugged against an ever-tightening cord. Once or twice it actually turned her back, but she thought of her father — facing a thousand deaths across the breech of his machine gun, of his scorn, always, for falterers — and went resolutely on.

There was little enough in her room among the chimney-pots to welcome her. The gay row of flowers in the window nodded in a friendly way, but she scarcely noticed them. After standing, for a long time, regarding her somber eyes in the mirror, she tossed her hat upon the bed and seated herself beside it. Three things she drew from her small leather handbag. One was an envelope, containing the ticket for her passage to America, and a few banknotes — the remainder of her savings. The second was a card-

board box, in which lay her father's decoration, the Croix de Guerre. The third was a thin silver locket, not larger than a two-franc piece. She opened this, and regarded, tenderly, the three or four faded violets it contained. They were souvenirs of her first day with Venable, at St. Cloud. In a way, the three articles before her represented three phases of her existence: the past lay with her father, in his lonely grave at St. Menehould; the violets typified the present; the passage to America, the future. She sighed, as she closed the locket; and replaced it, along with the other things, in her satchel. The past, she would say good-by to, to-morrow. To the present, also, she must soon bid farewell. Only the future, veiled in mystery, was left to her. What destiny lay beyond the curving rim of the sea? She did not concern herself greatly with it; the present was too poignantly sweet, the prospect of leaving it, too bitter, to allow much room in her thoughts for other things. All that the passing moments said to her might have been compressed into half a dozen words —"I am leaving him forever — forever." And she might so readily stay. Love beckoned with kindly eyes. What mattered the future, in either this world or the next? Love was free, untrameled. The laws of society were daily being broken by the highest. War had ruthlessly swept aside man's

petty conventions, left humanity wondering whether any God really existed, at all, save the god of force. Why should she sacrifice herself, her happiness, for the sake of an ideal? Why should she? — her fingers touched the little box containing her father's decoration. Why had *he* sacrificed himself for an ideal — he and the other tens of thousands whose blood-offering had been for humanity? She began to understand. That was the meaning of life — of it all — to live and die for an ideal. She must do that, too, and help Venable to do it, if not in the trenches, in the rut and groove of every-day life. She was glad, supremely glad, that she had had the courage to leave him, to-day; that to-morrow, she was going to St. Menehould. It seemed a useless thing, from a purely material standpoint, to go so far just to stand beside that narrow mound of earth; it could scarcely bring her father nearer to her, since she held the vivid memory of all their years together in her heart, yet she knew that she would bring back with her from that pilgrimage courage, strength, a new understanding of the age-old lesson of life — duty — as he had done his, as his comrades were doing theirs, as she, indeed, must do hers.

The morning was rainy, almost cold, as had been the day upon which she and Venable had first met. Her journey was uneventful. The

railway line seemed less congested than on the occasion of her former visit; she knew that the most desperate fighting was now going on along the line of the Somme. She observed no cessation, however, in the steady flow of the Red Cross ambulances to and from the hospital at St. Menehould; and the little graveyard, she soon saw, had stalked grimly up a slope and down again, and was no longer little.

From Paris she had brought all her potted plants, the moist earth about their roots wrapped in many thicknesses of paper. A little trowel, with which she had provided herself, enabled her to plant them; they struggled bravely to hold up their flowered heads in the rain. Some one, since her previous visit, had placed a flat cross at the head of the grave, with her father's name and rank neatly cut upon it. There were similar crosses at the other graves near by, some smaller, some larger. She knelt in the rain and prayed, for her father, for herself, that she might have strength to do her duty, always, as he had done his; for Venable, too, that he might be happy, and succeed in his career. A childish prayer, perhaps, yet of value in its attitude toward life and its problems. She rose, presently, awkwardly conscious of the tears in her eyes, and of a figure in black, standing, with bared head, beside her in the rain. It was a priest. Beneath

one arm he clutched two newly made wooden crosses and a spade. Peggy-Elise knew, now, who had placed the one at the head of the grave before her.

"Your father, my child?" queried the priest gravely, resuming his hat.

"Oui, mon Père." She regarded him timidly. Captain Lascelles had not been a religious man, in the accepted sense, and had raised his daughter to regard the universe as her church.

The old man touched her lightly on the head. "The good God will not forget any of His children," he said, simply. "I, who am but a feeble old man, have not forgotten the dead,"—he extended his arm toward the serried rows of graves—"how much more, then, will He, in His divine mercy, remember the living." He turned and made his way slowly across the slope, heedless of the rain.

Peggy-Elise looked after him for many moments, a feeling of exultation swelling in her soul. In spite of her prayers, the thought of a supreme being, intimately conscious of her existence, solicitous for her individual welfare, had not greatly appealed to her heretofore. Yet the old priest's smile had touched her imagination vividly. He, recording earthly immortality for his thousands — a divine Father, giving spiritual immortality to his millions. She made her way

to the railway station and waited, patiently, for the train that would take her back to Paris.

On Monday, when she again saw Venable, she felt better prepared to meet the protests that she instinctively felt he would make against her going. She came to him, early, her eyes shining, her face unnaturally pale against the black of her dress. It had been hard, not to see him, for these two days; she scarcely realized how hard, until she found herself trembling with excitement at his door. For a sickening moment, she thought of the time when she could no longer come to him, when she could not see his face, hear his voice, revel in his nearness to her. She feared her courage would fail her; then she thought of the grave beneath the dripping aspens, the kindly face of the old priest, and, throwing back her shoulders, she tapped at the studio door.

Venable received her with an enthusiasm that was quite unassumed. He, too, had found the days of her absence without savor. Seeing her daily, talking with her, he had unconsciously made her a part of his life. Only through her absence did he realize how vital a part of it she had become. He had already planned a new piece of work, a Victory, in anticipation of the day when the legions of the republic would march, triumphant, along the Champs Elysées. Peggy-Elise should be his model. Her departure

for America could be indefinitely postponed. He was full of the project, and spoke to her of it at once.

The girl listened, fired by his eager enthusiasm, but when he had finished she gravely shook her head.

"I have decided to go, to-morrow," she told him.

"But — why? Peggy-Elise, I — I can't do anything without you. Don't you remember how it was, when you first came? I was helpless — without inspiration. You gave it to me. Without you, the Phryne would never have been done. Now I want you for this new thing —"

"I must go," she repeated.

"No!" He came up to her, taking her hands quickly in his. "I need you, dear. I have asked you to marry me — what more can I do?"

"You have your art — your career," she replied. "Be true to them — they need your best."

"Can't you forget all that nonsense —?"

"It is not nonsense, my friend,— it is your creed. If we were to marry, you would be happy — glad, this year, the next, but after that — Oh — you have told me so, often enough — how it would be. Nothing can change it, now."

"Then, just stay and be my model —my friend — the way you have been. Please do, dear. I want you, I need you — so much." He dropped

her hands, and flung his arms about her, crushing her body against his in a passionate embrace. "I love you, my little Peggy-Elise," he whispered, his lips against her own. "I love you. Don't go away from me. I can't bear it."

Quite suddenly Peggy-Elise understood that what Venable felt for her was not love but passion. She knew very certainly that she loved Venable as deeply when away from him, as now in his arms; that he did the same, she gravely doubted. And while the blood mounted riotously to her brain, under the spur of his kisses, there came to her, also, a little shiver of fear, an impulse to protect herself — not her body, perhaps, but her soul. She would have given herself to him readily enough, on the instant, had her emotions been paramount; but something bigger than her emotions, something beyond them — the voice of her love, itself, perhaps — warned her that it would be drowned in a sea of passion — that to preserve it she must deny this surging desire. She flung herself, panting, from his arms.

"Wait, Gilbert!" she gasped. "Listen to me, please. It is not because of the conventions that I refuse you. I could not love you more were I married to you, nor could I give you more than I would give you, now. You want me here with you because it will make you happier to have me,

because I inspire you in your work, because you will be lonely without me — but those are only selfish thoughts, my dear. I think you do not know what love is." She put his searching arms aside. "Do not make it harder for me than it is. I am going to America, to-morrow."

His further efforts to alter her decision left her cold, and produced in him a feeling of almost childish irritation. He had, all his life, been in the habit of getting what he wanted; just now he wanted Peggy-Elise, and it annoyed him that he must see her pass out of his life. Despite the fact that he had told himself, a hundred times, during her absence, that marriage for him, at this time, would be a false step, he now, under the spell of her presence, felt convinced that she was essential to his happiness, and that her refusal to recognize the sincerity of his love was due to her coldness, her own lack of feeling.

They parted rather abruptly, at the luncheon hour. Venable begged her to accompany him, but she steadily refused, pleading numerous engagements during the remainder of the day. She was to leave Paris, by train, in the early evening, and the best that Venable could obtain was her permission to see her off at the railway station.

When she was gone, he sat down and reflected, over many cigarettes, upon the girl's coldness. Had he seen her, in her room, a little later, he

might have revised his opinion of her. Poor child, she had no engagements, during the afternoon, but she feared to remain with him longer; as it was, the mere nearness of him had sadly shaken the resolutions of the day before. A few hours more, and she might have thrown her arms about him, as she had longed to do every moment of the day, and begged him to keep her with him always.

The tears, the quiet of the room, restored her. She was almost gay, when they met at St. Lazare. Venable came, laden with flowers, candy, illustrated journals. She greeted him with the old merry smile. The few moments before their parting sped quickly. She did not even permit him to kiss her good-by. There had been enough of that in the morning, she felt.

"You will write to me, *mon ami*," she cried, through the window of the compartment, as the train moved off. "And you will not forget to send me a photograph of the Phryne? *Au revoir.*" Some spirit of coquetry caused her to toss a handful of the violets he had brought her, toward him; her last view of him was by no means a romantic one, for the violets had scattered along the platform, and he was making desperate efforts to gather them up. Then came the blur of objects, outside the window, and another and deeper blur in Peggy-Elise's eyes.

CHAPTER VI

ROBERT AUSTEN, at twenty, had been an old young man. Now, at forty, he was a young old man. Ambition had driven him fiercely through the intervening years, in order that attainment might the more quickly come; the same force now caused him to reach backward, to clutch at the spent years, that opportunity might the more slowly go. He felt that, at forty, a man should have achieved. He had not achieved. He asked himself why, and for want of a better answer laid the blame at the door of his early marriage.

On this particular night, he sat at his business-like, roll-top desk, in the octagonal room off the library, that he called his study. Because of its shape, Mrs. Austen had wished to turn it into a Turkish smoking-room; she had an excellent pair of Turkish curtains, a Mosul saddle-bag, and a hanging lamp made of dull, perforated brass that would have been perfect for it; but her husband had insisted upon the study. It had been a matter of argument between them ever since they had given up the apartment, in town, and moved to Flushing.

Mr. Austen read nervously, intently, shifting

his tall, bent figure from time to time to new positions, in an effort to relieve the discomfort occasioned by his too low chair. It was perhaps typical of the man that he used more energy to accommodate himself to discomfort than would have been required to achieve comfort.

His smooth-shaven face was lean, sensitive, plastic — the face of an artist, a dreamer. Its most striking characteristic was an expression of dull rebellion, evidenced by the straight, almost somber line of the mouth, the vertical furrows between the eyebrows. A slight frosting of gray about the temples made one rectify a first guess at Mr. Austen's age; it contradicted, in a measure, the youthful fire in his dark, full-lidded eyes. And here, too, was rebellion, but the hope-inspired rebellion that strives, not the helpless rebellion that has lapsed into bitter resentment.

With an air of complete boredom, he turned the pages of the manuscript before him.

Presently, he glanced up. The doorway, leading to the adjoining room, was darkened by the figure of a woman. She was tall, with an air of physical strength; her body had the fresh maturity of youth that is seldom found in a woman of thirty-eight. A mass of live, golden hair waved loosely back from her forehead and was caught in a heavy knot on her neck; she had a pair of handsome, petulant blue eyes, a discon-

tented mouth, and the expression of one whom life in some very definite way, had disappointed.

She gazed at the man before her, with an unhumorous smile — patiently, almost mockingly, as one might regard a child.

"What about to-morrow, Bob?" she questioned.

"To-morrow?" Mr. Austen looked at her with a puzzled frown.

"Certainly. Have you forgotten? My niece arrives by the French line, from Paris."

"Oh, yes. I *had* forgotten. I suppose it 's up to me to meet her."

"Somebody has to go. You know *I* can't. The steamer docks about noon, and I have the card club coming right after lunch."

"To-morrow is a busy day with me, too. I don't see how I 'm going to get away."

"You 'll simply have to. Tell them that it 's important. Surely they can let you have *one* afternoon off! You have n't had a vacation for three years."

"All right. I 'll manage it. Noon, you say? But how am I going to know the young woman when I see her?"

"Go on board, of course, and inquire of the purser — she won't leave until somebody comes for her. And please be as agreeable as you can. I can't say I 'm overjoyed at the prospect of hav-

ing her on our hands, but, after all, she *is* my sister's child, and I 've got to do what I can for her. I suppose she 'll stay with us for quite a while. I hope she 's presentable. I 'm going to give her that room over the pantry; it 's not very large, but I dare say she 'll manage."

"Why not the bay-window room?"

"Our only guest-chamber? What an idea, with Tom Russell and Edith coming for two weeks, in September! Really, Bob, I don't understand you, at times. I 'm going to take care of this girl, of course; she is an orphan, and I regard it as my duty, but I certainly don't propose to have my entire household upset by her coming. From what I know of the way they lived, when Mary was alive, I imagine the girl will be pleased with anything."

Mr. Austen allowed his gaze to travel slowly down the typewritten page before him. He ventured no reply. Not being of a combative nature, his wife's assertive, almost belligerent, manner tired rather than annoyed him. She was a woman who seemed instinctively to face life with a chip on her shoulder. The war theory of Napoleon, to strike first, she had made her own. In the most every-day affairs of life she made use of it. Conversation, with her, Mr. Austen had often remarked, began with a challenge and ended with a retreat.

"Very well — I 'll meet her," he said, by way of dismissing the subject, and turned once more to his work.

His wife, however, showed no inclination to depart. She gazed, fretfully, at the pile of manuscripts.

"Why don't you come out on the porch?" she asked. "It 's much cooler out there. And I can't say I enjoy sitting there, alone — it 's not especially exciting."

"I 've got this serial to finish," he protested. "We may be able to use it — one of Wallace Allen's. A good story, snappy — what the public wants. As an editor, I 've got to please them." He read for a moment. "Listen to this — the hero is proposing:

"Betty, I 'm dippy about you. Can't dance with another girl to save my life. Why should n't we hit it off?"

"What d' ye mean? Marriage?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"It 's such a bore."

"No other way for us to go to Honolulu this winter, the way we 've planned."

"All right. I hope it 'll take. If it does n't, and it means a trip to Reno, don't blame me."

"I won't. I 'm a good loser. Shall we run down in the morning and get the license?"

"I suppose we might as well. Early, though.

I 've got a tennis match on, at eleven. Why is it they can't make a decent cocktail, in this place? Suppose we move on to Sherry's."

Mr. Austen looked up from the manuscript, with a quizzical smile.

"Literature *à la mode,*" he said.

"Well," Mrs. Austen returned, "it 's real, at any rate. I like Wallace Allen's work. Everybody does. What 's the use of your reading the thing. His name is enough to carry it. I only wish *you* could get fifteen thousand for a serial."

"I might, if I had time, and peace of mind, to write one. But life, nowadays, seems to be nothing but bills." He took some papers from a drawer of the desk. "Here 's a lot that came in this morning: Dentist, $42.50; meat, $65.00 — two months; Collins and Strauss, $110.00." He let the accounts fall from his hands, with a helpless gesture. "What 's the use?"

"Don't forget," Mrs. Austen said, with asperity, "that you have a wife and three children. It would be very nice, of course, if we could all go about in fig-leaves, but unfortunately the conventions make it necessary for us to have clothes."

"Could n't you make some of them, Belle?" he hazarded. "Lots of women do. Here 's twenty-four dollars for night-dresses, alone. For Isabelle."

"Well, why not? The poor child bought the cheapest she could find. Six dollars apiece. She wanted the embroidered *crêpe de Chine,* but they were twelve, each, for the very plainest."

Mr. Austen replaced the bills in the drawer of the desk, and, rising, lit a cigarette.

"There 's only a little over a hundred dollars in the bank," he remarked, "but I 'm hoping *Underwood's* will take that sea-story of mine. God!" he suddenly burst out, "if I could only — just once — get out of debt!"

Mrs. Austen raised her eyebrows.

"George Harwood is making a hundred thousand a year," she said, "out of his plays. I saw it in the paper. Why don't you write a play?"

Mr. Austen gave his wife a long and not very friendly look.

"That synopsis I sold last month for five hundred could have been made into a play," he said. "I 'd never have let it go for motion picture use if I had n't needed the money. That 's the trouble with me. I have to sacrifice my best ideas for ready cash, to pay bills, when, if I could hold onto them, I might get ten times — a hundred times — as much."

Mrs. Austen sniffed.

"I know you blame it all on me," she said, with a shrug. "If you had n't married me, and undertaken to support a family, you 'd have been

a famous and successful writer, of course. There 's nothing like having some one to blame your failures upon. My own opinion is that if you had n't had duties, responsibilities, to urge you on, you 'd never have done anything. Some men need the spur of necessity to keep them going. You say married men are handicapped. Look at Vickers, and Chandler — they 're both married, but they 're making good, just the same. You are too easily discouraged. Everything will come out all right. If you can't meet the bills, this month, I 'll write to Uncle and ask him to help us out."

"Do you think I want you to be always asking favors of your godfather?" Mr. Austen retorted angrily. He resented more bitterly than most things his wife's habit of turning to her indulgent godfather — whom the children called "Uncle" — in every emergency, — emergencies invariably of her own creating. "I 'm making enough for us to get along on — four thousand a year salary, and at least two more from my outside work. That 's five hundred a month. We ought to be able to keep out of debt on that, with any sort of management. I 'm tired of being always on the verge of bankruptcy. Why can't you try to economize a little, with this war staring us in the face? Other people do."

"Well, I certainly do the best I can. Heaven knows I have few enough pleasures. If you think you can run the house on less than I do, I wish you'd try it — I'm sick enough of the task." She turned away, abruptly, and left the room.

Her husband rose and followed her, greatly upset.

"I'm not blaming you, Belle," he expostulated. "I suppose I'm a dreadful failure, but you know I *can* write. Only — it's pretty hard to concentrate, and do good work, when your free time has to be devoted to financial worries, and your daytime hours are all taken up with routine duties, as mine are."

"Then why don't you give up your job?"

"Belle, you ought not to say that. I'd give it up quickly enough, if I were single — I'd live in a garret, on bread and cheese, and be glad of the chance if I did n't have you and the children to think of."

Mrs. Austen sighed resignedly.

"I can't let you want for anything," Mr. Austen went on. "That's the tragedy of it all. I've sold my birthright for a mess of pottage, I suppose."

"Not specially flattering to the pottage," his wife interjected acidly. "Well — it's not my

fault if you 're dissatisfied with your bargain. Why don't you be a good sport, and play the game, now that you 've started it?"

"That 's what I 'm trying to do. But I can't help wondering what would happen if I were suddenly to call for a new deal. . . . If I were that sort of man, I might abandon the whole situation, leave you flat, and *take* the time really to do something worth while. You would regard me as a scoundrel, I suppose, but if I wrote something big, fine, under the inspiration of my new freedom — something that made me famous — my children would n't be able to sneer at me. They 'd say: 'Yes — perhaps he was n't all he should have been, but he *did* write the biggest novel of the century.' That 's the irony of it all. I sacrifice my life to give them and you the commonplaces of existence, and I get nothing in return but criticism for not having done more. Free, I might make a name for myself. You have never tried to understand the creative temperament, Belle; it demands the best a man has to give; it makes him ruthless — or ought to. He can't give everything to others and have anything left for his work. All I ask is a chance to show what I can do — and I can't get it." He trembled from excitement. "Can't you see," he added, almost pathetically, "the terrible struggle I have between my duty to you and the chil-

dren, on the one hand, and my duty to myself, on the other?"

Mrs. Austen regarded her husband with a cold and deliberate eye.

"You should have thought of all that before you married me," she said. "I did n't compel you to do it — you insisted upon it — said you could n't live without me. Don't try to escape the consequences, now — it would be ridiculous at your age. Of course, if you think it your duty to abandon me and your children, go ahead — you 'll come back soon enough. I 'm not the least bit afraid. You get these spasms every little while, but I 've learned not to pay any attention to them." She once more turned away. Her husband clutched her arm.

"Why won't you help me?" he cried.

"How? I 'm sure I do all I can."

"I 've told you how, so often. Could n't we economize — live in a simpler way — save up enough to buy — yes, *buy* — me a year of freedom? I 'll show you what I can do —"

Mrs. Austen shook off his detaining hand.

"I 'm doing the best I can, Bob," she said. "Don't let 's go all over it again. I have a headache. Don't forget what I told you about meeting that Lascelles girl. And, of course, with another mouth to feed, the bills are not going to be any less. If you take my advice, you 'll go

right to Mr. Walker and tell him the high prices of everything make it necessary for you to have an increase in salary. That would be far more to the point than fretting over your monthly expenses and nagging me to death about my extravagance. They ought to give you five thousand, at least." She went quickly toward the hall, from which came the strident voices of two quarreling children.

Mr. Austen went back to his study. The manscript he had been reading no longer interested him. He drew toward him a sheet of paper, and spent a long time adding up rows of figures.

CHAPTER VII

PEGGY-ELISE, after the lonely journey from France, had a sinking feeling about the heart as the decks of the steamer became empty and no one appeared to welcome her.

Because she was expecting her aunt to meet her, she took no interest in the tall, handsome man hurrying up the gang plank — beyond the interest handsomeness, itself, inspires — until she saw him approaching her, with the purser, his face lit by a friendly, interrogating smile. He put out an impulsive hand.

"I'm Mr. Austen," he explained, in English. "I'm so sorry to be late." Then added, in queer, self-conscious accents: *"Parlez-vous anglais?"*

"I am glad to meet you," Peggy-Elise replied, taking the man's outstretched hand. "You are the husband of my aunt?"

He looked relieved as she answered him in his own tongue.

"Yes. Unfortunately, she could not come to meet you, herself. Suppose we get your things, and go ashore. The customs people won't be

long — then we 'll go and have lunch. I know a delightful little café."

There was a certain eagerness in his manner, a suggestion of excitement. He found his foreign-born niece unexpectedly attractive. To take her to luncheon had seemed, in prospect, something of an ordeal — an embarrassing series of attempts to understand and make himself understood; but she spoke English perfectly, except for an occasional oddity of construction, and already his "duty" had become an agreeable adventure.

As they were flying across town, in a taxicab, her luggage — a satchel, a bundle in a shawl-strap, a small leather trunk — piled in beside the driver, Peggy-Elise was thinking that the streets were very rough and dirty, and the buildings along the route of their drive extraordinarily mean and sordid. She had anticipated something quite different, from the gleaming white towers that had first met her vision along the skyline. In this slightly disappointed frame of mind, she found herself leaving the cab in front of a plain-looking brick building, painted a light buff.

Mr. Austen announced, with a pleased smile, that it was a French restaurant, and led the way within. Peggy-Elise followed, not at all sure that she would n't have preferred an American

one. She felt a deep curiosity concerning America and things American, and longed to come in contact with them.

The delicious luncheon her uncle ordered put other thoughts temporarily out of her mind. She reflected that he seemed bent on pleasing her, in every respect. His manner was flatteringly cordial.

No, Peggy-Elise found herself saying, she had not been seasick; and, yes, she would like a little red wine — *vin ordinaire.* In true French fashion, she diluted it with water, much to Mr. Austen's surprise; and it was nice of him to hope that they might be able to make her happy, in their so-great America; and she was n't tired, at all; and the restaurant was very agreeable; and was she correct to suppose that her aunt had three children?

He nodded: Isabelle, a daughter, of eighteen; Robert Allyn, Jr., whom they called Allyn, now turned sixteen; and the baby, Anne, who was ten. He looked very pleased when Peggy-Elise told him, with one of her rare and flashing smiles, that he seemed far too young to have a grown daughter. She had not meant to pay a compliment; her uncle's youthfulness had come to the fore in response to her own; he appreciated her words the more because he felt the sincerity of them.

They spent quite two hours over the little meal, during which Peggy-Elise and her newly found uncle became great friends. Mr. Austen had not enjoyed himself so much for a long time. He felt like a boy upon a holiday. The office grind was forgotten, and the financial sword of Damocles, that hung by so frail a thread in his study at home, ceased to threaten him while he chatted with the stimulating young woman on the opposite side of the table. In fact, he rather doubted that it had ever threatened, as, under the spell of Peggy-Elise's enthusiasm, he talked of his work and ambitions — ambitions that seemed suddenly certain of realization. He would have liked to talk much more freely about his hopes, but it would have involved a discussion of his financial situation which, in the circumstances, would have cruelly embarrassed the girl. To avoid the temptation, he began to question her about herself.

"You show a great deal of understanding of one's ambitions, Mademoiselle Lascelles; such sympathy is rare in a girl of your age — you are not over twenty?"

"I am nineteen, monsieur — but then perhaps it is not years that count. When I should have been playing with dolls, I preferred to listen to my father discussing with his friends everything

in the universe — he was a great philosopher." She smiled, tenderly. "And, besides, it has been always my nature to think, and if one thinks — one must understand a little."

"I think," Mr. Austen said, after a moment's reflection, "that you are a very remarkable girl."

"But not at all!" She laughed, coloring. "I am just — ordinary."

"You are not 'ordinary,' compared with girls of your age here in America," he said, thoughtfully. When he had learned that Peggy-Elise was coming to live with them, he had supposed that his elder daughter Isabelle would be company for her. He smiled a little ruefully now at the recollection. He wondered what this grave young girl — for he sensed the gravity that underlay her lightness — would think of her new relatives. As to what they would think of her — He sighed.

An hour later, as they left the Flushing station and walked in the direction of the Austen home, Mr. Austen nodded toward an enormous white structure, with a brick-red, Queen Anne roof and amusing Colonial variations:

"Our house is the third from that atrocity on the corner; it belongs to a Mr. Donnelly. He used to be a contractor, but he has retired from business and come out here to live. I don't sup-

pose this interests you, but I mention it because you can't be in the neighborhood long, anyway, without hearing of the family."

As he spoke, a long-nosed, yellow car shot out from under the porte-cochère, and came whizzing down the drive — a capped and goggled figure at the wheel, another capped and goggled figure beside it. They waited for it to pass. Mr. Austen scowled at the car in a fashion that his niece was at a loss to interpret. It blurred by, and was far down the street before an arm waved back at them.

"I *thought* that was Allyn!" His face was white with anger. Peggy-Elise expected an explanation, but none was offered.

They reached the Austen place in silence. In silence, they turned in under the trailing honeysuckle that arched the trim box hedge. As they moved up the long pathway, Mrs. Austen, who had been talking to the hired man on the other side of the lawn, crossed to meet them. She looked very handsome and very young as she came toward them, all in white, twirling a spike of blue larkspur, and humming gaily.

"I expected you people hours ago!" she said, putting out a welcoming hand to Peggy-Elise, and kissing her lightly on the cheek.

"We stopped for lunch." Mr. Austen spoke a trifle irritably.

His wife's almost imperceptibly raised eyebrows seemed to ask: "Does it take so long for lunch?"

"Where 's Isabelle?" he demanded, the eloquent eyebrow rankling.

"Tennis."

Her husband frowned, and bit his lip.

"She had to go, Bob." She included Peggy-Elise in the explanation. "There are some match games on, over at Doris's, and Is is one of their crack players. She 'll be home soon, now."

"She could have stayed home *one* afternoon."

"There 's no use being unreasonable about it," Mrs. Austen remonstrated; "I 've explained why she had to go. We 're keeping this poor child standing here!" She laid her hand on the girl's arm, smiling. "Come along."

Peggy-Elise followed her into the house, refreshingly cool after the blistering August heat outside. As they passed the open door of the dining-room, her aunt stopped and told the maid to serve tea in fifteen minutes. Then she ran lightly up the broad, polished stairs. Peggy-Elise followed more slowly; she was not less light of foot, but she was considerably less light of heart. Her aunt's reception had chilled her, and the absence of her cousins, the casualness with which her arrival in the Austen household

had been treated, emphasized her unimportance and made her feel distressingly conscious of her dependent position. Also, her aunt lived in apparent affluence, and though this relieved the girl of anxiety on the score of expense she saw that there would be little for her to do in return for her aunt's hospitality. She might teach the children French, she was thinking, as Mrs. Austen ushered her into a small, meagerly furnished room in the rear of the house.

"I 'm sorry to have to put you in here," Mrs. Austen found herself explaining, under the influence of her niece's distinguished air and the unmistakably cultured quality of her voice. "It will be for only a little while — we have some people coming soon — and, you see, we have only one guest-chamber. When they go, you can have that room, but it would just mean moving back and forth, now."

"But I would not think of having you give it up to me," the girl said, impulsively. "I can be very comfortable here — you are very kind."

Her aunt did not protest.

"Well — the bathroom's there — you 'll find everything you need, I think. When you 're ready, come down on to the veranda." She smiled a quick, automatic smile, that was like a handy mask, hastily whipped on and off — and was gone.

As Mrs. Austen went out, Peggy-Elise heard some one running up the stairs, and the next moment there was the sound of voices on the landing near her door. Some words came to her, unavoidably distinct:

"I 've told Allyn, a half dozen times, that I don't want him to go out with Rex Donnelly in that car! In the first place, no boy should be allowed to drive a high-powered machine like that! They get to racing, and the first thing you know there 'll be an accident."

"You 're so tiresome about it," Mrs. Austen was saying in a bored voice. "You can't wrap boys up in cotton-wool! Besides, Allyn is crazy to have a car of his own, and if you can't give him one you might at least not deprive him of what pleasure he can get outside."

"In the name of heaven,"— Mr. Austen raised his voice —" why *should* he have a car — at his age?"

"Well, why should n't he? Several of the boys he knows have them! You have such old-fogey notions," she said, impatiently.

"If I had my way," he flung out, savagely, "Isabelle and Allyn would never set foot in the Donnelly's house again. It 's ruining them! My God, I give them everything I can, and more than I can, but you can't expect me to keep up

with a millionaire, and that 's what it 's coming to!"

Peggy-Elise heard them go downstairs, still talking. She sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the wall, and feeling vaguely disturbed. The clink of dishes in the room below made her spring up, whip off the smart little black hat, of her own fashioning, and begin a hasty toilet. She had just let down her hair, and begun to brush it with rapid, even strokes, when there was a light rap on the door.

She darted to open it. On the threshold stood a child of ten, tall for her age, whose height was emphasized by the short smocked frock of dull blue linen, stopping just above her bare olive knees. She regarded Peggy-Elise gravely. Before the girl could speak, her visitor began to recite, a little breathlessly:

"Vous êtes la bienvenue, ma chère cousine, chez nous!"

It was odd French, and oddly pronounced, but the dear thought back of it, the desire to give her a familiar moment in this new, strange land, and in what was, necessarily, a strange house, made the girl's heart leap and the tears spring to her eyes. She reached out and caught the child in her arms, and kissed her many times on both fresh cheeks.

"*Est-ce que tu parles français, ma petite?*" she asked, holding her close.

"I don't understand French," the child said, smiling, "but I wanted to be able to tell you you were welcome, in it, so Daddy taught me. He does n't know much French, either — he did, but he 's forgotten it. We had to look in the dictionary for 'welcome.'"

Peggy-Elise hugged her.

"You are Anne,— are you not?"

"Oh, I meant to tell you I was Anne, but I was so full of the other, it put everything else out of my head!" She laughed bubblingly. "Shall I call you Peggy-Elise? Or will it do if I just say Cousin Peggy?"

"Call me Peggy, *ma mie*," the girl said, captivated by her directness.

"What beautiful hair you have!" Anne exclaimed. "So glossy and sort of red! Oh! I love red hair — I think mine is going to be red," she announced, feeling of the tawny stubble that covered her well-shaped little head. "They had to shave it off, after I had typhoid, but I 'll have lots of it — we all have lots of hair. I 'll go down, now, and let you finish dressing. Are you almost ready?"

As Peggy-Elise twisted up her hair and hurriedly thrust the pins into it, she was thinking

that her small cousin was a very unusual child. Anne Austen had, in fact, poise and a certain forcefulness which created this impression. The girl wondered if she were a typical American child.

Anne had been born to the Austens several years after they had frankly admitted a mutual disappointment in their marriage, and when instances of dissatisfaction, instead of being repressed, were produced triumphantly and discussed exhaustively, bitterly, hopelessly. As a result, she heard many illuminating threshings of domestic problems, and, shortly out of her cradle, began to side with her father.

"Come over and sit by me — Peggy," Anne invited, sliding down from the broad wicker arm of her father's chair, as Peggy-Elise came out onto the porch.

"I fear I am late — I don't want to make a bad beginning." The girl spoke lightly, but Mr. Austen detected a shade of anxiety in her voice.

"You are beginning beautifully," he assured her.

Smiling in pretty apology, she hurried toward the little group in the corner, where Mrs. Austen, beside the wicker wagon, was already pouring tea.

"No — tea 's a movable feast," her aunt said carelessly.

Her uncle, who had risen, was standing, smiling warmly at her; the expression in his smoldering brown eyes made her lower her own for a surprised moment. She, in a simple black *crêpe de Chine* frock, with fine white hemstitched collar and cuffs, her transparent-skinned, sensitive face framed by her glinting tawny hair, her lips slightly parted, her gray eyes luminous with excitement, seemed to Mr. Austen strikingly beautiful and alluring. He emptied the chair next to his of some magazines and papers and offered it to her.

"It is very hot," she said, as she dropped gracefully into it.

Mrs. Austen glanced up to ask if she would have sugar and cream in her tea. As she passed the cup to her, her eyes went, apparently, instantly to the girl's face, yet they had, by some feminine legerdemain, traveled from the sharply pointed toe of Peggy-Elise's French shoe, to the broad, beautifully curved top of her head — over which Venable had raved — without missing one detail. Furthermore, without even glancing at her husband, she knew that he was looking young and handsome. She held out a cup of tea to him, smiling inscrutably.

"There are some cakes — sandwiches and stuff." She nodded toward the shelves of the wagon. "Try one of those pecan sandwiches —

they 're delicious — they were left over from this afternoon. Oh, I 'm dead!" she said, sinking back in her chair, and pressing her fingers to her eyes.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" her husband asked at length, in a rather strained tone.

"No. It was really too hot, to-day, to play cards. Mrs. Slope carried off first — she 's an impossible creature! She immediately began to talk about the handsome prizes Mrs. Cadman always gives. Why, I won one of her firsts, last winter, and it was n't worth bringing home — you know, Bob — that dinky little *compotière!*"

Mr. Austen nodded.

"You are fond of cards, yes?" Peggy-Elise inquired, reaching for a cake.

"Mad about them!" Her aunt pushed the cake-dish toward her. "Are n't you?"

"No." She made a comical *moue* of regret. "I have no intelligence for cards, and it is stupid to waste time on something you do badly — do you not think so?"

Mrs. Austen raised her eyebrows noncommittally.

"I think it 's stupid to play cards, at all — whether you do it well or badly," Mr. Austen declared, with heat. "It 's a pure waste of time!"

"Hear the little busy bee!" his wife mocked gaily. "Life is so exciting, here! What am I

to do? Go to 'Mothers' Meetings' and join the 'Dorcas Society'? I have to kill time, somehow!"

"It seems to me there are several other ways in which you might kill it," he retorted pointedly.

"We will now have a little lecture from father, on the duties of a wife and mother." There was a touch of recklessness in her laughter. "Have some more tea?"

"Thank you, I have had enough," Peggy-Elise smiled.

"You see, Mademoiselle Lascelles," Mr. Austen explained, "Mrs. Austen — that is, your aunt — does n't care for the country, and she —"

"And she is n't domestic," his wife interrupted, laughing again, "and she 's *frightfully* extravagant. You see, you 're a member of the family, now,"— she spoke half-banteringly — "so we 'll introduce you to all the family skeletons."

"If you and my uncle will call me 'Peggy,'" she ventured diffidently, "that will make me feel more like a real member of the family than even to meet the skeletons."

"Here comes Isabelle," said Anne, who had lingered in silent, helpless infatuation beside Peggy-Elise's chair.

The Austens' eldest daughter, in smart but crumpled white tennis garb, a green and white

striped sweater slung over her shoulder, crossed the veranda at a rather languid gait, her head inclined to one side. She carried two racquets in one hand, and a magazine in the other. At sight of Peggy, she smiled — a pretty, dimpled smile that fitted most occasions.

"Isabelle," Mrs. Austen said, "this is your cousin, Peggy."

Peggy rose, meaning to embrace her cousin, but before she could do so, Isabelle, her hands still full, laughingly offered her two disengaged fingers.

"Are n't you dead with this heat?" she inquired, pushing back a stray lock of golden hair with the hand that held the magazine, at the same time appraising her new cousin, curiously. "I almost died, over on the court, today! Whew! But we won!" She crossed over to her father, kissed him dutifully, and flopped into a chair.

"I suppose you 're all tired out from your long journey?"

"No — I am not very tired — I rested all the way."

Isabelle began to fan herself.

"Would you like some tea?" her mother asked.

"No! I just drank a gallon of ice-water!"

"You should n't do that, when you 're over-

heated," her father remonstrated. "Had Allyn returned, when you left?"

"Yes. Rex has a new bull-terrier; they went down to put it in the kennels. Allyn said he'd be right over." She glanced across the lawn. "Here he comes, now."

Peggy liked the tall, lanky boy, who blushed violently as he crossed the veranda and shook hands with her.

"I hope you'll pardon my appearance, Miss Lascelles,"— he glanced down at his mussed clothes. "Welcome to our city!"

This latest Austen was blond, like his mother, Peggy saw. He kept shaking his heavy, straight hair out of his eyes that, when he was not smiling, were a little hard too, like hers.

"Sorry I could n't stop, to-day," he went on. "Rex and I had to rush down to the express office to get a bull-terrier pup his father bought him. Gee! I wish I had one like it!"

"You'll have to ask your Uncle Ben to get you one." His mother's tone implied that that was all that would be necessary. "He is n't really their uncle," she explained to Peggy-Elise. "He's my godfather, but he adores the children — he has really spoiled them." She said it complacently.

"I *bet* he'd give me a dog," Allyn pursued, his young eyes shrewdly speculative.

Mr. Austen had been silent during this conversation. Peggy observed that the color had crept into his cheeks, and that he was keeping his eyes lowered; she did not understand the cause of his discomfort, but felt intuitively that here was a "skeleton" she had *not* met.

"Here 's a dandy picture of Theda Bara," Isabelle announced, looking up from her magazine. "I 'm crazy about her and Douglas Fairbanks! Don't you love the movies?"

"What is that —'movies'?" Peggy inquired.

Isabelle was dumb with astonishment.

"It 's moving-pictures, Peggy," Mr. Austen elucidated.

"Oh — the cinema. Yes — I like to go, sometimes."

Her cousin stared at her incredulously for a moment. "I suppose the pictures are n't very good over there, now, anyhow, on account of the war," she said, in an attempt to explain Peggy's indifference.

"Are things as bad as they say, over there?" Mrs. Austen asked. "Is there really such a shortage of food?"

"There is a shortage of everything," Peggy replied, gravely.

"Stt — stt!" Isabelle shook her head. "I only hope America won't be dragged into it!"

There followed some superficial, selfish war

talk — Red Cross, preparedness, war gardens. Listening, her hands tightly clasped in her lap, Peggy realized that the war had not touched these people; she wondered if it had come no nearer to other American families. Even before her departure, all eyes had begun to strain anxiously toward America, all hearts to dream of this great power coming magnificently, eagerly to help them, in their black hour, as they had once helped her. Peggy saw that, for the Austens at least, the war was in the background — a vast, unsettling force, inconceivable, remote.

And as she sat there, on the comfortable veranda, and looked out over the smooth lawn at the peaceful street, beyond, with the late afternoon shadows falling obliquely across it, the pleasant clink of tea-cups in her ears — as she sat there, so far from the insecurity, from the ghastly physical evidences of the conflict, and heard her relatives talking carelessly of the war — except as self-concern moved them — Peggy felt as if she had been dropped down, not in another country but on another planet.

"The Giants won again," Allyn said; "nine to nothing."

Leaning forward, their faces animated, he and his father excitedly debated the National League's chances of victory in the coming World Series — they were familiar with the strengths

and weaknesses of each team. Allyn was n't sure that McGraw had been wise to let Marquard go — he was pitching good ball, now, with the Brooklyns. But Mr. Austen said McGraw was right. They had it back and forth — it was a vital question.

"And then you criticize me," Mrs. Austen said, leaning over and flicking her husband lightly on the knee, with her finger, "because I 'm crazy about cards!"

"That 's different. You are n't interested in anything else — I 'm interested in a dozen things."

She drew in her under lip and regarded him with mock-penitence. "Is n't it terrible!"

"Have you ever seen a 'phone-doll, Mother?" Isabelle asked, at this juncture.

"A what?"

"A 'phone-doll — one of those Pompadour dolls, you know, with big skirts to cover the telephone? They 're peachy! Doris has a beauty — she paid forty dollars for it. I wish we had one!"

"I suppose we could find cheaper ones than that."

"I don't see why you have to have every newfangled thing that comes out," Mr. Austen spoke irritably.

"It's a miracle you don't regard the telephone as 'new-fangled'!" his wife retorted.

"The telephone is a necessity."

Mrs. Austen sighed, in exasperation, then caught up the tiny silver bell, on the end of the tea-wagon, and tinkled it sharply.

The maid came and removed the tea things. There was an uncomfortable silence. Mr. Austen broke it.

"Would you like to see an evening paper?" he asked, handing Peggy the *Sun*.

She accepted it, with a smile; but she bent unseeing eyes upon it, while the loneliness that had increased with every passing moment overwhelmed her. Ever since she had left Paris, anticipation had sustained her. She had hoped, against the rather discouraging matter-of-factness of her letters, to find something of her idolized mother in her mother's sister; she had longed for a sister to adore, in Isabelle — they were to have been so near to her — her mother's own people.

"If you will excuse me,"— she rose, smiling bravely —"I will go to my room and rest for a little while." Anne followed her.

Mrs. Austen, who had been reading the social items in the Flushing *Local*, reached over and took the paper Peggy had abandoned. For a

while the silence was broken only by her amused ejaculations and the crackling of newspapers.

"Do you think she's pretty?" Isabelle inquired suddenly, with a tiny, critical lifting of her nostrils.

Her mother looked up blankly from her paper; but her father said:

"I think she's far more than pretty — she's beautiful."

"*Beau*tiful!" Isabelle exclaimed, frowning.

"Yes — there's soul in her face."

Mrs. Austen began to hum lightly.

"Well —" Isabelle said, at length, "she's too serious for me!"

"I guess she could be — lively enough if she got started," Allyn put in.

Mrs. Austen continued to hum.

CHAPTER VIII

MR. AUSTEN, dressed for business, came into his study one morning, some weeks after Peggy-Elise's arrival, and found her hard at work at the little typewriter desk in the corner.

She had not heard him enter, in the rattle of the machine. He stood, for a moment, looking at her, his chin in his hand, his head bent. The breeze, blowing in through the open window beside her, had loosened some little softly curling hairs all over her head, giving it an adorably childlike look, in piquant contrast to the exquisitely developed shoulders below. Mr. Austen threw back his head, closed his eyes for a moment, bit his lip, then went over and stood behind Peggy's chair, and read a line of what she had written.

"You 're getting to be quite expert, are n't you?" There was fondness in his voice.

She started.

"I did n't know you were here! Yes — I am getting along," she answered, recovering herself; "but I have still to go slowly — it is not very difficult." She drew from the typewriter the

page she had just completed and separated the sheets. "This is not a very distinct copy — is it?"

"The carbon 's worn out — I 'll get some new ones — it does n't matter for this stuff." He picked up several pages, glanced over them, and threw them down on the desk. He began to pace the floor.

"This moving-picture stuff is deadly — it 's very kind of you to copy it for me."

"I think you must know, my uncle,"— she often addressed him this way —" that it makes me very happy to be able to do something for you." She spoke with warm gravity.

"I know it 's deadly stuff," he repeated bitterly, "but it 's what they want, and I 'm out for the money! I beg your pardon, Peggy — yes, I know it makes you happy. You are one of those rare people with unselfishness in their souls. . . . I 've given up all hope of doing the work I know I could do, if I had leisure and an easy mind. Anyhow, the best years of my life are gone!"

"What do you mean by the best years?" Peggy asked, turning around.

"My youth!"

The girl considered.

"But do you not think the best years are the years one makes the best use of — whether they

come early or late? If the experience one needs, to do big work, comes when one is young, it may be that — one has paid almost too much for it. Do you not think so?"

Her uncle studied her for a while, without replying. At length he said:

"You are a very comforting person, Peggy — one could grow very attached to you — one could become very dependent upon you." He spoke slowly, reflectively.

The pleased color flashed into Peggy's pale, softly luminous cheeks.

Mr. Austen turned away abruptly, seated himself at his desk, and drew toward him the sheaf of bills that had piled up steadily since the first of the month. Then he got out his check-book and began to write. His face assumed its familiar air of rebellion.

The clatter of the typewriter was drowned suddenly by the ringing of the telephone, just outside the study door; Peggy answered it. "It is for Aunt Isabelle," she said, going in search of her. Mrs. Austen, who had heard the ring, collided with her at the door of the library. The girl returned to her desk; but she could not work while her aunt was talking, so she examined the pages she had typed, for errors.

"What are you going to see?" Mrs. Austen was saying, at the telephone. "Yes . . . yes,

they say it 's wonderful. . . Well, I don't see how I can possibly manage it — you know how it is when you have a family on your hands. It 's cook's afternoon off, and the maid is home — sick sister, I believe. . . . Yes? " She laughed gaily. " You know my weakness! I can't resist an inducement like that! Wait a minute — Peggy! " she called, " do you think you could get dinner, to-night? "

" It would be nothing to do," Peggy said, smiling.

Mrs. Austen turned again to the telephone. Presently she came into the study.

" I 'm going to town," she announced briskly, " to have luncheon — go to a matinée with Flo Kipp." Mr. Austen made no comment. She turned to Peggy:

" Don't go to any bother about dinner. There are lots of canned things — give them some of that tongue — it 's delicious — and some asparagus tips. If you want anything, you can telephone for it."

Her niece nodded.

" I am sure there is enough to feed an army." She laughed, but with a sudden sadness in her heart, as she thought of the hungry millions she had so recently left behind.

Mrs. Austen folded her arms and addressed her husband.

"I want some money." She drew in her lips, bringing into prominence two flanking dimples. There was a pause.

"How much?"

She raised her eyebrows, shrugged.

"Twenty-five dollars."

"What are you going to do with twenty-five dollars?"

"Play bridge, darling," she said, with diabolical sweetness. "Don't go," she commanded, as Peggy rose to leave. "We always have these little discussions."

Mr. Austen picked up the bills he had laid aside; his hands trembled.

"Here 's a bill,"— he flicked it with his hand —"from Loennecker and Dreyer's — seventy-three dollars — for groceries — and not an item on it! Hereafter, I want an itemized bill — I 've told you this, before."

"It 's their custom to send out their bills that way — I 'm not going to demand an itemized bill from people like that! They 're absolutely reliable — they 're the best firm in town."

"The most expensive," he snapped. "They may be reliable, but every firm makes mistakes. How do you know that you are n't being charged two or three times for the same thing?"

"They send a slip with every order, I believe," she said coldly.

"Well, where *are* those slips? I want to see them."

"I've told Minnie to save them — I don't know whether she does or not."

"How do you know what you're paying for things?"

She looked at him in astonishment.

"You don't suppose they'd give them to me any cheaper if I asked the price, do you?"

"No — but it does n't seem to occur to you that you *might* be ordering things we really could n't afford. It seems to me that seventy-three dollars is outrageous for one month's groceries!"

"They keep the finest grades of everything. I know their prices are high, but *every*body trades there." This remark was not meant to be as inclusive as it sounded; it was meant, in fact, to be extremely exclusive.

"It would be much better, I should think, anyway, if you went and did your marketing instead of ordering everything by telephone — you leave it to them, and they send you the most expensive brands they carry. And you never get as good fruit and vegetables as if you selected them yourself."

"You're perfectly ridiculous, Bob! Nobody does it! Besides, I have something else to do

with my time." She put her hands up and eased the weight of her heavy, live hair.

"If you would permit me, Aunt Isabelle," Peggy said a little timidly, "I would love to do it for you. Perhaps I could find cheaper shops, where things are just as good, and where you do not have to pay for the name — it is the same in Paris. And it is better, too, do you not think so, to pay cash? You can keep track of the money, and they cannot cheat you."

Mrs. Austen shook her head.

"That would be delightful when there *was* cash, but what would we do when there was n't? Loennecker and Dreyer have always been very agreeable about waiting for their money — I would n't deal anywhere else."

"They ought not to have to wait for their money," her husband declared, folding a bill into an envelope and drawing the ink-well toward him. "On five hundred dollars a month we should be able to pay every bill and save something."

Peggy did the sum rapidly into francs.

"But you mean you have two thousand francs a *month?*" Her excited tones expressed incredulity. "It is a fortune!"

"It is n't a fortune in America," her aunt said curtly, smiling. "Besides, your uncle is ro-

mancing — it 's only three hundred and fifty — the rest is uncertain."

"Oh, I would love to have so much money to handle!"— Peggy's eyes sparkled; her French genius for economy longed to work a miracle in this badly managed household. To her, it seemed that her uncle ought to be a rich man. She began to understand something of his problem, and of his consequent bitterness and discouragement.

"Well, my dear, I wish you had it," Mrs. Austen said wearily; "you 'd soon be sick of it!"

"Maybe so," the girl agreed. "But at least I would have the satisfaction, first, to go into the kitchen and teach that cook not to be so wasteful. It is a crime! Yesterday, when I went out to iron a blouse, she was peeling potatoes, and she was cutting off that much!" She indicated a half-inch, on her little finger.

"My dear girl,"— her aunt gave a short laugh —"if you interfered with the cook she would leave."

"Then she could leave," Peggy said decisively. "I would take her place, myself."

"That 's the only way to prevent waste, of course," Mr. Austen said, sealing the last envelope and rising.

"That 's what you 'd like *me* to do, is n't it, pet?" His wife flashed him a mocking smile.

"Well, I have no intention whatsoever of being a household drudge and spending the rest of my days in a kitchen — I get little enough out of life, as it is!"

"You know perfectly well that I have no desire to see you spend your life in a kitchen! But I think if you gave a little attention to that end of the house you might be able to reduce our living to a more economical basis. It would be to your own interest in the end — even if you don't care about my side of it," he concluded bitterly.

"Let the future take care of itself," she retorted coldly. "I mean to enjoy myself now." She put out her hand. "You 'd better make that thirty dollars."

Her husband stood, irresolute, for a moment, then he sat down and made out a check. He gave it to her without looking up. A burden seemed to have settled on his shoulders; they sagged dejectedly; he looked older and very tired.

When he had left for the city, Mrs. Austen said to Peggy:

"We always have a scene like this, the first of the month. He 's forever talking about living on a simpler scale, but he 'd be the first one to protest. I 've proposed, a half dozen times, getting an apartment in town; but your uncle

does n't believe in raising children in the city. It 's ridiculous — you see just as healthy children there as you do anywhere!"

The girl wondered if her aunt really did n't understand that the "simpler scale" referred to the carelessness and extravagance in every direction.

When Mrs. Austen went away to dress, Peggy drew an envelope from her belt and pressed it, breathlessly, to her lips; it was a letter from Venable — the first since her departure. It had come that morning, but she had waited until she could be alone to read it. In her nervous eagerness, she tore the envelope to pieces and, with hammering pulses, shook open the page.

It was a brief letter. When she had finished it, the radiance had gone out of her face and a sick feeling surged over her, with each beat of her heart. Venable had missed her, it seemed — was desolate without her; yet in some subtle fashion he conveyed to her mind that this feeling was an aftermath — that, since she had refused to remain with him, there was nothing to do but regard the episode as closed. He said nothing about his previously expressed intention to come to America. He spoke of her voice, and hoped that she would succeed in getting a hearing — he opined that this was all that would be necessary to insure her future.

A little cynical smile twisted her lips at his mention of her voice — it had reminded her of her first Sunday in America. In her own country, Sunday was a joyous day, a sociable day, a day of delightful excursioning, when the weather was fine; and she had come downstairs that first Sunday morning, happily expectant. She had found the family irritable and touchy. Mrs. Austen had amazed her by stating violently that she "loathed" Sundays. After breakfast they sat and read the papers for hours, Isabelle and Allyn having a highly recriminatory wrangle over the possession of the illustrated supplement.

By degrees, they dispersed. A Sunday quiet brooded over the house. There was no one on the ground floor, except Peggy herself. She went to the piano, and began to try over some songs she found there. She sang softly, but her pure, resonant tones carried to every part of the house. She was in the middle of "Le Charme," when Isabelle came into the room. She did n't know Peggy could play, she had said, interrupting her, and would she play over some accompaniments for her? Isabelle, it had developed, was studying for a grand opera career. Peggy had quietly put aside the unfinished song. She was shocked, not only by her cousin's rudeness, but by her very obvious jealousy. She had not sung, since.

She read Venable's letter again, dwelling avidly on the only lines that held comfort for her: "I can't work — I miss the inspiration of you." She knew this could be true, and she found a gleam of happiness in the tie it implied. For a long time she sat, her hands clasped about her knee, thinking. It was, really, a passionate search for arguments to justify the attitude of the man she loved; she found one in the scene she had just witnessed between her aunt and uncle. From this, and the conversation of the women she had met in the Austen home, she inferred that the average American woman was neither trained nor inclined to economize and to unselfishly bear her share of the marriage burdens. Venable, an American, knew this too, and was perhaps influenced by the knowledge. Marriage would mean double failure for him — failure as an artist and as a husband. But Peggy knew that he knew she was different; she was too wretchedly logical to have the comfort of a delusion. The truth was that Venable's ideals did not measure up to her own. First and last, it was a woman's physical attractiveness that mattered to him; since this was to be enjoyed without marriage — why marry? Character and intelligence he valued, she knew, but he lacked the fineness to appreciate love. She went back to her typewriter with a heavy heart.

"What are we going to have for dinner?" Anne inquired.

Peggy, allowing for the hindrances that await one in a strange kitchen, had gone out early in the afternoon to look the ground over.

"I don't know, yet," she said, fastening herself into a blue and white checked apron she had found hanging on the door.

"There was almost a whole roast of beef left from dinner, last night — I think I shall make a *ragoût*. Does your father like a *ragoût?*"

"I don't know what it is?"

"I think you call it a — stew."

"Oh, he loves it! But cook won't make it — it's too much trouble. He likes it brown."

"But of course!" Peggy opened the refrigerator, and then stood regarding the plate in her hand in amazement. "Where is the rest of it?" She held out a platter, on which lay the ribs and tail-end of a large roast.

"Servants," Anne said laconically.

"Do you mean to tell me they would dare eat all the beautiful heart of that roast? Why — there is nothing left!"

In the same way, when she looked for some left-over bits of vegetables for her stew, she could find nothing.

"Oh — they never save anything like that.

What do you want?" Anne trotted toward the pantry. Peggy followed.

"Some carrots and peas."

"They 're on the top shelf — there."

Peggy reached up and selected what she wanted, at the same time taking in the rows of many-shaped glass jars, filled with vegetables, fruits, and potted meats, the majority of them bearing familar French or Italian labels. She sighed, thinking what they must have cost here in America. Then she went back and continued her preparations for dinner.

When Mr. Austen came home he went out to the kitchen. Anne, on her way to the dining-room with some plates of salad, stopped to give him an adoring kiss. Peggy was at the sink, draining the water from some string beans; she threw her uncle a gay smile of welcome over her shoulder. He looked tired, and his face still held traces of the morning's bitterness and defeat, though it had brightened a little under Anne's caress.

"Can't I do something?"

"There is nothing to do, *mon oncle.* Anne is setting the table, and I have only to take up dinner," Peggy said, in the high good humor of the cook who knows that her meal has turned out well.

"Then perhaps you won't mind if I stand here

and just watch you," he asked, with a winning, half-wistful smile.

"I should like that!"

He crossed over and took one of her hands in his.

"Would you?"

"Of course!" she said tranquilly. But her sensitive face betrayed confusion as she met his eyes — they were compellingly tender. He stood very close, looking down at her with an expression of intense sweetness.

"You are lovely, to-night!" he said, in a low, unsteady voice. "You are lovely, lovely!"

She disengaged her hand gently, and pushed back a strand of hair from her temple; there was nothing to indicate that she had not freed her hand for that sole purpose.

"I am glad if you find me lovely." The frank pleasure in her voice held no hint of coquetry. "Have you forgotten that we were to talk French when we were alone?"

Mr. Austen looked at her for a moment in silence.

"I 'm afraid the only French I can think of to-night would not carry me far — or —" he said slowly, turning away —" perhaps it would carry me too far."

Peggy removed her apron.

"Will you take in this dish, my uncle? Dinner is ready."

CHAPTER IX

ONE morning along in November, Mr. Austen came out of the house on his way to town, and caught sight of Peggy raking up the crisp, brown leaves that strewed the lawn. He stood and watched her, loving the picture she made.

The day was clear, still, under a dazzling sunshine. The only sounds were the rhythmic swish of leaves and Peggy's vibrant voice lifted in a gay old French song. Her lithe body bent with graceful freedom to the pull of the rake. She had put on Anne's scarlet *chasseur* cap, and her skin was luminous against its vivid folds. She had, somehow, the prankish, elusive look of a wood nymph who had strayed into civilized haunts, had found there a strange, diverting toy, and was having great sport with it. As he watched her, Mr. Austen felt that if he stirred she would vanish behind one of the old maples that shaded the lawn.

"*Bon jour, mon oncle!*" she called blithely, as she saw him coming down the path. "*Comment ça va?*"

"I am in excellent health, thank you." He smiled, for her mood was infectious. "Only,

it seems to me that young ladies of refinement don't make use of that particular form in inquiring about their uncles' health," he teased.

"It is true — but I am not refined, this morning!" she laughed. "I am only happy."

"Yes — you seem remarkably happy."

"I have had a letter!" Her eyes danced.

"Yes — I know," he said, glancing down. Presently he looked up again, with a rather forced smile. "Are n't you going to town, this morning?"

"No. Mr. Weller does n't need me until Thursday."

"There 's another case," Mr. Austen flung out, "where an artist has been sacrificed for his family. With his gift, he ought not to be doing magazine illustrating. Of course, his wife is a very nice woman, but that does n't alter the fact that the care of her and the two children has cost him a career!"

"I think he does not want the fact altered — he is very happy."

"Well," he said, after a moment's silence, "good-by, Peggy."

She leaned on the rake handle and watched until he turned into the street; he did not look back. She began to rake again, lifting the leaves into a pile. She knew what had been in his mind. When she had announced her inten-

tion, the previous fortnight, to go to work, he had tried to dissuade her, arguing that it was not necessary. She, however, had seen clearly that her ambition to become a singer could never be realized in her aunt's home — she could not even practise; they would feel that she was usurping Isabelle's prerogatives — but she could not leave without money. Mrs. Austen had raised her eyebrows when she learned that her niece intended to pose for illustrations — it was n't very desirable work, she thought — but if Peggy felt she had to earn something — It had ended with Mr. Austen speaking to his friend Weller.

The girl stopped raking for a moment to push the hair out of her eyes. Some crows cawed overhead, their flight shadowed on the yellowing grass. Her heart swelled as she watched them dip out of sight. Somehow, this beauty of black, flying birds doubled the joy that had come to her with Venable's letter that morning, and she flung wide her arms, threw back her head — her eyes closed — and drew a great, shivering, ecstatic breath.

It was a short letter, like the first one, nor was there any tenderness in it. It was, in fact, full of savage protest against existence, of helpless rage at his inability to work — petulant, illogical, glum. He was sending her a copy of

the *Revue* — they had reproduced the Phryne in it — last decent thing he would ever do, probably.

Peggy had smiled very tenderly as she read it, her eyes sparkling, her heart beating wildly. In every word, she felt his need of her, his loneliness for her.

A sudden ache to see him swept over her. . . . It would be wonderful to swing along the road, beside him, for miles, this glorious morning, to —

"Oh, Peggy!" Mrs. Austen called, out of the front window, "come upstairs a minute, will you?"

She was standing beside her bed, opening a cardboard box, as her niece entered.

"I love your room, Aunt Isabelle," the girl said, looking about the sun-flooded chamber, with its hangings of a quaint block chintz, in which heavy old pinks, parrot greens, and dull blues blended charmingly on a rich cream ground.

"I hate the furniture!" Mrs. Austen made a face at the curly-maple bedroom suite. "I'm going to get one of those cream-enameled Chippendale sets, with cane medallions — they're the rage, now — Mrs. Apgar has one in French gray. Want to see something pretty?"

She held up, against herself, a blouse of webby linen, exquisitely embroidered and hemstitched, with insets of *filet*.

"How beautiful!" Peggy exclaimed, with the Frenchwoman's eye for fine needlework.

She held up another. It was even sheerer, and marvelously tucked. The girl examined it, enthusiastically. Her aunt opened a bureau drawer and began to make room for them.

"Your uncle will have a fit when he gets the bill! If I win at bridge, next Saturday, I mean to pay for them myself. I suppose I should n't have bought them," she went on, "but I met Mrs. Donnelly at the counter, and I could n't resist getting a couple, too. That one you have was twenty-five, and this was forty."

"Dollars — you mean? But, do you — are they worth it?" She hesitated. "If you would like to return these, I could make you some — I can embroider quite well. It seems too bad to pay so much for something that will last only a little while."

"My dear — if I start skimping and trying to economize on clothes, I 'll always have to — I don't want to give your uncle any bad habits!" she replied, her eyes dancing.

Unaccountably, Peggy suddenly felt that she did not know her aunt at all; she had a vague impression that her flippancy and heartlessness

were — somehow — a mask; but this idea confused her previous conception of her only fleetingly.

Isabelle had come in during their conversation.

"Well — when *I* marry I won't have to train my husband, because I shall pick out a rich one! A man ought to give you everything when you give him — everything!" She crossed to the mirror. "I did n't get my hair up right, this morning," she scowled, pulling out hairpins.

"But what do you mean by 'everything'?" Peggy inquired amusedly. "I cannot see that you give anything, if there are servants to do all the work and you have only to walk into the shops and buy what you like?"

Isabelle turned round from the mirror, where she had been admiring herself, her shimmering golden hair caught loosely in her hand.

"Why — I 'd give — I'd give him — myself!" She hesitated over the word, blushing.

"But is that more than he gives you?" her cousin asked frankly. "And, in addition, he takes care of you."

Isabelle flared up at this attack on the most sacred — and senseless — tenet of her sex.

"That must be a French idea!"

"I think France had not the honor first to perceive that truth," Peggy returned pleasantly.

"Isabelle, your hair is all split at the ends!" Mrs. Austen said, paying no attention to the conversation. "Turn around! You 're getting a wrinkle from frowning! We 'll go in town, Tuesday, and have a massage and manicure, and get that new specialist the Donnellys were speaking of — what 's his name? — to treat your hair."

"Doris says he 's wonderful. Gee! I wish I could have a new fall suit!"

"I 've told you to stop saying 'Gee!' What 's the matter with your brown one?"

"That old thing!"

"It was new last spring."

"I 'm sick of it."

Her mother's raised eyebrows implied not disapproval, but impotence.

"You ought to see Doris's new outfit — mauve broadcloth and moleskin — she paid a hundred and seventy-five dollars for it."

"Well,— you 'll have to hurry and marry that rich man," Mrs. Austen said, laughing.

Isabelle picked up a pair of silver-handled scissors from the bureau and went to a corner closet.

"What are you going to do?"

"Borrow that Poiret label from the cloak Uncle gave you, and put it in my new one — I' m going to wear it to the opera to-morrow

night. I'll put it back," Isabelle said, snipping.

Her mother burst out laughing.

"I love that!"

"The fire feels good, these nights, does n't it?" Mrs. Austen said, coming into the library and settling herself in a big chair, with the paper.

Peggy nodded, smiling. She was curled up in a corner of the great leather divan, knitting by the light of the crackling log fire. Her steel needles made red flashes in the dim library, lighted only by the amber-shaded lamp on the long study table. She was lost in dreams. Venable's letter, that morning, had brought her more than the joy of his need of her; it had revived her *amour propre* that had languished since the receipt of his first letter. All day long, a mounting, delicious sense of power had thrilled her. Having examined herself in the mirror, she felt dissatisfied — this was not the creature who charmed Venable, in her thoughts. The result was inevitable, to feminine psychology. She took a slow, luxurious bath — very different from the unimaginative affair with which she had begun the day; shampooed her hair; buffered her dainty nails. Then she had cased her fragrant, satiny, joyous body in the finest

garments she possessed. Her black gown, with its demure, white cuffs and childish, round collar emphasized her pale, sparkling beauty. In some subtle fashion, the process had metamorphosed her; when she had looked in the mirror again, she had wished that Venable could see her. She was living over the last time he had caught her in his arms, when her aunt said:

"Is that the sock you started last night?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Austen shook her head.

"You work very fast. Knitting would make me so nervous I should go mad!" She threw aside her paper and opened a magazine.

Peggy studied her — she thought she looked strikingly handsome, in the Antwerp blue georgette gown she wore — and very young. She never could grow accustomed to her aunt's youthfulness; she wondered if it were due to her refusal to be touched by responsibility.

"Bob," Mrs. Austen called in to her husband, who was working in his study, "what time did the Hasbroucks say they 'd be over?"

"They did n't say," Mr. Austen replied, in a preoccupied voice.

The door-bell rang.

"Bob, will you go to the door? I let Minnie go to prayer-meeting — she 's very religious! Your uncle has a terrible crush on Mrs.

Hasbrouck," she confided to Peggy, when her husband was out of earshot. "The Doctor's a divvle!" she added, her eyes dancing. "I had a wild experience with him, once! Shh!" she cautioned, as the girl opened her mouth to speak.

Mrs. Hasbrouck came in, laughing, followed by her husband and Mr. Austen. She was short and softly plump, with a dazzling sort of prettiness. Her black hair was tossed up on top of her head, loosely, and provocative curls strayed over her temples and small ears. Flashing jet earrings swung from their rouged lobes. She was heavily made up, even to the rather inadequate eyelashes that fringed her snapping brown eyes. She was vivacious, and she bubbled with gossip and amusingly sophisticated small talk. She was one of those women who unfailingly make a brilliant entrance.

When the introductions were over, she dropped into a chair beside Mrs. Austen. While they were talking, she threw frequent glances at Mr. Austen, who leaned against the mantel-piece, chatting with her husband. He caught her eye, once, and smiled. Peggy happened to look up at the moment, and her aunt gestured humorously with her eyebrow, toward Mr. Austen. Several times, Doctor Hasbrouck turned an intent, swift gaze upon Peggy. Pres-

ently, he came over and sat down beside her.

"Knitting for the Red Cross?"

"No — for a friend."

"Noticed that, Austen?" the doctor inquired. "All the charming, pretty girls are knitting for friends — only the homely ones are working for the Red Cross."

Mrs. Hasbrouck stopped in the middle of a word, glanced at the faces of the two men, and flashed Peggy a brilliant, antagonistic smile.

"I do not object that you stretch the truth a little, to be agreeable," the girl said, with a pretty air of raillery, looking up from her work into the doctor's magnetic blue eyes, in which ardent admiration smoldered.

"I'd stretch it even farther than that!" he laughed.

"*Docteur,* I am sure of it!" Peggy affirmed vivaciously.

Her uncle, his elbows on his knees, his chin resting on his knuckles, had never taken his eyes from her face. This self-possessed, bantering Peggy — with whom the doctor was obviously already smitten — was a new and fascinating person to him. He wondered if she found Hasbrouck attractive — he studied him from this angle. He was thick-set, vital — women liked that. It struck him, suddenly, that the doctor was very good-looking, after an irregular fashion,

and there was something very attractive about his big, humorous mouth, with its perpetual quirk at the corners. Peggy probably liked him. . . .

"You know, Austen, I would n't be surprised if America were in this war, by spring?"

"Carter Hasbrouck! — you pessimist!" his wife exclaimed. "It's much safer to stay neutral!"

"But how *can* you?" Peggy said earnestly. "Even if America does not resent the sinking of her ships, she cannot remain neutral when there is right on one side and wrong on the other!"

"That's right! That's right!" the doctor agreed. "You're not a pacifist, are you!"

"They are rabbits!"

The men laughed; Mrs. Austen appeared to be mildly amused; Mrs. Hasbrouck smiled on the girl, with coldly glittering eyes.

"You are — French, are n't you?" she inquired.

"I am half American," Peggy corrected.

"If war breaks out, I'm going over," the doctor declared.

"But why do you wait?" Peggy's eyes were mischievous.

"Anxious to get rid of me?" he interrogated, with a humorous twitch of his mouth.

"But no!" she laughed. "You are very

agreeable, even if you are absurd. Will you get me that ball of wool, please — it has just rolled under my uncle's chair."

Mr. Austen handed it to her, as the doctor stooped. He avoided her eyes. Mrs. Hasbrouck regarded the men scornfully.

"Carter! Do you hear that!" she said, some time later, breaking into the conversation by the fireplace. "The Woodhulls are divorced!"

"You don't mean it!"

"They were married only four months!"

"What was the trouble?" he asked, watching Peggy out of the corner of his eye.

"Just uncongenial," Mrs. Austen interjected. "You remember the Smiths? — They were married only three weeks!"

"Better do away with marriage altogether," her husband suggested, lighting a cigarette.

"You 'd love that, would n't you, darling," she said, with a tormenting smile.

"It would save a lot of suffering."

"How does it strike you, Miss Lascelles?" the doctor asked.

"You do not look at marriage, here, as we do in my country, I 'm afraid — it is that you expect a miracle!" she laughed. "In France, if a man and his wife find themselves uncongenial, at the end of a few months — well — they are philosophical. You see, from childhood, we are

taught that one must make a success of marriage. A woman would not think to divorce her husband, because she was disappointed in him! *Mon Dieu,*— they would be all divorcées." She shrugged, her face humorously alight.

"Sounds sort of cold-blooded," the doctor remarked.

"Not at all!" Peggy protested, laughing. "It is only that we are practical."

"I never heard of anything more revolting, anyway, than their custom of choosing a husband for a girl!" Mrs. Hasbrouck exclaimed, with her pretty, contemptuous smile.

"But how can a young girl judge of character?" Peggy retorted. "How can she find out the things about a man that she should know? She is not forced to marry him, if she does not wish to."

"Would you like to have your husband selected for you?" the doctor questioned, grinning.

"*Docteur,* you forget that I am half American! The Yankee half of me will choose our husband — and the French half will make the best of it!"

Mrs. Austen and the doctor's wife did not glance up, at the spontaneous laughter that followed Peggy's little sally. They were apparently too absorbed, in an exchange of gossip, to be aware of it. The girl, however, was not deceived. Her face grew hot. She wondered if

she had been forward. She was sure she had said nothing she should not have said — yet, there was a faintly contemptuous look on the faces of the women that, clearly, bore no relation to what they were saying. As she came out of her troubled preoccupation, Mrs. Hasbrouck remarked:

"There 's one good thing about this war, anyway — when it 's over we won't have any trouble getting servants."

"And then you say," Peggy spoke in a quivering voice, "that the French are cold-blooded — *mon Dieu —!*"

"I don't see anything cold-blooded about that; we need servants, and these people will need work — that 's all," she finished icily.

Peggy resumed the knitting she had dropped for the moment; her expression was grave, almost pitiful.

"Well, you 'll have to admit," Mr. Austen spoke up, "that it *is* a trifle cold-blooded to see an advantage in other people's tragedies."

"Well, at least it 's 'practical,'" Mrs. Hasbrouck parried, with a malicious emphasis.

"Me-ow!" the doctor said, and everybody laughed.

"Suppose we go and have something to eat," Mrs. Austen suggested, leading the way to the dining-room.

Peggy and the doctor followed.

"Sorry I did n't meet you, sooner, Miss Lascelles. Really!"

He leaned toward her, and spoke nervously, in a lowered voice. The masking smile had disappeared; desire flamed in his eyes. "I hope I — shall see you — again — soon. You are the most —" He stopped abruptly; Mr. Austen and his wife had come up close behind them.

Mrs. Hasbrouck was saying something very complimentary about her companion's work, in a calm, furious voice — her chin high.

Peggy knew she had overheard the doctor's interrupted superlative, and she was wretchedly uncomfortable to have been placed, so undeservedly, in a dubious position.

All through the frivolity of the supper, the doctor fatuously continued to establish the fact of his admiration for her. She was miserable, and longed to get to her room.

Mrs. Hasbrouck gave her a brilliant, hostile smile, and a flaccid hand, when she said good night.

From her room, Peggy was conscious that her aunt had switched off the dining-room lights, spoken to her husband, and come upstairs; that her uncle had locked and bolted the front door; then she lost herself in disquieting thoughts of the evening.

Suddenly she remembered that she had forgotten to bring up the book she had been reading, and went down for it. The library was dark, except for the dull glow from the fire. As she was feeling along the wall for the switch, some one stirred. She gave a startled exclamation.

"Did I frighten you, Peggy? I 'm sorry." It was her uncle's voice — low, caressing.

"I thought every one was in bed," the girl explained, "but I remember, now, you did not come upstairs. I came down for a book — I have the very bad habit to read before I can go to sleep. I think I left it on the end of the mantel-piece." She crossed to where Mr. Austen stood staring into the fire.

"I 'm afraid you 've done for the doctor," he said.

She could not see his face — his height lifted it above the small circle of radiance from the embers, but she felt his devouring gaze.

"That is absurd!" She tried to speak lightly, against the curious excitement his tone had aroused in her: "He is a married man!"

"But he is *human* — he is *human*," he whispered, passionately, as he caught her in his arms, and pressed his mouth to hers, again and again, in spite of her efforts to free herself. Her head whirled, she felt suddenly faint, her vital young body trembled in his embrace. "I love you, dear-

est — you know that I love you!" he breathed, crushing her to him.

"Oh, don't!" Peggy said weakly, and somehow escaped from his arms and found her way, dizzily, out of the darkened room.

At the top of the stairs, she met her aunt coming along the hall. There was not the least need to explain where she had been, but a sense of guilt betrayed her into it.

"I went down to get a book," she said, striving to speak naturally.

Mrs. Austen glanced at the girl's hands, raised her eyebrows politely, and went on to her room.

Peggy grew hot, all over, and her heart filled with sickening dread.

In her excitement, she had come upstairs without the book.

CHAPTER X

MRS. AUSTEN went to her room, in a state of intense astonishment and suspicion. Automatically, she let down her heavy, bright hair and began to brush it. Why had Peggy been so nervous and flushed, and why that stupid lie about a book? Perhaps she had gone down really for a book, and something had happened that had put it out of her mind — but what?

She would not have admitted, even to herself, that she regarded Peggy as a possible rival. But she did. The sense of kinship was too weakened by circumstances to affect her attitude. Peggy was her niece, it is true — but she was also young and attractive, and Mrs. Austen was more conscious of the latter fact than of the former. But though, since the hour of the girl's arrival, she had been fully aware of her husband's gravitation toward her, and though Doctor Hasbrouck's conduct that evening had intensified her jealousy, no suspicion of Peggy had crossed her mind until now.

Her husband, unhappily unaware of Peggy's slip and of the necessity, therefore, to comport himself in a manner to avert suspicion, prepared

for bed in an absorbed silence, stopping now and then and staring at space. To his wife, the symptoms were conclusive — she was not wholly unfamiliar with them.

After hours of tossing, Mr. Austen dozed off, envying his wife her ability to sleep — at the moment when she, indeed, was scornfully lashing herself for having been so gullible.

The children had finished breakfast and their father and mother were alone at the table, when Peggy came down the next morning. She was agonizingly self-conscious, as she seated herself. She had dreaded meeting them; especially she feared some seemingly trivial remark on her uncle's part that, to her aunt, would prove fatally conclusive, in view of last night's unfortunate occurrence. But he saluted her with his customary morning gravity. As for Mrs. Austen — there was no way to fathom her enigmatic smile. This morning, in her uneasiness, Peggy felt the full disturbing force of it.

"I believe you said you were going to the opera, to-night?" Mr. Austen inquired, as his wife turned off the ebony spigot of the percolator and passed Peggy her coffee.

She nodded.

"Well,— I 'll stay in town, and bring you home. You might come in early, if you like," he suggested, smiling, "and have dinner with me."

She raised her eyebrows disagreeably.

"I could n't think of putting you to that bother! The Donnellys have asked us to motor in, with them, and they 'll bring us home."

"Well," he said, uncovering the rolls and offering them to Peggy, "I dare say you regard that as a more agreeable arrangement, anyway."

Mrs. Austen lifted her shoulders, in a characteristic gesture.

In the silence that followed it seemed to Peggy that she was creating a din with her knife and fork; her senses became unreliable, magnifying sounds and distances. Nothing weighed anything — her cup was so light that she almost spilled her coffee when she lifted it. Her aunt's manner with her husband had for the girl a sickening significance. She was horribly worried. If she had only thought to say that she had been unable to find the book, she would have cleared herself, instantly; but now there was nothing she could do — it would simply have to stand as a suspicious circumstance.

"What did you have to pay for tickets?" her uncle's voice broke the silence, at last.

"Ten dollars."

"Apiece?"

"Certainly!" his wife said belligerently, frowning. "We were lucky to get them! Mr.

Donnelly had a hard time, as it was — it 's the opening of the season."

Mr. Austen buttered a piece of roll. He turned to Peggy:

"You 're going, of course?"

"No — I do not care a great deal for 'Carmen.'"

"How did you like the Hasbroucks?" he asked, after a moment.

The girl made a gesture of indifference.

Mrs. Austen busied herself with an active crisp of bacon.

"I think the doctor was very smitten with Peggy — don't you?" Mr. Austen continued.

"The doctor 's smitten with every one who encourages him," she said contemptuously. Then addressing Peggy: "You were taking a chance — his wife is insanely jealous of every woman who flirts with him."

Her niece flushed.

"I did not think I flirted. You have all teased me for my seriousness, since I have been here, and last night I tried to be more gay — that is all."

Mrs. Austen was regarding her plate with an air of bored cynicism. Peggy had a moment of plexal nausea — she wished she had never left France.

"By the way," Mr. Austen said, folding his napkin, "I wonder if you could find time, to-day, to type that scenario of mine—'Labor'? Merrit seemed very much interested in it, yesterday, and wants to see it right away. If you could—"

"Why don't you have one of the girls in the office do it?" his wife interrupted.

"I don't care to have them know, at the office, that I am doing motion-picture scenarios," he said, flushing. "Besides, Peggy likes to do it."

"I can't imagine any one *liking* to do type-writing, but then—"

"That is true. I am not an exception," Peggy said, smiling, "but I suppose we all do things, sometimes, for others, that we do not like especially to do."

Her aunt made no comment.

She was lounging by the fire, reading the paper, when Peggy went into the library some time later, the unopened copy of the *Revue* she had just received from Venable, in her hand. She meant to glance through it and then get to work.

"Now you are just 'Marguerite,'" she said, in an effort to seem at ease, to Isabelle, who sat in a low chair full in the oblong of brilliant sunshine from a near window, nibbling bonbons from a round rose and gold-laced box.

"You mean my hair?" Isabelle inquired,

catching up the long braids that hung over either shoulder. "Doris says Doctor Vignol — he's the hair specialist, you know — makes all his people wear their hair hanging for hours, every day — he says it exercises the roots — is n't he wonderful? I'm crazy to go to him!"

"It is not just the hair," Peggy said. "It is the whole effect — the simple gray dress — and the box — it is like a jewel casket."

Isabelle began to hum the Jewel song.

"I like the music," she said, "but I think Marguerite's awfully wishy-washy — I'd rather do 'Thais.'"

"Yes — but it is a very difficult rôle."

"Did you see the girl Allyn was with, last night, Mother?" she asked, ignoring her cousin's remark. "I think she was an awful stick."

Mrs. Austen shook her head. She seemed preoccupied.

Peggy settled herself on the divan, her heart heavy. In thrusting a pillow behind her back, she uncovered a green volume.

"There is my book!" she exclaimed. "I looked for it everywhere!" Suddenly, she saw that her aunt was watching her, and realized what was passing in her mind. She supposed, of course that Peggy was referring to the book of last night's incident; instead, the girl had found one she had actually mislaid, several days earlier;

without intentional duplicity, she had cleared herself.

With a great rush of relief, she turned to her magazine. The Phryne was even more perfect than she had remembered. As she gazed at the exquisite figùre, she thrilled with pride in the man whom she had helped, a little, to create it. It did not need Vernet's enthusiastic paragraph, below — it was its own magnificent reason for being. In her joy, she passed the *Revue* to her aunt.

"Here is a reproduction of Mr. Venable's Phryne."

Isabelle went and looked over her mother's shoulder.

"Why!" she gasped, "it — why it looks like you, Peggy!"

"But that is most natural; I told you that I posed for it," she replied, bewildered by her cousin's aghast face.

Two quick spots of color burned in Mrs. Austen's cheeks:

"You did n't say that you posed — nude!"

"But I told you it represented Phryne's appearance before the Athenian tribunal — did you not know the story?"

"Do you mean — you don't mean," Isabelle asked in horror, "that you posed *that* way — with nothing on — at all?" Her cheeks

were crimson, her lips parted, incredulously.

"Certainly. How can an artist do the figure if he has no model?"

"Well — if they have to have one, let them use some of the vulgar women who — who don't care! I can't imagine a — a decent —" She broke off, an expression of disgust distorting her pretty face.

"You do not understand, Isabelle," Peggy managed to say quietly. "A true artist does not wish to perpetuate in marble a coarse-minded, coarse-bodied woman — sculpture would degenerate into a base art, if only common women would lend themselves to the work. Even the Phryne, who was a courtesan, could not be truly represented, except by some one with intelligence and refinement. Otherwise, only the repulsive side of her would come out."

"I should say I don't understand," Isabelle said scornfully, "and I don't want to!" She regarded her cousin with unconcealed distaste. "*I* think it 's immoral!"

"Tell me, Isabelle," Peggy said earnestly, "is it any more immoral than for a woman to appear in public in a very *décolleté* gown or a fashionable bathing suit? She shows as much of herself as she dares, whether she has beauty to justify it or not — she is not thinking of beauty! She wishes only to remind men that she is a woman

— to stimulate their curiosity — and passion! With a model, it is quite different — she has to make her living with her beauty — and an artist is thinking of that, or of her defects, perhaps, when he is doing the nude figure — and not of her sex! I think you do not realize how artists and their models regard posing."

"All this talk of artists amuses me," Mrs. Austen said, with withering sarcasm. "They are men, like any one else, and they take advantage of their opportunities!"

The color flashed out of Peggy's cheeks. Striving to remain calm, she said:

"It is true that sometimes artists are contemptible — just as bakers, or ministers or doctors — are sometimes contemptible; but I can tell you, my aunt, that women are insulted quite as often, in the every-day relations with men, as they ever are in studios."

Without comment on what she had just said, Mrs. Austen returned the *Revue* to her niece.

"I hope you won't show that to any one else! I think you 'd better destroy it."

Peggy put in most of the afternoon on the scenario her uncle had asked her to type, but her mind was not on the work; instead, it reviewed obstinately every detail of her aunt's behavior over the Phryne; it forced her to realize that her nearest relatives confused posing with moral

laxity — they could not, or they would not, see a difference. She was indignant, distressed. An ache of homesickness for the old broad studio life with her father, for the contact with keen, liberal minds, brought the tears to her eyes. In a momentary reaction against the stupid narrowness of her present life, she almost wished that she had remained in France with Venable, on any terms. She had not realized that there could be an environment in which people did not think for themselves, in which they were actuated by a kind of inherited hypocrisy. She had given much thought to the needs of her body, in the past, and some to those of her soul, but a stimulating mental atmosphere had entirely obscured the possibility of an existence in which her mind might famish. The aridity of her life, in the Austen home was beginning to depress her unbearably. It was true her uncle could be drawn into invigorating discussions, but most of the time he revolved round and round his own problem. Besides, his recently disclosed feeling for her eliminated any hope of comradeship. Of the friends who frequented the house, not one appeared to have an interest beyond cards, theaters, and social gossip. She felt she could not stand much more of it.

The Donnelly car had come and gone, bearing Mrs. Austen and Isabelle away. Allyn had

dashed over to the Donnellys', immediately after dinner, to try Rex's new pool table.

Peggy had kissed Anne good night, and gone to her own room to prepare for bed, when she heard Mr. Austen ascending the stairs. He stopped at her door.

"Are n't you coming down, this evening?" he inquired. "It 's early, you know,— only half-past nine. I — I 'd like to have a little talk with you —"

Peggy considered, rapidly. After all, she could not ignore her uncle's behavior; it involved an issue that must be met sometime — better now, when they could talk without danger of interruption.

"All right, *mon oncle* — I shall be down in a minute."

He was at his desk, going over the scenario she had typed, when she entered, a work-basket in her arms.

"You know — of course — why I want to talk with you," he said, without preamble, as she settled herself in a comfortable chair. "I 'm not going to apologize for what I did last night — you know that I love you — Peggy, I have never loved any woman in my life as I do you!" He reached over and took the sewing out of her hands, and held one in each of his. "I don't believe — marvelously as you understand most

things,— you can quite realize the tragedy of it. You satisfy every need, every desire — if I had you, there is nothing I could not accomplish!"

She gently withdrew her hands and sat, for a moment, reflecting.

"You do not know me at all."

"I know that I love you — and nothing else matters," he said, intensely.

Peggy shook her head.

"Many other things matter. You see — you are too impulsive. Because you believe you love me, you will not look at my faults. You would not look at my aunt's, because you were infatuated with her — you have told me so. She was extravagant, and she loved always to have a good time — and you were poor and liked to be quiet — yet you married her. . . . It would be the same with me. You said, just a moment ago, that I would satisfy every need, but to do that I would have to live — like this — with my life fitted into yours. What would become of my ambitions? You must have realized, *mon cher oncle,* that no domestic life, alone, could ever content me." As she talked, she deftly repaired a torn scallop. "You see — I have a certain pride that makes me do as well as I can, the things that I have to do, but, in themselves, many of them do not interest me. My one thought is to sing."

"I could make you so happy, you'd never

think of your ambitions again!" he said, vehemently.

"But what do you think would make me happy?"

"To be loved, as I would love you!"

"And give up my work?" She shook her head.

"Well, then, I dare say it could be arranged so that you could go on with your singing,"—he spoke without enthusiasm.

"We are so serious!" Peggy said, breaking into a little laugh. "You have already a wife!"

"There are ways out of marriage . . ." His voice was tense.

She was silent a moment. Then she said, with grave sweetness:

"It was not to help you find a way out that I have talked as I have. It is as I was saying, last night — there are always problems in marriage, and I think divorce is a stupid solution, generally. It seems to me like — like a confession of failure — except in rare cases."

"Peggy," her uncle said, "I have tried — well, practically all of my married life — to change your aunt — to interest her in more vital things — to teach her the value of money, but —" He made a gesture of futility.

"Perhaps you have not gone about it the right

way — perhaps — forgive me to say it — you should have tried to change yourself, a little."

"Perhaps I should have been firmer with her," he reflected.

"Or with yourself," she hazarded.

"Let 's not talk any more about this, to-night." He rose and shook himself as though to get rid of an unpleasant thought. "I want to be happy just this little while that I have you to myself." He spoke wistfully. "Let 's go into the other room, and sit by the fire."

"No." She folded up her work: "I am going to bed, now."

"You are afraid that I may forget myself, again? Peggy — was it really so disagreeable?" He leaned toward her, smiling tenderly.

"You are very impetuous — and you have — much physical charm — and I am not — insensitive," she said slowly, "but — no — I did not like it. It is difficult to explain."

"You mean that you did n't want to like it?"

"No — it is not that; it would not happen again."

"Are you very sure?"

"Yes. You — surprised me, last night. Of course, if I were contemptible, and there were not some one else for whom I — care — it is true I could drift into an affair with you — I mean —

you do not repel me. In the same circumstances there are many with whom it would be impossible — do you see what I mean?"

"Yes," he said bitterly, "it's quite clear what you mean — it was not myself, but only the man in me that moved you. My God, Peggy! If I had been that other man, I would never have let you come to America!"

"He is like you, my uncle; he thinks that it is not well for an artist to marry."

"Dear, I'd marry you, to-morrow."

"And repent it, the day after," she said, with a whimsical smile. "Good night."

He looked down adoringly into her eyes.

"No — that is the one thing I could never do. I wish I had known you twenty years ago."

"But I was not born, then!" Her eyes twinkled.

"No — that's true — you were n't. You see, you are so old for your age —"

"And you are so young for yours —"

They smiled at each other.

"Good night," Peggy said, at last.

"Good night." He held her hand lingeringly in his; she could feel the pulse beating against her palm. "I hope you will — rest well," he said, and turned away abruptly.

After Peggy went, he sat at his desk for a long time, his head between his hands, staring at the

tan blotter. He felt that he had not exaggerated his feeling for her; if anything, he had understated it — or rather, he had omitted individualizing details. As he recalled his words, they seemed disappointingly typical and unconvincing. He saw how natural it was Peggy should have confused the quality of his love for her with that of his long-ago infatuation for his wife. That had been mere youthful passion — it had lacked the complexity of his love for Peggy. To realize his literary ambitions, to prove himself to himself, mattered more to him, now, than anything else in the world; the girl understood this; she encouraged him, inspired him; he needed her — she moved through his every dream. And, as he sat thinking, he saw, suddenly, that he did *not* need his wife — she gave him nothing that he could not obtain elsewhere.

He was still deep in thought, when Mrs. Austen and Isabelle came in from the opera. They had had a wonderful time — Galland had been divine — she had taken ten curtain calls.

"Why, Papa,"— Isabelle's eyes shone with excitement —"she gets over two thousand dollars a night! I wish I were in her shoes!"

"Well, your father can help you, if he cares to."

Mr. Austen regarded his wife blankly.

"You know Giles Winthrop well enough to in-

vite him out to the house, don't you?" she asked belligerently. "You went to college with him."

"But —"

"He 's one of the directors of the Metropolitan, is n't he? It seems to me that if you can't advance Isabelle socially, you might pull any strings you can to help her artistically. Her voice is just as good as lots that you hear there — it 's only a question of pull."

He was silent a moment, wondering how his wife could think that Isabelle had grand opera possibilities. But finally he said:

"All right. I 'll see if I can get hold of him."

He listened until he heard the click of their heels on the stairs, then he followed, automatically pressing buttons that left the rooms in darkness behind him.

He had yielded for the sake of peace — but it was a curiously external peace; inside, there was sickening turmoil.

CHAPTER XI

ONE evening after dinner, during the fortnight following Peggy-Elise's departure for America, Gilbert Venable was lying on the couch in his studio, smoking, and thinking of her — missing her. He was wondering if, with her irritating practicality, she had put him out of her thoughts as resolutely as she had put him out of her life and at once admiring and resenting her strength, when there came a knock at the door. It was an unfamiliar and individual knock — one short, imperious rap. It touched his imagination, and he hurried to open the door, pipe in hand.

In the doorway, her hands resting lightly on her thighs, one foot thrust back and her head to one side, stood Fania Rebikoff, the woman about whose dancing and whose personality all Paris was talking. Venable's pulses leapt at sight of her; her dazzling splendor took his breath away. She was tall, and her supple body was sheathed in shimmering Tyrian purple silk. A vermillion sash, brocaded in old silver, with heavy silver fringe, was caught round her slim hips and knotted on one side, and she wore quaint, tarnished

silver, heelless shoes. On her right hand was an enormous square emerald, in a barbaric silver setting. Her black hair was brushed straight back from her forehead, so that her head looked sleek and glossy like a wet seal's. Heavy emerald earrings swung from her short-lobed ears.

"It is necessary to introduce myself?" she demanded disdainfully, in French, as Venable stared at her — speechless.

"Your pardon, madame," he managed to articulate. "I was thinking that there must be some mistake."

"No." She entered the studio with lazy grace. "The little Bosquet wished to bring me, himself, to save me embarrassment — but me — I am never embarrassed — and I preferred to meet you — alone." Her voice had strangely disturbing notes in it; Venable's breath came short, as it played along his nerves — it was languorous, alluring.

He had seen her, some months before, at the Opéra, and had been restless for days after. Her marvelous dancing was an expression of consuming, unslakable desire; every glance of her dark, tired eyes; every quiver of her unquiet mouth, painted vividly scarlet; every movement of her sinuous body, swaying to urging, Russian rhythms — the faint hint of exhaustion — subtly

promised ecstatic destruction to all who might seek to quench it. But the stories current about her had rather dashed Venable's enthusiasm. At that time she was permitting a certain elderly banker to pay for her expensive caprices. She drove notorious bargains with her lovers, Paris said, and nicknamed her "L'Avare." Venable had figured that, from meeting such a woman, nothing was to be gained unless all was to be gained — and had put her out of his head. But now, close to her, the madness returned. The peculiar white flaming beauty of her face fascinated him — he could not take his eyes from it.

"I am sorry, madame," he said, at length, "that you should have found me like this. I have been lying down."

Her heavy magnetic gaze traveled over him like a lingering hand. He thrilled under it. She slowly lifted one shoulder.

"Where is the Phryne?" she demanded.

He led the way to it, in chagrin. For a mad moment, he had thought that her presence in his studio at that hour, coupled with her expressed wish to see him alone, might be due to some caprice of curiosity, of interest touching him, personally. He smiled at his naïveté. As she scrutinized the figure, with intense interest, his

pride as an artist soothed his injured vanity. He wondered if she thought of purchasing the Phryne.

She turned to him finally, with an air of triumph, her lips parted in a scornful smile.

"My body is far more beautiful than that — it has more subtlety — more appeal! I told Bosquet! He is a fool! Look!"

With perfect ease, she assumed the pose of the Phryne, but the insolence, the sensuousness, the contempt, were startlingly intensified.

Venable gazed at her, spellbound.

"Destroy that," she urged, "and you shall do one of me that will live forever! See — *she* could have been cold and controlled — it is in her face, in her body — she had a soul — but me — I am just fire — I burn always — it is my nature — I know only one law — to devour!"

Venable strove to speak calmly.

"Yes — you are elemental, but you would not do for the Phryne. The old Greeks would not have found you beautiful. Your beauty is of to-day; it would appeal only to the school that ignores featural perfection, and worships angularity, and even ugliness, if it has a certain quality. You are too thin, too modern to be a convincing Phryne."

She snapped her fingers.

"You are in love with your model."

"Madame," Venable asked suddenly, "why did you wish to meet me alone?" He smiled down upon her — there was challenge in his eyes.

She looked at him with an expression that made his senses reel.

"There is always a possibility that one may wish she had come — alone."

Venable caught her blindly to him, and bent her supple body far back as he leaned over and felt thirstily for her lips.

It seemed to Venable that life could offer nothing more than it gave him during the following week. Fania was infatuated with her handsome new lover and omitted none of the ritual of enslavement. Into his workaday studio she brought the barbaric splendor of her costumes — Bakst, who admired her inordinately, had designed them all — and as she swirled past him in some spontaneous, impassioned dance, or sat, cross-legged, among cushions, in fantastic Turkish garb of Persian green, Bakst magenta, and black arabesqued in gold — and with rare inflections recited for him some vivid chapter from her life — it had all the enchanting regalement of the Arabian Nights.

Fania stimulated his imagination, but much as opium might have affected it; ideas for figures sprang up with such satisfying vitality and dis-

tinctness that he was somehow lazily disinclined to give them more concrete expression. He thought, even, of changing the whole mode of his art — of adopting the abandonment of the futurists in order to catch the elusive, free, ultra-modern quality of Fania; at moments even the Phryne appeared stilted, antiquated. But all his enthusiasm was insufficient to energize his relaxed will.

At first, Fania insisted upon having their meals in the studio, but the whim was of short duration. One night she pushed the food from her in a pet. When Venable tried to find out what the trouble was, she shrugged him away irritably. What was the matter with the man that he did not want to take her out and flaunt his conquest? She was used to being "shown off"; she understood masculine vanity and profited by it. This willingness to celebrate such a victory in solitude was an inconceivable affront. The fool might be loutishly in love, but he did not know her value — she was wasted on him.

"Are we to stay shut up in this hole forever?" she demanded, having fumed and lashed herself into a fury.

Venable looked at her in amazement.

"Why, I thought it was your wish," he said.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she stamped. "Am I to be chained to my wishes?"

"Well, what do you want to do?"

"I want to go somewhere and see some one!" She flung her wineglass to the floor, shivering it into atoms.

They went to Durand's.

There was a moment's silence when they entered, then a buzz. She was pointed out; people came to their table. She was in brilliant humor. Venable saw the envy in men's eyes, caught his name as it passed from table to table — he was intoxicated with his triumph. During the evening, Fania discovered that a striking young woman, at an adjoining table, was trying to attract Venable's attention, and her passion, that had rather languished for a day or two, flared up. He happened to remark that the stranger looked as if she might be an American. Fania's eyes blazed.

"You will take me home, now! — before you humiliate me further!" she commanded.

Venable was dumbfounded.

Back in the studio there was a violent scene. She jerked off her jewels, tore off her clothes, broke the pins tearing them out of her hair in jealous mania. Her voice rose to a scream as she said that Venable had made her the laughing-stock of Paris. She had thrown herself away on a nobody, and he had ignored her — *Fania Rebikoff,* who had flouted kings — ignored

her for — She drew on all her reserves of vocabulary to describe her rival.

Venable explained and explained. She shrieked him down. She was hideous in her rage — unbelievably coarse. He was disenchanted — at least, temporarily. Her hair was dishevelled, her eyes bloodshot, and the studio looked as though a tornado had had the ordering of it: the dinner things had not been removed, the broken wineglass still glittered on the floor, that was further strewn with Fania's gorgeous garments. One of her gold sandals lay upside down on a chair, trailing its laces; everywhere there were hairpins. Her heavy gold scarf had been arrested in transit by a finger of the Phryne, from which it now hung. Venable had a moment of disgust; he thought involuntarily of Peggy — life would certainly be a more dignified, a more worth while thing with her, but then, she was of a different ilk — of an ilk that did not lend itself to promiscuous living. In that moment, quite unconsciously, he acknowledged Peggy-Elise's superiority by his reluctance even to compare her with the Russian.

Without warning, Fania suddenly ceased her abuse, flung her arms around Venable's neck, and sobbed that he did not love her any more.

Harmony was restored but it did not last. Every day, now, there were quarrels. She

nagged him interminably about the Phryne. Had Peggy inspired it? Was it like her? He admitted, unfortunately, that Peggy was younger and slimmer. Fania became a madwoman. He must have the Phryne removed; she could not stand to be reminded, every hour, of this woman who had been everything to him. In vain he assured her that Peggy was only a friend. At first, her jealousy rather flattered him, but by degrees he saw that all her tirades sprang from wounded vanity. If a woman was praised by any one, in her presence, she took offense and sulked — she knew the defects of every prominent beauty in Paris and detailed them venomously. Then it required hours of adroit wooing and a shameless use of superlatives to win her back to a reasonable humor. It became very wearisome. She was irascible, capricious.

After devilling him for two days, because he had not made the promised figure of her, she exerted every charm to tease him away from the work. She posed for an hour the next day, then grew bored and demanded that he stop. The third day, they had another violent quarrel: Fania could see no resemblance to herself in the rough clay outlines; she insinuated that though that might be how she looked to him, it was not how she looked to herself, and she demanded immediate alterations. The artist in Venable de-

fended his work indignantly. There was an exchange of enlightening personalities. Fania caught up her heavy gold powder-box, and hurled it at the figure. Venable, in a white rage, lunged at it, and pounded the clay into a shapeless lump. Fania hissed that she was through with him! Venable, in whom she had awakened insatiable cravings, humbled himself once more and implored her to stay.

After that, she continually threatened to go. Venable's nerves had gone to pieces, and in his fuddled state of mind his one thought was to keep the woman, at any cost, whose power over him made her indispensable to him; furthermore, he exaggerated the ridicule to which he would be subjected as a deserted lover. He pictured all Paris convulsed by Fania's conscienceless humor.

Then the Phryne was reproduced in the *Revue*. Fania retaliated in an unforeseen fashion. Instead of shrewing it over Venable, she adopted a tone of commiseration; it was nothing to her if he could not see his opportunities, if he persisted in sculping little nobodies, in whom Paris had no interest, when he might be making himself famous. From that, she passed to his shortcomings as a lover. He had no imagination. It was enough to endure stupidity when one was well paid! Words passed between them that are not commonly reported in the public prints. Ven-

able slammed on his hat and went out. Downstairs, he found a letter from Peggy-Elise—just the sight of her handwriting quieted something of the mental hurly-burly. One page he read twice:

"I have reasoned it all out, *mon ami*. We have two sides—the weak and the strong. When we yield to passion the weak side rules—the worst of us comes to the top; but if there is love with it, it brings out unselfishness and all the best things, to balance the other side. I might have lived with you, Gilbert, if you had loved me. But I think if you had, you would not have wanted me to.

"I know you will shrug and be impatient over what I have said — but it is true. When a man really loves, he wants to pay a woman the highest compliment in his power, and I think no man can feel that it is a higher compliment to make a woman his mistress than to make her his wife. Do you not agree with me?"

Peggy was right; ordinarily, Venable would have shrugged aside her words; but, coming at the psychological moment, they caused an intense reaction, and he hailed them as pure wisdom. In a flash, he saw how he had deteriorated in these few weeks with Fania; his temper had become as ungovernable as hers; he had matched coarseness with coarseness and violence with violence in the fury of their quarrels; he had parried her jealousy with petty lies; he had grown

indifferent to his work — the "weak" side of him had certainly been uppermost. Married life loomed, suddenly, as the most desirable of human states — quiet, respectable, married life.

As he was returning to his studio that afternoon, he met an elderly gentleman, elegantly, almost foppishly dressed, ascending the stairs. It developed that he had called to see Venable in connection with the Phryne. Venable was relieved to find the studio empty. The visitor, Prince Ignace Pulaski, recently arrived from Rome, had seen the Phryne in the *Revue,* that morning, and had hastened to inspect the original. He had not dared to hope for anything so perfect — he could have no peace until he had added this masterpiece to his collection. He offered Venable a sum for it that staggered him; yet in the next breath he wondered if he were being cheated. If it was as good as Pulaski said, might he not be wiser to hold it longer? But then it might be that the prince had a special fancy for it and had overvalued it. In the end, he accepted his check. He was showing him some of his other work, when Fania came in, clad in a brilliant green gown and sumptuous sables.

The prince, having been introduced, elatedly informed her that he was now the possessor of the Phryne — what did she think of it? Fania thought it was rarely beautiful, but she said it

absently with her eyes fixed fascinatedly on the prince. Venable watched her with indifference — he suddenly saw the whole callousness of her. When she rose to leave, the prince rose, too. She bade her erstwhile lover a gay good-by. Three days later, he saw her driving in the Bois with the prince.

At first, Venable was demoralized; he suffered all the agonies of adjustment of the opium fiend who has been newly deprived of his drug. He had no appetite and he slept badly. The studio depressed him horribly — it seemed still to vibrate violently with Fania's frenzies, and the Phryne's empty pedestal filled him with loneliness — it had been a very tangible link with Peggy-Elise. He dallied with the thought of Peggy — she still baffled him, piqued his vanity. He speculated much about her.

When he told his friends he was going to America, they recalled Peggy-Elise. He admitted he meant to marry her, if it were not too late. They tried to dissuade him, offering the stereotyped arguments against marriage; it would ruin his career, shut him off from inspiring affairs. He interrupted them with a sardonic laugh. He said he had never had an "inspiring" affair in his life — that, in fact, he had never found anything so inspiring as Peggy-Elise's understanding and artistic intuition.

They were very glum — they could see nothing before him except oblivion. Armstrong said it was all tommy-rot — a reaction from the last affair — that Fania was the exception and not the rule. Venable shook his head. Vernet even offered him his new mistress. "She would soon prefer your charms to mine, *mon vieux,*" he urged humorously. Venable was touched by their affection, but he remained obdurate.

That night he wrote Peggy-Elise that he was coming to America.

CHAPTER XII

AUSTEN kept his word and invited Giles Winthrop to the house. All through dinner he hoped for an opening in which to refer casually to Isabelle's voice — not even the dread of his wife's biting tongue could have induced him to introduce the subject abruptly, after the manner of many parents with accomplished offspring — but his hope was disappointed.

In the den, over their after-dinner cigars, Mr. Austen had momentarily forgotten his paternal obligation, when Isabelle, in the next room, began to play the piano, remindingly. He racked his brain for some legitimate excuse for asking his friend to listen to her; he had too little parental egotism to imagine that a man of Winthrop's broad musical culture would find entertainment in her amateurish efforts.

Peggy slipped into the library that adjoined the den, to get her knitting; Isabelle, in the living-room, was playing the opening bars of the "Vissi d'Arte." Peggy sang it softly to herself; her tones were pure and full — her pianissimo had none of the usual wispy thinness. Winthrop listened in astonishment. To him, the ro-

mance, the great adventure of life was to discover a rare voice. Let any one hint that in a certain corner of the world there was one worth hearing, and though it were in Thibetan fastnesses he would be off the next hour in quest of it. He knew perfectly well that most persons' judgment was unreliable, because they lacked a refined musical sense, and, as a consequence, he had run down many coarse, or harsh, or hollow voices; still nothing could restrain him — it was a passion. The Metropolitan owed to him three of its best artists. Now, as he heard Peggy's voice, his pulses leaped; Mr. Austen had not mentioned that there was a singer in the house.

"Does your daughter sing?" he asked.

"Yes — a little," Mr. Austen said cautiously, too relieved to realize how the miracle had happened.

"I 'd like to hear her," Winthrop's manner was eager.

Isabelle always had to be coaxed to sing; it was as hard to start her as it was to stop her. She made no exception of the present occasion. Only her youth and prettiness saved her protests from utter ineptness. Winthrop said, amiably, that one always expected artists to be nervous. She blushed but betrayed none of the traditional agitation.

"I wish you 'd accompany me, Peggy," she

said, finally going to the piano with an amazing air of assurance.

Peggy dropped her knitting into Anne's lap — she sat on a hassock at her feet — and went to the piano. The "Vissi d'Arte" lay open on the rack. Isabelle motioned toward it.

Winthrop listened blankly, as the first phrases issued from her lips. She had a small, rather pretty voice, badly produced, and marred by the worst mannerisms of several famous singers. She had no power of interpretation; her work was wholly imitative. His nerves were on edge by the time she had finished. This was not the voice he had heard.

He let her down, with politely evasive phrases. She had a charming voice, he said, but it was immature; that time, and only time, brought the maturity necessary for professional appearance; that she must be very careful not to strain it, etc., etc.

Isabelle argued that many singers had gone into grand opera in their 'teens. He admitted that this happened among the Latins, where girls matured very young. Mr. Austen asked if Italy produced more singers than Germany; the conversation became general. Winthrop was preoccupied. He wondered why Isabelle had been put forward when there was in the house the rare voice he had overheard.

He glanced several times at Peggy's sensitive profile — she had that indefinable look of a singer — she interested him intensely; but if she sang, why did no one mention the fact? There remained only Mrs. Austen. To his question, she replied that Isabelle was the only song-bird in the house.

"Why, Mother! Peggy sings," Anne exclaimed. "She sings beautifully."

Winthrop turned eagerly to the girl. She shook her head, nervous and distressed by the turn of affairs.

"Yes, she does!" Anne insisted.

"I sing just to please the little one," Peggy explained. "She is not a judge."

"Her voice goes all through you," Anne declared obstinately.

"Sing something for us, Peggy," her uncle urged, understanding her reluctance. "I don't think I 've ever heard you."

Peggy hesitated; she did not want to antagonize her aunt, nor to prejudice Isabelle's chances, if she had any. Suddenly, her common-sense asserted itself; this was a heaven-sent opportunity — she had just as much right to take advantage of it as her cousin had. She remembered what Venable had said — that you could not get ahead without "pull." She seated herself at the piano. Winthrop leaned forward,

eagerly attentive, as she played the brief introduction to "La Chevelure."

He sat motionless, almost breathless, until the strange, disturbing dissonance came to its hushed rest in the final chord. Peggy's voice, impassioned, thrilling, poignantly sweet, amazed all her listeners. There was a moment of absolute stillness, when she finished. Then Anne threw her arms around her, with a sob. It broke the tension. Mr. Austen was too moved to speak—he did not dare even to look at his niece. Isabelle and her mother wore strained smiles. Winthrop's eyes glowed with admiration and excitement — Peggy was a rare find. She had not only a voice of divine quality, pure, golden, but she had almost perfect production — her tones floated. Also she had intensity, dramatic power, and that artistic restraint that comes usually only with long experience.

"With whom did you study, Mademoiselle?" he asked.

"With Madame Simon — she and my father were very dear friends."

"Do you mean Clémentine Simon —?"

"Yes."

"Oh, yes, yes," he nodded. "She is very fine — she is a pupil of old Lamperti. I knew her when she was the rage in Paris — she had a beautiful voice."

"Her voice is still beautiful," Peggy said enthusiastically. "She does n't sing any more, but she gave me the arias for solféggi, and when I got them wrong, she would do them for me."

"Did I understand you to say that Mademoiselle Lascelles is your niece?" Winthrop inquired, when he and Mr. Austen were once more ensconced in the study.

"Well, she is my wife's niece — her sister married André Lascelles —a musician — violinist, I think, in Paris."

"I see."

"She came to live with us a couple of months ago, after her father's death — he fell at Le Mort Homme."

"I see, I see." Winthrop would have liked to ask many questions, but it was a delicate situation; he suspected that it had been the Austen girl's intention to keep her gifted cousin in the background. And why had Austen never heard the niece sing?

Mr. Austen sensed his friend's preoccupation. He attributed it to Peggy. He himself had been shattered by her singing, but he did not appreciate her artistry — he had only been moved by it; it did not occur to him that it might be Peggy's voice, only, and not herself that had so impressed Winthrop.

The girl went to her room early. She was mis-

erable. Winthrop had seemed to like her work, yet he had not said a word in praise of it. With the tormenting self-depreciation of the artist, she was convinced of her own mediocrity. She wished she had not sung "La Chevelure"— so many people did not care for Debussy — and then, she was out of practice. Having tried, uselessly, to read, or to write letters, she had just decided to go to bed when her uncle called her. He wanted some notes he had made for an opera libretto; where had Peggy put them, when she straightened out his manuscripts? She said it would be easier to get them than to try to tell him where they were.

She found them, and was about to leave the study when Winthrop said:

"Mademoiselle, I wish my old friend Debussy could have heard you sing 'La Chevelure,' to-night."

"Monsieur!" was all Peggy could articulate; her cheeks were flushed, her eyes sparkled with happy tears.

"Have you no ambition to make use of your rare gifts?" he inquired gently.

She gestured with her hands, to indicate the impossibility of speech.

"Well, mademoiselle," he said, touched, "when you wish to begin work, come to me — I think I may be able to help you."

Peggy left the room, in a daze.

There was a bitter scene, the next day. Mrs. Austen accused her husband of having brought Winthrop to the house solely to hear Peggy — any one could see through it! Mr. Austen was dumbfounded. She intimated that he was infatuated with her niece — that they were deceiving her. The partial truth of her charge blunted his indignation — left it unconvincing.

Nothing was said, outright, to Peggy, but the situation became intolerably strained; she decided to leave her aunt's household before there should be an open break. She had saved a little money, she was still posing for Hiller, and her sense of strangeness, in America, had worn off; she knew she would be able to manage. She meant to get in touch with Winthrop, as soon as possible.

When she announced her decision, Anne had one of the few storms of weeping that had characterized her singularly tearless childhood. When her sister came to comfort her, she pushed her away. "I hope you 're satisfied, *now,* Is Austen!"

Mrs. Austen smiled cynically when Peggy said she felt herself an added expense; she remembered that the girl had posed for the Phryne, and believed that she wanted freedom only for a lax

life. She was convinced that her husband had manœuvered the change.

Through a woman friend of her uncle, Peggy located in a tiny attic room, in Patchin Place. She was enchanted with Greenwich Village; in its quaintly haphazard laying out of streets, that ran unexpectedly, delightfully, and often bewilderingly into themselves and each other, it reminded her of Paris. She prowled about, ecstatically. She found the little French bakery, where she could get real *brioches,* and discovered other French shops. She felt at home for the first time since she had been in America. The people she met — even the ones she saw on the street — had a certain charm; they were like the types in the Quarter — often absurd, but at least sincere in their absurdity. She loved their ardent, clever, humorous or wildly tragic, faces; it stimulated her just to look at them — there was such passion for life, such rebellion against stagnation. She breathed it in and felt renewed.

Flo Kipp called Mrs. Austen up, one morning, about two weeks after Peggy's departure. In the course of their chat she said, in her breezy way:

"My dear, you must go down with us, some time, to Greenwich Village! A crowd of us went, the other night, to the 'Dutch Oven'— such crazy people, my dear! — you never saw such

freaks! Did your husband mention seeing me? He had the prettiest little girl with him! Who *is* she?"

"What was she like?" Mrs. Austen inquired carelessly, though her throat contracted on the words.

"Oh — tawny, my dear — quite beautiful eyes and mouth — very *chic* — she looked French."

"Oh, yes," she said, in an offhand manner, "that was Peggy — my niece, you know."

"O-oh?"

Mrs. Austen winced under her friend's inflection.

"She 's very pretty — is n't she?" Mrs. Kipp said, and began making arrangements for the matinée.

When Mrs. Austen hung up the receiver, she had a nauseating headache. What she had just heard, confirmed her growing suspicions. There was no reason, of course, why her husband should not have taken Peggy to supper; it was his not having mentioned it that was so damningly significant. She sat at the telephone desk, for a long time, recalling every little detail that might establish her husband's infidelity. When the telephone rang, again, she put the receiver to her ear absently, then listened, galvanized. A telegram was being transmitted over the wire; it an-

nounced the death of her godfather, from apoplexy, on his way to California.

She was horribly shocked. She had seen him, only a few days before, in perfect health. In spite of herself, she could not help realizing how his death would alter her affairs; she was his sole heir. This meant the end of her whole makeshifting, dreary, eventless existence — how she longed for beautiful clothes, for money enough to play her beloved bridge without the humiliation of having to confess her debts to her husband, and of being curtain-lectured for trying to make the best of conditions for which, she felt, he alone was responsible. She speculated, though feeling that it was a little indecent, on the probable extent of her godfather's fortune; she concluded, from the rate at which he had lived, that he must have been worth at least a half-million.

The staggering truth was that he had lived up to and far beyond his means; his little remaining property barely covered his debts. There was an insurance for ten thousand dollars, in Mrs. Austen's favor — and that was all. She thought there must be some mistake, but there was none.

"Uncle said so often that he had provided for me!" she complained bitterly to her husband; she was sick from disappointment. "But I suppose it's what I might have expected — he just

threw money away — and he never denied himself anything! How long will ten thousand dollars last?" she demanded indignantly.

"Not very long — unless you make a wise use of it," he concurred.

"What do you mean —'make a wise use of it'?" Her tone was hostile.

"I mean that, in our circumstances, it might be made to go a very long way — we might get out of debt, for instance."

"And *then* what?" she asked, with forced patience.

He hesitated.

"Well, then, if I had an easy mind — I could give up this editorial job, and write — in a year we 'd be on our feet." He could not keep the wild hope out of his voice and eyes.

She sneered.

"You have n't much confidence in me — have you?" he said.

"No! I have n't! You 've had enough time, in the last ten years, to have written a dozen books!"

"No one can write, on the verge of bankruptcy all the time!"

"Well, do you think it 's been easy for me?" she retorted angrily. "I could scream when I go into your study and find you adding up your

debts! Those little papers, with their eternal columns of neat little figures, have driven me almost insane! I 'm sick of it all — I can't stand any more of it! I 'm going to have a good time with this money — and I don't care what happens afterward!"

"In that event," he said, in an icy voice, "we 'd better have an understanding." He paced the floor several times, his head bent. "I judge that you and the children can live for a year on ten thousand dollars — however extravagant you are, and I 'm going to take advantage of the fact, to go away somewhere, by myself, and do my work — I owe it to myself! I 'm not going down to my grave, with the conviction that I was a failure, simply because I never had a chance to prove to the contrary! You don't understand my ambitions — you 've never even tried to!" he concluded bitterly.

"I should think your ambition would be to make your wife and children happy, instead of forcing us to every shift, to keep up appearances, and not let people know what a failure you are! You seem to think I have no pride!" Her blue eyes flashed angrily.

"I think your pride should be a little concerned with making a success of your end of the bargain!"

"I make as good a showing as any one could, on what I have! Every one imagines we are a lot better off than we are!"

"Good God! Is that your only conception of success?"

"Well I'd like to see any one do better!" she stormed.

Mr. Austen packed a suitcase, did up a bundle of manuscripts, and left the house the next morning, before any one was up. If necessary, he meant to borrow enough to see him through a year; but, at the office, he found a letter from Merrit, announcing that he had accepted his scenario, "Labor," and enclosing a check for fifteen hundred dollars. Mr. Austen felt that Fate was with him.

During the day, he called up his wife, and told her that he would not see her again, until he had finished the book he intended to write; he refused to say where he was going. She replied that if he went, he need never come back. He said that was up to her. She hung up the receiver, her head whirling. She had not believed for a moment, the night before, that he would execute his threat! And she utterly discredited the reason he had given for going; doubtless, it was his intention to have Peggy with him — that was why he would not tell her where he was to be.

She told the children that their father had gone out of town, for a few days, on business. She waited a torturing week for him to return. Then she could bear the strain no longer. She went to Patchin Place, hoping to either confront her husband with Peggy, or to learn that the girl had quitted her lodgings. But she was there, and in bed, with a cold — she had n't been even outside the door for a week. Of Mr. Austen's disappearance, she knew only from a letter she had received from him. He hoped she would come, later on, to see him.

In her relief, Mrs. Austen felt a sudden friendliness for her niece — she was thin, and she had a bad cough.

"I think you 'd better come home — and let us take care of you." Her manner was tinged with embarrassment.

"You are very kind," Peggy pressed her hand, "but I am all right, here — every one is so good to me!"

When Mrs. Austen left, she ordered more delicacies sent up to the girl than she could possibly eat in a month. She was shocked by her quarters; to her, used to conventional surroundings, they seemed unthinkably mean and depressing. She was very uncomfortable over it; she knew that her sister Mary — Peggy's mother — would

never have permitted a child of hers, Isabelle, for example, to leave the shelter of her roof, while she had one.

On the way home, she considered divorcing her husband later on, on the grounds of desertion; but she knew her pride would never let her admit she had been deserted — she would carry off his absence, somehow. She wondered if he had really gone away, just to work; it was unimaginable — and yet — she half believed him. She felt a dawning admiration for him.

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN she read Venable's letter, Peggy dropped weakly into a chair, her eyes shining, her heart shaking her body with the impact of its beat. It announced that he would be in America, by the end of December, and that longing for "his little Peggy-Elise" was bringing him. Things should be the way she wanted them, now, he said. He told her briefly of the affair with Fania — did she remember who Fania was? — into which loneliness, he averred, had plunged him, and out of which he had come, a happier and wiser man.

As Peggy read, she could hear his magnetic voice, could see his handsome face bent persuasively over her, and she yearned passionately for him. But though her heart was wholly satisfied with the letter her reason sat back, critically, and advised that she reread it. She did so. Finally, she had to admit that Venable's altered attitude might be due to a reaction, and that there was just a hint of pride in his reference to the Rebikoff affair.

After a sleepless night, she called up Giles

Winthrop; she had tried twice before to get him, but he had been out of town. Even over the telephone, his pleasure at hearing from her was obvious. He proposed that they have lunch together and talk things over.

Apart from ambition, Peggy was very eager to get into opera now; she realized that if she were still posing for Hiller when Venable arrived, she could scarcely refuse to pose for him; and if she consented there would be the old difficult intimacy with its inevitable temptation. But far beyond the rather remote possibility of drifting into relations to which she was opposed was the need of an unanswerable argument, should Venable desire to marry her, as his letter implied.

It had come to her in the night, as a result of relentlessly facing facts, that though there were artists who should marry, Venable was not one of them. It was a matter of character; some shouldered responsibilities and worked better for having them; others avoided them as a hindrance. Venable was of these. Peggy feared that his new state of mind would be of short duration, and she was determined that he should not ruin both their lives. If he were bent on marrying her, the only obstacle that might balk him would be a career of hers that must not be hampered.

Winthrop took her to lunch at Delmonico's. She assured him she had never eaten such deli-

cious food in her life — it was the apotheosis of cooking. He was delighted. They talked French, throughout the meal; he addressed the waiters in French — Peggy had the illusion of being back in her own country. She was at her gayest. Winthrop was thrilled as he looked into her deep gray eyes, starry with pleasure and excitement. She would be beautiful on the stage. And with her voice and temperament —

"What is the matter?" Peggy asked, for his face had suddenly taken on an expression of half-humorous chagrin.

He laughed.

"I was just wondering how it will turn out, with you — singers are a gamble, mademoiselle." With a kind of whimsical despair, he related some of his experiences. Once, in California, he thought he had found a successor to Patti — the woman was young, handsome; she had a magnificent voice, and a surplus of temperament; but she had been simply too lazy to make the effort necessary to memorize a rôle; in addition, she was insanely egotistical and had a fiendish temper. Then there was the case of Sarah Rabinowitz. He had discovered her singing in an East Side synagogue, of which her father was the rabbi. She had the languorous, Semitic beauty; her voice was both sympathetic and brilliant and of phenomenal range. It was arranged that she

should study for a year — she had had good training. Three days later, Winthrop was informed that Sarah was in Bellevue. It was useless to inquire of her father what was the matter — he spoke no English. Winthrop had rushed to the hospital, like a madman, only to learn that she was in the psychopathic ward — she had "spells," and had to be taken there often.

Peggy laughed.

"Well, I can only assure you, monsieur, that I am neither lazy nor crazy!"

As a result of their talk, Winthrop, himself, took her to Signor Ferro-Ganacci, the following Thursday. A rehearsal was in progress when they entered, and they had to wait a few minutes. At the sound of the orchestra, Peggy's hand flew to her throat and she trembled violently. It brought her father back, as she had seen him, thousands of times, leaving for the Opéra, violin-case in hand. She had a curious feeling that he was near — to help her, perhaps. For a moment the tears threatened, but she controlled herself.

"Mr. Winthrop tells me you have a very good soprano voice," Signor Ferro-Ganacci said, studying her from under bent brows. "You know 'Bohême'?" he inquired presently. Something about her suggested *Mimi* to him.

She said she did.

"All right." He nodded. "We'll have

'Mimi's song'— unless there is something you would prefer?"

"I will sing that."

When Peggy found herself standing alone in the middle of that vast stage, sensed the bigness of the darkened auditorium, and saw Winthrop and Ferro-Ganacci vanishing up the aisle toward the back of the house, she had a moment of panic; she would never be able to make herself heard. Then she began to sing. It was an agonizing experience. She knew from her moving lips, and her interior sensations that she was producing tones, but she could not hear them. Though the orchestra was playing softly, her voice blended with it and was lost in it — it was the first time she had ever sung with one. Toward the end of the song, she began to distinguish a sound that had a human quality, and concluded that this was her voice. By the time she reached the brief final unaccompanied recitative, she had so lost herself in her work that the cessation of the orchestra did not startle her. As her last bell-like, plaintive tones died, she realized that she was standing with her hands outstretched in a little apologetic gesture that the words had inspired. Then there came the more poignant realization that her future had been determined by the quality of the work she had just done. Fortunately, she was diverted from this consideration by the sight

of the two men, returning down the aisle. They were talking animatedly.

"Mademoiselle,"— Signor Ferro-Ganacci entered the orchestra enclosure —"are you familiar with 'The Barber'?"

Peggy hesitated.

"No, monsieur — I know only the aria — 'Una Voce Poco Fà.'"

"Good! That is what I wish to hear. You are nervous?"

"Un peu," she admitted, falling into French, in her excitement.

"It is natural." He flashed her a sympathetic smile, and rejoined Winthrop.

It took a few moments to get the scores and distribute them. There was the swish of turning pages, then silence, as the conductor raised his baton.

For a sickening second, Peggy wondered if she would be able to do the aria — she was out of practice, and it called for great agility; but she had no time to think.

As she sang the traditional cadenza, that was interpolated by a famous coloratura — and has been sung since by any whose range included it — sang it brilliantly, with perfect mastery, and stopped on a triumphant note, there was a burst of applause from the two men, in which the musi-

cians joined. Peggy felt that she must be dreaming.

" I guessed at once that you were a coloratura," Signor Ferro-Ganacci said.

" Yes — it is what my teacher told me, always — but I did not care to be a coloratura — it does not suit my temperament," the girl replied, with an expression of mingled rapture and disappointment.

He smiled.

" Mademoiselle, it is just that warm, dramatic temperament that coloraturas usually lack."

Peggy went out to see her uncle, early the next morning. It was snowing heavily, but she was in too great a fever to tell him her news to be restrained by the weather. It was the first time she had gone to see him.

It had been Mr. Austen's intention, when he walked bitterly out of his Flushing home, suitcase and manuscripts in hand, to find — if possible — a place in the country where he could have solitude for his work. Through luck, he had run across an artist friend, about to join the Lafayette Escadrille, who had offered him the use of his " shack " at Montvale, in northern Jersey. The " shack " had proved to be a delightful rustic studio, on a birch-covered hillside that sloped

gently down to a harum-scarum little river, tumbling and tearing over boulders, or lying, quiet, in some pebble-bottomed hollow. The place, or perhaps the change, or perhaps both, had proved an inspiration, and Mr. Austen was almost satisfied with the quality of his work.

He had just put the coffee pot over, when Peggy knocked. Without interest, he opened the door, to which no one had come, so far, except tradespeople, and then stared in astonishment.

"Peggy!" he marveled, in a caressing voice, "is it really you?" He put out his hand and drew her into the house. "Forgive me for keeping you standing here in the cold — though I 'm not sure, yet, you 're not a snow-sprite, and that you won't melt when I bring you in where it 's warm. Have you come to stay?" he asked lightly, taking the small hand-bag she carried — he achieved lightness with a great effort.

She laughed gaily.

"No — those are things to eat — it is a good rule, when you come to visit a hermit, to bring your dinner with you!"

"Oh, Peggy, Peggy! — it is so good to see you!" He seized her hands and began to draw her to him, but suddenly released her. "Have you had breakfast?" He pulled himself together.

"No — I planned to have it with you — I have

brought some beautiful real *brioches.* Have you an apron?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Get breakfast."

His eyes twinkled.

"How do you suppose I manage when I'm here alone?"

"I don't know!" She smiled lugubriously. "If you are as helpless as my father was —"

"My dear Peggy, all men are helpless when they have some one to depend on — but I assure you we are born housekeepers! You sit there, and I'll prove it to you!" He motioned to an easy-chair by the fireplace, in which a great hickory log blazed.

She dropped into it, her eyes sparkling with amusement as her tall uncle donned a chef's regulation snowy cap and apron — his predecessor had bought them to wear at a masked ball.

"But where did you get those!" she demanded, through her laughter.

He maintained an important silence.

She looked on, fascinated, as he placed a small table by the fire, and covered it with an immaculate cloth, taken from the chest of drawers that had yielded up the cap and apron. He set the table with an air of solemnity, put a halved orange at each place, then stood off to inspect his work.

"Sugar, butter, cream,"—he pointed at each, with an enumerating finger—"napkins! I forgot napkins." He fetched them, all with an air of absorption that was enchantingly funny.

The breakfast, of bacon and eggs, *brioches* and coffee, was delicious.

"Well, after all," Mr. Austen said, in response to Peggy's praise, "I 'd be pretty stupid if, after all the breakfasts I 've eaten, I did n't know how to produce one."

She admitted that was true, and began a whimsical inquisition. How did he manage about this? How did he manage about that? Who took care of his laundry? It was perfectly simple: His friend, the owner of the studio, had set the ball rolling and he, Austen, had simply let it roll; butcher, baker, milkman, laundryman appeared, as by magic, and brought things or whisked them away. The studio was a little "out of their way," but nearly every place, in the country, was. But who did his mending? The laundry. Did they do it well? He hesitated, then admitted, laughing, that their darning left something to be desired. Taken all in all, he was not an object of pity.

"*Mon oncle,*" Peggy said, leaning back from the table, her chin resting on her clasped hands, "what do you think has happened to me?"

"I don't know what has happened to you,

dear, but nothing could be too good." He smiled tenderly.

"Well — your friend, Mr. Winthrop, has got me into the Metropolitan Opera Company — is n't it wonderful? I am to have small French and Italian rôles, this season, and then — if I do well — You see, I have had no stage experience, so they cannot tell — It may be that I shall be a — what is it Isabelle calls it? — a 'stick.'" The word fell quaintly from her lips.

Her uncle rejected the possibility, with a smile.

"I do not know," Peggy said, with an anxious air. "One may have good instinct for acting, but it is a great art to know just how much to exaggerate; on one side of a very fine line you are — ineffective — and on the other, ridiculous. But I shall work very hard." Her face was alight with enthusiasm.

She went on to tell him of her interview with Signor Ferro-Ganacci.

"And it has all come to me through you," she added, as she finished, putting out an impulsive hand to him. He bent over and carried it to his lips.

"Dear girl, it has come to you through your own gifts and loveliness."

"But I might have had to wait a long time, if I had not met Mr. Winthrop."

Mr. Austen's face fell for a moment into bitter

lines — the acrimonious scene with his wife, touching this matter, had come back to him, but he smiled as he saw Peggy's troubled eyes fixed on him.

"I am glad, dear, that I have been able to help you even indirectly — I would do far more, if I could —"

They had a wonderful day, marred momentarily for Mr. Austen by the news that Venable was coming to America so soon, and for the girl by the pain her news occasioned; but their gaiety was too vital to be more than fleetingly dimmed. When Peggy asked how he was coming along with his writing, he said if she 'd like to hear what he 'd done, she could judge for herself. She looked up in astonishment, from the sock she was redarning, at the thick sheaf of manuscript in her uncle's hand.

"You see, I can work very rapidly under the right conditions."

"It is curious," Peggy said, studying his face, "but you are a quite different person when you speak of your work — it makes you look always happy and — handsome — it is a kind of — idealized you — a —" She stopped, at loss for words.

"I know what you mean — it 's because I love to write, and it brings out the best side of me."

"But it is a wonderful thing — love," she said dreamily.

"Yes," he replied, with a pregnant inflection.

They were silent for a moment.

"I have n't decided on a title for this book — if you think of anything —"

Peggy nodded.

In the course of the reading, she glanced up several times appreciatively, and caught her uncle's waiting eye. "I thought you would like that," he said once; or again, "I knew that would appeal to you." Peggy stopped darning, and leaned forward intently. She listened, amazed, her sympathy with his ambitions becoming every moment more concrete, more enlightened.

The story dealt — not unnaturally in the circumstances — with a case similar to Mr. Austen's own. He presented it grippingly. But by degrees Peggy saw that though his touch was sure, it was prejudiced. She realized how blindly he had gone through those frustrating years, how bitterness and defeat had veiled his vision; in his eyes, the artist was a kind of super-being, unalterable, to which the rest of the universe should adapt itself. Inevitably, therefore, he vindicated the artist's domestic failure.

"Well?" he inquired, when he had finished.

"It is splendid! I found myself being almost converted. How is it to end?"

"I have Egerton divorce his wife, and marry again. The second time, he marries a woman he thinks is going to be an ideal wife — an altogether different type — but she does n't understand him — she 's too exacting — and in the end, they separate. He simply proves to his satisfaction that artists should n't marry,— anyway, that *he* should n't."

Peggy was thoughtful.

"Yes — but this divorcing and marrying again, and then more divorce — and then no marriage at all — it does not seem to me that it is a solution of the problem; I think it is only an evasion. Figure to yourself! Always artists will go on marrying — it is their — what do you call it? — their Achilles' heel — that they must have a wife and family. Nearly always there is that need; and since this is so, it does no good to say they should not marry. If I could write, I would try to go to the bottom of this question."

"And how would you solve it?" her uncle asked, a shade quizzically.

"Well — I would show that a man has no right to act as if he were different from other men, to do as he pleases, to be a pampered husband, because he writes or paints or sings! What is it — an artist? It is the name for some one who has special creative gifts — just as we call those who have the same gifts, in a less de-

gree, artisans — but they are both *men!* A stone-carver would not dare to have a 'temperament,' but a sculptor has all his weaknesses excused, because he has more brain. Why should he be less a man because he is a little more a god?"

Mr. Austen looked at her curiously.

"What you — seem to mean," he said slowly, as though the idea were forming with each word, "is that an artist fails in marriage because he is a failure — as a man— and not because he is an artist, at all —"

"Yes."

"Then you think, in my case —"

"I think,"— she hesitated, fearing to wound him —"I think perhaps you let the situation get out of your hands — in the beginning."

"You mean I was weak!" he stated bluntly. "That if I wanted to write, I should have done so and let the family suffer, until I was on my feet."

"Or else — have realized that you could not have things the way you wanted them, and worked in spite of unfavorable conditions," she suggested gently. "It is always easier to change oneself than to change another."

He sat for a long time, thinking. Things his wife had said, shot through his mind: "You could have written a dozen books in the last ten

years." "Why don't you write, instead of eternally adding up your debts, and nagging me for my extravagance?" He wondered if his wife had thought him weak. She was n't analytical, but she was instinctive, and she had probably sensed it. Again, he was n't convinced that he had been weak — he had been, rather, the victim of circumstances. But, after all, was n't that the only difference between a strong man and a weak one? — that one overcame obstacles and the other succumbed to them.

"You know how much my wife did to help me!" he flung out bitterly, at this juncture.

"Do you know,"— Peggy leaned her tawny head back against her locked hands, and spoke meditatively —"I often thought Aunt Isabelle bought things she did n't want, and did things you disliked, just to — to goad you into mastery."

"No — you credit her with too much subtlety. She was never actuated by anything but selfishness."

"I do not mean that she was subtle — I think she was prompted by some primitive instinct."

A long silence fell upon them. The short winter day was closing in. Peggy strained her eyes over her work, throughout the brief twilight; her uncle seemed to have forgotten her presence. Darkness crept up to the strip of lighted hearth, but still he stared into the fire. A log settled and

flared into flame, scattering sparks. He did not stir. He had been vouchsafed a glimpse of the whole long scroll of his married life; emotionlessly, he absorbed one significant detail after another, as one takes notes for leisurely pondering. All the convicting things he had forgotten, passed under his mind's eye. And finally, there was the telephone conversation with his wife, in which she had told him he need not return. The spell held until the last word, then he sat up, and said:

"Well — this is n't getting dinner — is it?"

Later, as they groped their way to the station, by lantern-light, Mr. Austen said:

"Have you — seen any of the family?"

Peggy told him of her aunt's visit and of her kindness.

"Um. Are they — have they made any change?"

"Yes — they have moved to New York." She hesitated. "I talked with Anne, yesterday, over the telephone and —"

"How is she?" he interrupted eagerly. "How are they living?"

She told him.

"My God! That child ought not to be shut up in an apartment house! She 's not strong — she ought to live outdoors! Does she get plenty of exercise?" he demanded, in irritable anxiety.

"I think she is well — but she misses you."

Mr. Austen did not speak again until the train came. His eyes were full of bitterness; his lips were set in a hard line. He said good-by automatically.

CHAPTER XIV

DURING this, his first month of absence, Mr. Austen had felt frequent yearnings for his youngest child, but he had cynically dismissed the idea that it might be mutual — her mother would see to it that she did not pine. Children — any child — could be amused into forgetfulness. Then Peggy had shocked him out of the half-comforting, half-bitter persuasion. Vivid pictures of a sick Anne, of a lonely Anne, of a bewildered Anne tormented him so that he could not sleep, could not work.

He had a three-day struggle with his pride; finally, he got a strong enough hold upon it to permit him to write a note to his wife, telling her where he was, in case anything should happen to the children. He hesitated over her address — she would know Peggy had supplied it — but then, there was no reason why he should not be in touch with his niece; his life was his own, now. He did not intend to return to his wife; her final selfishness, coupled with his blissful month of work-filled solitude, he felt, justified this determination. They could continue to live

apart, and he would support the family, or he would agree to a divorce. He meant to have Anne with him, if possible.

When Mrs. Austen spied the envelope, addressed in her husband's nervous hand, she said contemptuously, to herself, though her heart was beating rapidly:

"I knew it would n't last!"

But the triumph faded out of her eyes as she read his brief note, that revealed not only his whereabouts and his indifference to her personal fate, but also that he was in communication with her niece. A spasm of jealousy drove the blood burstingly into her head, and gave her a sick feeling in her throat.

"You have a perfectly reliable source of information — why trouble me?" she wrote, only to crumple the sheet, and fling it viciously into the waste-basket. Pride urged her to divorce him and let him marry Peggy, if he wanted to. "The fool!" she ejaculated, between locked teeth. "He does n't know *what* he wants! He would n't be any happier with her than he was with me!"

Of course, if she freed him, every one would think she had had no alternative; on the other hand, if she herself were free — Cynically, she realized that, unhindered by the confusing illusions of youth, she could marry very well. She

would choose some one who liked to see a woman handsomely dressed, to take her around and be proud of her — give her a good time. But, somehow, the thought proved disappointingly unstimulating. It induced a surprisingly dismal, "gone" feeling. She was glad when Flo Kipp breezed in.

"My dear!" she exclaimed, "put on your things, this minute and come with me! 'Yvonnette' is selling all her winter models for nothing, my dear — she 's *giv*ing them away! Such ducky hats you never *saw!* This is one of them — is n't it a beauty? — is n't it a creation? — only twenty dollars, my dear!" She whirled round gaily for Mrs. Austen to inspect the small, plain, black velvet turban, with what looked like a hen feather stuck in the front of it, for its sole trimming. "Just *find*ing it, my dear," she exulted.

"My dear girl, don't talk hats to me!" Mrs. Austen exclaimed. "I bought three, yesterday — they cost a fortune, but I could n't resist them. Come on into the bedroom."

"Hello, my dear!" Mrs. Kipp called, as they passed the open door of Anne's room. Anne looked up, leisurely, from the book on her lap.

"Hello," she responded indifferently.

"Too perfect, my dear — simply wonderful," Mrs. Kipp raved, as her friend adjusted the first of her purchases on her blond head. For fifteen

minutes, ecstatic sounds issued from within.

"Anne!" Mrs. Austen called. "Come here and show Aunt Flo your new hat."

Anne's lip curled; the "aunt" was a courtesy relationship which she had never, in her heart, ratified. She obeyed reluctantly.

There followed more raptures. Anne meant to depart, the instant they subsided, but just then Mrs. Kipp, with her usual irrelevance, said:

"'And how is your husband, my dear?"

"Oh — deep in the throes!" Mrs. Austen laughed indulgently. "I had a letter from him this morning."

"Well — just think of it, my dear! — to go away and stay a whole month! It 's *too* exciting! Fancy being so clever! Where did you say he was?"

"Montvale."

"New Jersey?"

Mrs. Austen nodded.

"Why, I have some friends there, my dear — the Dunhams. I 've been there *lots* of times. It 's on the Erie — an enchanting spot! Perfect place to work in! Of course I have n't an idea in my head, but you know what I mean — I imagine it would be, if I had! A whole month! I never heard of such a thing!"

"Well — the eccentricity of genius," Mrs. Austen said, in mock despair. Then, seriously:

"It was really impossible for him to work, home, with the children and everything — he tried to for years. You see — the artistic temperament is very peculiar —" Mrs. Kipp nodded sympathetically. "I don't understand it — I don't pretend to," Mrs. Austen continued, rolling her eyes, and making an expressive gesture with her hands; "I simply humor it."

Mrs. Kipp switched back to the subject of hats.

"Come along, and buy just one!" she urged.

"I can't — I 've been frightfully extravagant — you know I paid eight-hundred-and-fifty dollars for my coat — but it was such a bargain!" She referred to the handsome seal-trimmed, moleskin coat she had recently bought.

"I know, my dear, but one can't go around looking like a savage," Mrs. Kipp protested. "You can have it made over."

Anne had slipped back to her room, unnoticed. With shining eyes, she said to herself:

"Well, anyhow, I know *now* where he is. But he should have let me know, himself — he knew I would n't tell — I 'd have told *him*," she thought reproachfully. For the hundredth time, she tried to puzzle out why he had gone away at all.

Peggy was practising, down in Mary Hallam's studio, one evening, when a messenger arrived

with a marconigram for her. Mary, who had introduced herself to Peggy by way of a bowl of soup during the latter's illness, lifted an interrogating eye-brow as Peggy looked up, radiant, from the paper in her hands.

"He will be here, to-morrow!"

The pronoun was sufficiently explicit for any one who had lived close to her since the arrival of Venable's cable, ten days earlier, announcing that he was sailing.

"But how can I meet him?" she asked, in sudden consternation. "I have to go to rehearsal!"

"Could n't meet him, anyhow — you have n't got a permit, and there is n't time to get one. He 'll hunt you up," Mary added drily.

Peggy went to bed early, but she could not sleep — it is doubtful whether she would have slept, even without the added excitement of Venable's expected arrival. In two days, she was to make her début in "Carmen," in the modest rôle of *Frasquita;* on the morrow, there was to be a dress-rehearsal, with all the principals, and Peggy's mind was so overstimulated with it all that she was unable to relax and get the sleep she needed so badly. For six weeks she had driven as hard as she could drive; in addition to the regular hours of daily practice, she had learned several minor rôles, and, at Signor Ferro-Ganacci's suggestion, was getting up in *Mimi*

and *Manon;* she had taken up the study of Italian, not only for pronunciation, but that she might interpret intelligently what she was singing; then Winthrop had arranged for her to go every night to the opera, as part of her preparation, and with coaching and rehearsals she had little time to rest. Also, it was very expensive — it would have been impossibly so, even had her new work not obliged her to give up posing, but for Winthrop's help. She accepted it gladly, and was to repay him when she could. He had taken a keen interest in every detail of her progress; her discriminating and generous criticism of the various singers delighted him, and he was much amused by her reverence for Paolo Breschi, whom she regarded as the Metropolitan's finest artist; naïvely, she hoped that some day he might deign to notice her. Winthrop, knowing the great baritone's reputation, thought it highly probable he would! Sometimes, when the girl was not looking, Winthrop would study her with a peculiar intentness, shot with admiration.

Peggy was genuinely fond of him. She found in him that priceless thing — fine feeling; it revealed itself in every contact with him. Though he was reputed scarcely to know, himself, what he was "worth," his spending never even approached the limits of good taste. Peggy appreciated this, the more because she had been sick-

ened by the stupid extravagance she had so often seen, and by frequent exhibitions of vulgarity. Once, when they had been lunching at the Plaza, two young women at an adjacent table — one of them a bride — (it was impossible not to overhear their conversation — impossible, almost, to hear anything else) — had paid $42.50 for their lunch. The unmarried one giggled over the check: "Is n't it scandalous!" Her companion had waved a glittering hand: "What 'll I do with it? I 've got to spend it *some*how!" Peggy had wondered how these people, who could not fail to know of all Europe's plight, could be so at a loss to spend their wealth that they had to throw away almost fifty dollars on a meal! She had thought, wrathfully, that it would be just the same, with people like that, if America, itself, were in the war.

She tossed and turned — sleep would not come. Woven in with these memories of the recent past were disturbing thoughts of the near future. She wondered if she would have strength to persist in her determination not to marry Venable, if he should urge her. Her mind treacherously pictured him bending over her, there in the dark, and slipping his arms under her, his pleading voice in her ears. It was torture. But as she grew calmer, she visualized the worse torture of a marriage that would satisfy one's desires, but

not one's ideals; she saw too clearly, to be able to put it aside, that for her, physical harmony would not endure long against a constant difference of opinion.

In the morning, while she was dressing, she decided to stop and ask Mary to watch for Venable, and tell him where he could find her.

She started downstairs, her umbrella under her arm, for it was snowing, just as a man started up. In some remote corner of her subconsciousness she connected him with the doorbell that had recently rung; and, in the same vague way, she was aware that, as they approached each other, he stopped — presumably to let her pass. She bowed, without glancing up, then wavered, caught by some arresting quality in him. She looked up, involuntarily. It was Venable. As their eyes met, he reached out and drew her to him, with one of his rare smiles.

"I wondered if you could pass me and not know it," he breathed.

The irresistible magnetism that she had struggled against, in the old days, mastered her at his touch; she uttered a little moan as his lips brushed hers in a rapture of anticipation. For a long moment, they were lost in each other.

They started apart, as a doorknob turned. Venable picked up his hat, and Peggy straightened hers, and collected the umbrella she had un-

consciously leaned against the wall. She found herself saying:

"What time did you get in? I did not expect to see you so soon!"

And he replied:

"Eight o'clock. I left my things at the hotel and came right over here. You see, Peggy-Elise," he smiled tenderly, "I came to America to see you, and naturally I have n't lost any time in accomplishing it."

But their minds were not on what they were saying. Peggy was thinking, cynically, how easy it had been to make certain decisions — away from him — and how terribly difficult it was going to be to carry them out against the overpowering argument of sheer physical appeal. And Venable, stirred by this first taste of an exquisitely responsive Peggy, this Peggy, of whose existence he had never been quite sure, was wondering, over hammering pulses, how long she would make him wait before she would yield, wholly. Would she, out of some unsuspected stratum of formality, wish them to be fiancés? The idea of being "engaged" to Peggy struck him humorously — he opined the engagement would be of short duration.

"Where are you going?" he asked, as they descended the front steps.

"To rehearsal."

"I'll take you — we can get a taxi here, somewhere."

On the way to the corner, he observed her. She had not changed in appearance — she was even still wearing black, though she had lightened it by the addition of a soft-brimmed white felt hat, and she looked beautiful and distinguished, as always,— but there was a subtle difference — a touch more of confidence in her bearing — she was somehow more individualized. Perhaps America had developed the American side of her, or — perhaps she had met some one. . . . Whatever might be the reason, he was fascinated with this newly emerged Peggy-Elise.

In the taxicab, whose snow-blurred windows furnished privacy, he caught her to him again. She tried to free herself, but he met her efforts with a tender, unheeding laugh close to her lips. When at last he released her, she was white and weak, but determined.

"Gilbert,— you must not do that, again."

"Why not?" he demanded humoringly.

"Did you not receive my letter? I explained —"

"Yes, I know," he interrupted. "You were sure I did n't love you — I think, to quote you exactly, that I 'did n't know what love was,'— and I believe you said, too, that you were n't going to marry me because it would interfere as

much with your career, as it would with mine." His manner conveyed that he had taken her letter lightly.

His assurance unsteadied her; the reasons that had shaped her decision somehow lost their potency, but she clung desperately to the decision itself.

"I have not changed my mind." She forced herself to meet his amused eyes.

"You will."

"No — you are wrong — my work means everything to me."

"Work never means as much to any woman as love," he contradicted.

She looked at him, with something of the old, calm strength in her gray eyes.

"That is true — but I think you and I do not mean the same thing by love."

"I have come to America — to marry you — Peggy-Elise," he argued, with a winning smile.

"That might only prove that you — wanted me very much."

"Well, what do you call that?" There was amusement in his voice,

"Did you love Fania?"

Venable suddenly understood; she was jealous, of course! Any woman would be, in the circumstances. It did not occur to him that Peggy had referred to Fania only to support an argu-

ment; her curious ability to view any question impersonally had always confounded him.

"I think,"—he spoke in a tone of finality—"that the fact that I 'm here answers every objection." After a pause, he said:

"Tell me how you got into the Metropolitan—I believe you said a friend of your uncle's was instrumental in arranging it?"

He listened without comment, as Peggy talked enthusiastically of Giles Winthrop and of her work.

"How long do you suppose this rehearsal will last?" he asked, as the taxicab stopped at the stage entrance.

"It 's impossible to tell—there is no performance to-night—we may rehearse very late."

They decided, in view of the general uncertainty, not to try to see each other again that day, but to have luncheon together, on the morrow.

"I think I 'll call up your friend, Miss Hallam, around dinner-time, and see if you 're back."

But at seven o'clock the rehearsal was still in full swing. Signor Ferro-Ganacci put it up to the principals—they could stop, if they liked, and finish on the next day; but there was a unanimous desire to have it over with, then, and rest on the day of the performance, itself.

Some one went to Peggy, to know if she wished

to send out for food, but she was so exhausted from the strain of meeting Venable, and of singing, for the first time, with mature artists, that she shook her head — the thought of food repelled her. Nevertheless, when a waiter inquired, a few minutes afterward, if she were Mademoiselle Lascelles, and began to open an oblong white enameled box, in which she caught a glimpse of dainty food and service, she felt suddenly hungry. A lump rose in her throat as she read the understanding note from Winthrop, that accompanied it: He hoped she would try to eat something, and she was not to be nervous — he had some splendid things to tell her.

He had chosen the repast with his usual care — Peggy grew ravenous as she looked at the delicious fruit salad, the cold breast of chicken, the slices of thin bread and butter and the bottle of French claret; but she ate sparingly. When she had finished, she leaned back, her hands dropped in her lap, her eyes closed, and forced herself to relax. Footsteps passed and repassed. Presently, she was aware that some one had stopped in front of her. She glanced up, carelessly, and found Signor Paolo Breschi appraising her with Italian thoroughness.

"*Dio!*" he ejaculated, under his breath. Then he smiled brilliantly. "Pardon me, mademoiselle — I have forget to introduce myself —"

"It is not necessary — I know who you are," Peggy said, in a voice that betrayed none of the excitement she felt at this encounter. "I have been learning from you for a month, from the front."

"So?" His long, mobile face was radiant with pleasure. "Then you will not be offended if I criticize?"

"I would feel so honored, signor!"

"Well — it is this." He explained that he thought she could improve her pantomime, at a certain point, and showed her what he meant. She rose eagerly, and did it after him. When she looked up for correction, his expression disconcerted her — it combined appreciation of her work, with undisguised personal approval. He was about to speak, when they called the third act, and Peggy had to hurry away; she felt his eyes upon her until she disappeared in the glittering, gaudy crowd.

Rehearsal was over at half-past nine. When Peggy came downstairs, Winthrop was waiting to take her home. She settled back gratefully, in a corner of his big car, for the morning's snowstorm had worked itself into a blizzard, and transportation was demoralized. Her companion was jubilant. The general opinion of his protégée was that she had a "future."

"Your voice could be heard over all the others,

in the ensemble work — it has a remarkable quality," he said. "Ferro-Ganacci is going to put you on the list of '*doubleurs*'— which means, of course, that you may be called on at any time to sing an important rôle." But Peggy was too worn out by a succession of intense emotions to be elated by her success. Winthrop understood and was silent during the remainder of the ride.

As they picked their way through the drifted snow, to her door, the girl said simply:

"There is nobody like you."

He made no reply. When they said good night, he avoided her eyes, softly luminous with gratitude.

"Try to sleep," he advised, releasing her hand.

She found Venable waiting for her, in Mary Hallam's studio — he had dropped in, around nine, to see if she had returned, and Mary had asked him to come in and sit down.

"Giles Winthrop bring you home?" Mary inquired.

"Yes — he is very kind."

"Humph!" she laughed; "he won't get any medals for that sort of philanthropy."

"You are wrong — it is just kindness."

"I would have gone for you, myself," Venable explained, a trifle stiffly, "but I was afraid of missing you."

Peggy went to her room early. Venable car-

ried up her cloak and umbrella for a pretext to be alone with her. When he had lighted the gas, he said:

"Peggy — this man, Winthrop — is he anything to you?"

"He is a dear friend."

"Does he love you?"

"He has not said so."

He looked at her searchingly.

"Will you marry me, to-morrow?"

She shook her head.

"Dear," he protested, "this is nonsense! You want me as much as I want you, and you know it! Do you really think I don't know how to love?" He put his hand persuasively on her shoulder. She removed it.

"I am not thinking about that — now; I am remembering the things you used to say against marriage — Have you come to the conclusion that it is well for an artist to marry?"

He hesitated.

"No — but we are intelligent enough to eliminate the — well — the disagreeable features of marriage — and keep its attractive ones. You are the only woman I have ever known with whom it would be possible."

"'The disagreeable features'— you mean —?"

"Children — and things; they would interfere with your work as much as they would with

mine. I think it would be as nearly perfect as a marriage could be — would n't it?"

Peggy looked at him, queerly.

"For you — perhaps; me — I would not call it 'marriage' at all — it would be only a ceremony that would permit you to have a mistress comfortably and respectably."

He was silent.

For a long time her eyes probed his, but what she sought apparently lay beyond reach of her hungry vision, for she could not altogether subdue the hopelessness in her voice, when she spoke.

"We will talk about it, another time — I am too tired, now."

"I don't see that it will do any good to talk — you 'll change your mind about a lot of things, when you 've tried it," he urged, taking her in his arms.

She did not protest — neither did she respond. He tried to rouse her, but she remained obdurately passive.

He left her, with a growing uneasiness.

CHAPTER XV

PEGGY had told Venable the truth — she was indeed too tired to talk — so tired that, five minutes after she had slipped into bed, she was asleep.

She woke feeling wonderfully refreshed in body and mind; the problem she had resolutely refused to consider, after her head touched the pillow, had somehow solved itself while she slept, or, rather, dissolved itself, for it was gone. She would simply not see Venable alone, again, until her objections to marrying him had crystallized into reasons; just now, they were too instinctive, she knew, to withstand argument.

She called him up and told him she would be unable to take luncheon with him — she was too busy. He was silent for a moment.

" Well — I suppose I 'll see you after the performance, to-night, to congratulate you — won't I? "

" Or to sympathize with me! "

" I think you won't need any one's sympathy."

" That is nice of you. You will meet my uncle and Mr. Winthrop — they will both be there."

"Yes?"

Only a few, in the brilliant audience that assembled that night to see, rather than to hear, Charlotte Galland as *Carmen,* knew that Peggy was making her début; but many of them spoke of the beautiful new voice that issued from the throat of an equally beautiful young woman, and took a second look at their programs. It was behind the scenes, and after the performance, that she had her triumph. Signor Ferro-Ganacci brought back two of the directors to meet her; Charlotte Galland sent her some flowers and a charming note; Paolo Breschi was either with her every minute, in the wings, or watching her amorously from them — he was beside himself with desire for her, he told her, with Latin frankness.

And when she came out of the theater, with Giles Winthrop at her side, she found the people who, one way or another, mattered most to her, awaiting her — Venable and Mary Hallam in one group, and her uncle and Anne Austen in the other. Anne had demanded to be taken to the opera, and had finally been sent in charge of her governess — a melancholy, shrivelled little Frenchwoman — whom she tolerated; she stood beside the child, looking very dismal.

Anne had not known that her father was to be there. When she spied him she broke loose from

Mademoiselle Seguin, and ran passionately to him. She had kissed him and clung to him, adoringly. Austen had been so moved, that he had not been able to speak.

"Oh, Daddy!" she had cried, "when are you coming home? — To-night?"

He had smiled, with infinite tenderness, into her ardent little face:

"When I 've finished my work, dear — it won't be very long."

While they were waiting for Peggy, Mr. Austen and Venable identified each other. Jealousy flamed up in the latter as he observed Austen's good looks and very evident attractiveness — he wondered if Peggy were in love with her uncle, if that were why she had left her aunt's home. She appeared, just then, with Winthrop, and diverted his speculations into a new channel. His first feeling, at sight of her escort, was one of intense relief; he could not imagine Peggy caring for that plainish, middle-aged man, whose plainness was further aggravated by eyeglasses; but when a smile lighted his face, and he spoke in an attractive voice, that was full of quiet force, Venable realized that he would have to be reckoned with.

Introductions and congratulations over, Winthrop suggested that they all go and have a little supper, in honor of the occasion. Peggy dis-

covered Mademoiselle Seguin slipping away.

"Mademoiselle," she said, in French, "it would give me the greatest happiness to have one of my own countrywomen with me, to-night — will you not stay?"

"It is so good of you, Mademoiselle! — but I cannot — to-night. I have a very bad headache."

When Peggy could not alter her decision, she said:

"Then we will take you home, first."

The girl protested, but Peggy had her way. At the door, as she said good night, she impulsively removed all but one of the beautiful scarlet buds she was wearing, and pinned them on the lapel of Mademoiselle Seguin's worn black coat. Tears sprang to her eyes, at sight of the woman's pleasure, and she wished that she might, somehow, bring the miracle of success into the drab lives of the many little alien French governesses who had lost their youth — or were losing it — day after monotonous day.

"I got red roses for you, Peggy," Anne said, unconsciously enlightening three men who had been intensely curious about the flowers Peggy wore, "because you always seem to me like a red rose — in mourning. And you smell like a flower, too — with the dew on it." She looked up, worshippingly, into her cousin's face: "I 'm so glad I can stay all night with you!"

Peggy had a little moment of self-consciousness, when Winthrop helped her off with her wrap. Instead of her usual black, the opening cloak revealed her in a softly gleaming white evening frock; her exquisite throat and arms needed no ornaments, and she wore none. No one there, except Venable, had ever seen her so beautiful — but he was not thinking of her beauty; his mind had gone back to that other time he had seen her in white, the night they had stopped at the Maison Chevalier, after he had come to her aid — a forlorn, tragic figure, huddled on a pile of crushed stone, beside the road from Verdun. He recalled his surprise at her loveliness, when she joined him, in a simple white dress of Madame's daughter, which Madame had loaned her to replace her dripping garments. How little any one could have foreseen the girl's destiny that night! She had been then, and always, so unassuming, so unaffected — she had had none of the flamboyant qualities, the conspicuous eccentricities that are supposed to distinguish the personality of genius. Until tonight, he would have imagined her wholly unsuited to a part like that of *Frasquita,* for instance, yet she had simply disappeared in it, replacing her own quiet, poised self with the primitive, uncurbed, crudely colorful gipsy girl, in a way that had taken his breath. In this new re-

spect for her, he realized that it was going to be very difficult, now, to win her. . . . He wondered how he had failed to gage her worth more accurately, in the Phryne days. It occurred to him that possibly he had undervalued all women — yet those he had known had justified his valuation.

"Oh, Peggy!" Anne exclaimed, "you look beautiful! I 've never seen you in anything but black — except your nightdress," she amended.

Everybody laughed, as Peggy blushed and put her hand over Anne's mouth.

"*Cherie,* I would not have believed you were an *enfant terrible,*" she laughed, hugging her.

It was a gay supper. For Peggy, it would have been perfect had her father been there to share the happiness of her first success; but she was too unselfish, too deeply grateful, to let this ache shadow her joy. Besides, she would have been more than human had she not caught the infectious gaiety of her companions, and been a little carried away by their toasts and prophecies. And to have Venable witness her triumph, added a last intoxicating touch. She felt a delicious awakening sense of power, not only over men, but over circumstances; her new earning capacity bewildered her — a thousand francs — she always turned dollars into francs — for a few hours' work! It was a fabulous sum! She would be

able, now, to take a little apartment, as Winthrop had suggested that evening, where she could have privacy for her work, and a place to receive people. Also, she would be able, she realized, with a swelling heart, to contribute much more to the various funds for the relief of her countrymen — and save, besides.

Venable, studying her radiant face, wondered if Winthrop had by any chance proposed to her, that evening — there was no tinge of possessiveness in their manner, yet he was at a loss to account for a certain note of exultation in Peggy, that he felt, instinctively, was not due to her success; it did not occur to him that he himself, his unconsciously more deferential attitude, a new hint of diffidence in him, had brought it there. He thought it was the touch of excitement he had observed in newly engaged women. He realized, enviously, that Winthrop was the type of man who, not even in extremest circumstances, would offer the woman he loved a substitute for marriage — he was the sort that would remain faithful to an insane wife. To Venable, it was sheer foolishness — yet a kind of fine foolishness. He admitted that he, himself, was built on quite other lines. Or was it a matter of early training? His father's materialistic attitude toward women had unquestionably influenced him; yet he remembered that, in the ardor of his

first love affair, he had, despite the paternal advice, intended to marry the girl, but she had belonged to that branch of the frail sisterhood that is more seducing than seduced. . . . His subsequent dealings with women were of an unattractive nature. He wondered, while missing no word of Peggy's conversation, what would have happened had Ida — that was her name — been a proper young person. He decided, with a soothing sense of justification, that he would now have been an unsuccessful business man — since he had no financial aptitude — with a large and probably complaining family — he assumed that families complained more or less, under the provocation of poverty. And here was Peggy apparently wanting one; or, at least, as far as he could fathom it, resenting the proposed omission of it. He wished he had said nothing about children, yet it was better to talk it out honestly, now, than to have the necessarily far more sordid and estranging discussions of it, afterward. He reflected that Winthrop would be delighted with a family.

When they left the restaurant, it was snowing hard. Venable said it was the kind of weather he loved to be out in, and would walk home. Disappointedly, Peggy watched his tall figure disappear down the avenue, in the wind-whirled

snow that the lights transformed into a curtain of flashing crystals.

Her lately blossomed sense of power proved to be one of those fragile, heavy-scented blooms, that are as perishable as they are intoxicating; it withered under Venable's small show of indifference. And it did not revive under Winthrop's significant attentiveness — the male world, outside of Venable, might go cassocked and cowled, for all it mattered to Peggy. Yet she wished, for a moment, that she could care for Winthrop — there was such a perfect understanding between them, such similarity of tastes and ideals, and he was so tender, so unselfish. Those were the things, according to her own convictions, that ought to prompt love — but they did n't — at least, not the love that finds satisfaction only in marriage; *that* sort of love seemed to depend upon a certain delicious troubling of the nerves. . . . She knew that if Venable were suddenly robbed of his power to stir her, she would not cling to his unglamoured faults, hoping for a miracle to change him.

Up in her little Patchin Place room, she undressed Anne, and lingeringly tucked her into bed. Then she got into the orange-lined, gray kimono, with its flight of storks, that Venable had brought her, turned out the gas, and, by the light

of a candle, fixed in a violently futuristic candlestick a young Russian artist in the house had made, opened her small leather trunk and took out the box that held her father's *Croix de Guerre*. She intended to put the scarlet rosebud with it, in memory of her first success, that meant so much to her and would have meant so much, she thought, to her father. But as she looked at them, lying side by side — the pretty festive flower, and that stern symbol of supreme sacrifice — the hot shamed color flooded her face; by what right had she put it there?

In a blinding, shrivelling vision, she saw herself engrossed in her own affairs, carried away by her easily won success — a success for which she had not had to strike a blow! — concerned for her own happiness, that affected, at best, the happiness of only one other — when at that very moment the *brancardiers* were carrying their martyred thousands from the battlefields of Europe! The color flickered out of her cheeks, leaving her white and scornful. What sacrifice ennobled the rose she would have placed beside her father's cross? She had given time and strength to the Red Cross, had gone without comforts, often, in order to care in small ways for some *poilus* who had been kind to her at St. Menehould, and she meant, now, to do more — but "more" was not enough! She thought how

her father would have scorned merely to do what could have been reasonably expected of him! He had flung his life away with glorious carelessness. She could see him drop suddenly across his machine gun, his gray dead piled up within a few yards of the trench, a defiant smile on his lips. He had lived up to, and died up to, his highest ideal; and there, in the quiet of her little candle-lit room, he seemed to tell her that it had brought him happiness, and to show her what she must do.

She bowed her head and listened. He reminded her that he had left her his *Croix de Guerre* as a symbol of the unfinished duty for which he had died, and which he had bequeathed to her; to perform that faithfully was the only success that mattered, that would make her the woman she was meant to be; "duty" invariably compelled one to rise above every-day littleness and selfishness, and to live finely — to live better than one seemed able to live, without the urge of it. One could not realize his ideal — that curious something that was like a luminous, strong self, in one, struggling eternally for realization — unless one felt in his heart that sense of responsibility to some one, something. Without it, her father's spirit seemed to argue, one was cut off from love — not the changeling passions that parade in its guise, but the unseeking tenderness

that sees in every man a brother, that forgets its private griefs in the grief of the world — love, that was turning France and Belgium into a shambles to-day, that to-morrow the whole world might be made a happier, better place for unknown and unborn men to live in — love, the light of the world! When one turned his face from it, one saw only the blighting black wedge of his own shadow. . . .

For perhaps an hour Peggy sat there on the floor, beside her trunk, her hands dropped in her lap, so still that she appeared scarcely to breathe. When she rose, at last, her face was transfigured. She looked slowly around the humble little room; the hour had glorified it, sanctified it. All thought of leaving it for bigger quarters had vanished; it would be time enough to think of luxuries when each of her countrymen had a roof again, and clothes — and food. Her eyes filled with tears, but a peace as profound and sweet as the peace of death was in her heart.

She laid her father's war cross, in its simple case, back in the trunk; then she put the rose in a vase on the window-sill, to bloom its triumphant little hour.

CHAPTER XVI

ELMER JOHNSTON was one of those Americans who grew restive under three years of diplomacy and applied idealism; he was temperamentally not a watchful waiter — he loved a fight. In January, 1917, his patience suddenly snapped over a new piece of German submarine insolence, and he walked out of his Washington Mews studio, leaving canvases, paints, brushes, where he dropped them, and joined the American Ambulance.

Through a mutual acquaintance, Venable secured the vacated apartment. He moved in such impedimenta as was necessary to convert it into a sculptor's studio, and tried to settle to work. With little success, however — partly because of Peggy's behavior, and partly because no one seemed to understand why he had returned to America at such a time. The implication was embarrassingly clear. He assured himself it was nobody's damned business, and stubbornly refused to look at the pictures his memory flashed up, of certain scenes in a Paris hospital, and from stories he had heard. But even when he was not

aware of the cause, he felt uncomfortably nagged.

Then Peggy had explained her refusal to marry him. It was not, as he had half supposed, because of his objection to a family, but because of his utter selfishness — his objection was only an aggravated instance of it.

"I don't know," he said, "but *I* think that shows a good deal of consideration for you."

"Yes," she admitted, a shade sadly, "but it was a secondary consideration."

"I suppose the trouble with me is that I have a too pagan attitude toward love."

"But even the pagans raised little pagans."

"Yes, because in those days safety lay in numbers. What I meant was that I want marriage to be a source of pleasure — not of annoyance."

Peggy regarded him gravely.

"I think perhaps you do not realize that when women are considering getting married, they think things over much as men do — they decide that this man would be a good husband, but a sad lover, and that one would be a good lover but a poor husband — just as a man often gives up a fascinating woman for one who is dependable, who — has reverence for marriage, and all that it means. I believe," she said slowly, "that the worth-while men and women — want something — more — than a mistress or a lover, when they marry — is it not so?"

Venable was petulant.

"I don't think it's a question of — value — it's wholly a matter of temperament. Marriage is a blanket that covers a multitude of relations — you take your choice. Society enforces the ceremony on you, with the alternative of ostracism if you rebel — but, beyond that, it seems to me it has no power and, I imagine, little concern. I know a man, for instance, who married a woman because she had a splendid head for business — he saw that it would be an advantageous union — she was n't specially attractive to him in any other way — they are n't much more than business partners — but that's what they want. And, in the same way, if it happens that all you want of a woman is that she should be a charming mistress and a delightful companion — if you don't want several children interfering with your work — you're not outraging any convention — you're simply managing to do as you please, within it — and in spite of it." He flicked the ash somewhat irritably from his cigarette.

"But, Gilbert — marriage is something more than a convention — it is the most sacred relation in the world! And why should you be content to know only part of its joys? Me — I would like to live the fullest life possible, through it — to be not only a wife, and mistress, but — a

mother. It is so strange to me, that you who thrill when you are making something — lifelike — out of marble, have no desire to — to create something really alive."

"No — I admit it does n't thrill me, specially, to contemplate a function all life has in common with me — kittens and puppies are a product of the same forces that fashion human young."

Peggy was silent, a long time, sitting very still; the mysterious Door that sometimes seemed to open in her, swung back, now, and let in a blaze of light; it illumined the walls of the Dark Chamber, and let her read the ancient writings thereon. . . . When she at last spoke, her eyes were luminous and her voice vibrant with feeling.

"You are all wrong, Gilbert, *mon ami.* It is true that animals have the creative function, too; but we give our little ones something more than they give theirs — a conscience, perhaps — a sense of right and wrong. Every human being has it — it is the source of ideals. *That* is what I mean," she said eagerly; "it is only human beings that have ideals — the whole fate of the world rests with them — it makes them seem like — gods — some way."

"Yet you have told me that I have no ideals," he said, smiling half amusedly.

"You have them, of course, but I think you do

not — follow them — sometimes. Sometimes — you are selfish."

Venable studied her narrowly.

"You have changed, Peggy-Elise," he charged, at length.

"Yes — perhaps a little; one cannot remain always the same."

"I liked you very well as you were," he said, with the tender, imploring smile that always made him so difficult to resist.

"Yes," she smiled back, "but I did not like myself at all."

"Do you like yourself, now?" he asked whimsically.

"I am not in love with myself."

"Nor with me. I think it 's you, not I, dear, who have to learn what love is."

Venable thought many times of this conversation. He was thinking of it as he stood at the window of his Washington Mews studio, one stormy morning in mid-March, watching the pouring rain splash up from the paving stones and swirl down the inadequate gutters. In spite of himself, her accusations of selfishness had taken hold of his mind. Inconsistently, his new respect for her, as an artist, had increased his respect for her opinions, and in one direction, at least, he had to admit that she was right; it was selfishness that had kept him out of the war —

he had dreaded the loathsome discomforts of the life; furthermore, there was every chance that he might be injured, in the first encounter — be maimed in his hand, or blinded — and for the splendid career he had much reason to expect he would have to substitute some occupation for the blind or crippled. Or he might be killed, outright, without ever firing a shot. There was no taint of cowardice in these speculations; on the contrary, danger held for him the fascination that it does for many men. It was simply that it seemed to him like folly, to risk a life — perhaps to no purpose — whose flickering out would mean the extinction of rare gifts. Even Peggy had urged him to live for his work. He recalled how convincingly she had spoken of the artist's high destiny, that night in the Maison Chevalier, as they sat by the great fireplace, the flames lighting her lovely, tired face less than some strange inner glow. The urgings of his conscience, awakened by the sights he had witnessed the previous night at Verdun, had had too little vitality to withstand the comfort of her argument. But now, as he stared across the rain-swept Mews into the studio where Feodor Sierzycki was working, frenziedly, by gaslight, on his magnificent figure of "Russia Awakening"— breathing into it a passionate love for his country and a flaming hatred for her exploiters, Venable saw that, at

bottom, what had kept him out of the war was indifference to the fate of the world — the fate, as Peggy had said, that lay in the hands of human beings. The German outrages had filled him with loathing for the Germans; but they had not filled him with love for the outraged . . . with pity, that puts a sword in one's hand. Even his hatred had no splendor — it flared up only at intervals and did not affect his conduct. Nothing affected it, he realized, except what affected his personal happiness. But were not most men like that? The French and English were fighting for reasons that vitally affected their welfare. But what about the Belgians? What about the American Legion? The Belgians needed only to have stood aside, and the Hunnish hordes would have marched peacefully through the land, leaving it as they had found it, and a little richer, perhaps, for some German gold. But from Albert of Belgium, down to the humblest subject, there was not a man whose ideal of honor would permit him to break his country's word. And so, Venable saw, though the Belgian race was a thing of fragments, scattered over the globe, and Belgium and Flanders were names for a land that had been crushed out of all resemblance to itself under the grinding heel of Germany, the spirit of Belgium — dazzling, invincible, intact — the "something

more," the ideal, that each man had died for, lived and would live, forever.

And the American Legion? No thought of their happiness had actuated *them*, unless, indeed, they could know no joy in a world befouled by oppression. . . . These were Peggy's "worth-while" people — these little precious handfuls of Belgians and Americans — and he, Venable, was not of them. He faced the truth squarely.

He turned round from the window, and contemplated the Victory, on the modeling stand; it was a failure. For weeks, he had been blaming the fact on the lack of a good model — none of them had reflected the spirit of proud triumph that he had wanted — none of them had lent him inspiration. He had worked, finally, without a model. He admitted frankly that he had needed Peggy — he had had her in mind for this Victory, at the time he was doing the Phryne, in Paris. He studied the figure critically. It represented a woman, life sized, sword in hand, her garments blown, as in the act of walking, her head high; it expressed victory in every line, yet, somehow — it seemed to Venable — it was a cold, impersonal victory — it lacked something vital. For the first time in his life there came to him a sense of limitation — a question as to the breadth of his genius. He thought of his past work. As he recalled the subjects — Bacchus, Satyr and

Nymphs, Mercury, Pierrot — the many studies of similar nature — and lastly, the Phryne — he realized that, without exception, his work had expressed one or other of the ruling human passions — not once had he soared into the ideal. His art had elevated many earth-born themes, but he had brought nothing down from the stars to elevate his art.

In the midst of these unflattering reflections, Peggy arrived.

"Is anything the matter?" She searched his face.

"Why?"

"Because — all the morning I have felt that,"— she hesitated —"that you needed me."

"I need you, always," he said, with simple earnestness.

She flushed happily, under his tone.

"Has nothing happened — really?" she persisted. "You look — different."

"Nothing — except that I have been thinking — you claim that that changes one. Let me have your umbrella and things."

"These are for lunch,"— she set down some packages —"and these are daffodils." She unwrapped a paper cone, shaking the yellow blossoms loose. "But it is immoral — the price you charge for flowers, here in America — they are what I miss! Think what we used to buy, back

of the Madeline, for a few sous!" She shrugged her raincoat from her shoulders, into his hands. He took it, with a smile that only accentuated the strange new sternness in his face. It baffled Peggy and attracted her. It was almost as though a mask had been snatched away, revealing a more sensitive, finer face beneath — one that the fluttering scarf of Truth had brushed, in passing. She felt suddenly nearer to him than she had ever been.

When he had hung her raincoat on the back of an easel he joined her by the fire. He stood for a while looking down at her, wondering what had brought her to him in such weather — and if she had come, as she said, because she had thought he needed her or because she had needed him. Her strong, self-reliant profile discouraged the latter supposition; it suggested the person whose greatest need would be another's need of her. In the midst of his uncertainty it flashed into his mind that the reason, possibly, why he had always found Peggy incomprehensible was because she did not "play the game"— she knew none of its laws, apparently, and, doubtless, would have scorned them if she had; she spoke and acted, he believed, out of a fearless, innate sincerity. He put out his hand and touched her head tenderly.

"You are a dear woman, Peggy-Elise — the

dearest I have ever known — and the best."

She thrilled. It was the first time he had ever used an affectionate tone toward her; usually, he was either persuasively passionate or simply comradely. It seemed, in some new way, to take into account sides of her that he had hitherto ignored or been ignorant of. It had a feel of domesticity — a husband might speak so to his wife, at the end of some specially trying day in her life. She smiled up at him, for answer.

"How is your work going?" she inquired, after a moment.

"All wrong." He went over to the figure. "I wish you'd tell me what you think of it."

Peggy examined it, thoughtfully.

"I think it is a very good Victory," she said finally, "but it is not the Victory for this war — it is so powerful that it suggests an easy conquest — a purely military triumph. I think, Gilbert, the Victory for this war should show great — weariness — almost exhaustion — and indomitable human courage. I would make her very worn — her clothes frayed a little, her face and body thin, and — spiritualized." As she talked, her own face and form involuntarily responded to her thought, and she stood there, in all the incongruity of a trim modern "rainy-day" suit, the incarnation of the Victory she had just outlined.

"You mean," Venable's eyes were fixed, critically, on the figure, "this war has been so terrible — you think it will be so — hard-won — that the conquerors will be too weary, too spent, to exult?"

"Not exactly that; I mean it will be a — spiritual victory, a victory of love — of sacrifice, for an ideal of brotherhood. I think it should show mankind self-crucified — stepping, somehow, out of all its human failings, into godhood. The mood would be reverent — not exultant — Do you not think so?"

Venable caught up a piece of charcoal.

"Will you hold that pose a moment?" he requested, beginning to sketch her rapidly. He worked for fifteen minutes, making notes from various angles. When he had finished, his face wore the absorbed expression Peggy had seen on it, so often, on the days when the Phryne had been coming along well. He seemed to have forgotten her presence. "Could you hold that a minute longer?" he asked, in an engrossed tone.

Without waiting for a reply, he brought clay and commenced to build up a new figure. He worked silently, swiftly, like one possessed; he was wholly unconscious of the passing of time, and Peggy was too interested, too wildly happy, to be concerned with the trivial matter of an

aching muscle, here and there. When he finally said: "Well — that 's all I can do with it, now," and drew the girl back, with him, to inspect his work, they were both a little breathless over the result. Through all its roughness and absence of detail, it breathed the sublime spirit of victorious self-sacrifice.

"It 's the best thing I 've ever done," he said elatedly, "and I could n't have done it without you. This is what I think marriage would mean to me, with you — the doing of big work — together, Peggy-Elise,— success! Would n't *that* seem to you a worth-while life?"

She did not look at him; would he ever think of any one but himself?

"Yes — it would be worth-while, but — it would be incomplete. I would have to give up certain ideals — the very things that, it may be, make me — useful to you — an 'inspiration,' as you call it. If I were to live the — way I would have to, with you — I would hate myself, in six months. And you, too, perhaps."

"Suppose I should agree to live according to your ideals?" he urged. "Suppose I should be willing to have some little Peggys and Gilberts running around —?"

She shook her head.

"You would be doing it only to please me; I know your nature."

He began to work in some detail on the Victory's head.

"I admit I 'm not naturally — paternal, and I am, apparently, naturally selfish — to save my life, I don't see how I can be different. I don't like children; and, though I can see just how bad it sounds, I can't care enough for all those people — over there — to want to lay down my life for them. What would you do, in a case like mine? At least, now I am honest with myself."

"You are honest with *one* side of yourself," Peggy corrected gravely. "You are honest with the artist in you; but you outrage the man."

"Perhaps the man is n't as strong in me as the artist?" He leaned back, to view his work.

"That is impossible, Gilbert! The man in you is the real you — it is just an accident that you are an artist; you might have been trained for quite different work — they might have made a lawyer of you, or a doctor. Then, all the things that you lay now to your temperament would have been looked upon as weaknesses — you would have been regarded as so much less a man, because of them. It is only the artist, in you, that is callous to the sufferings of the people 'over there,' as you say — You, yourself, have moments of burning to give a hundred lives, if you had them, to right the wrongs that have been done! I *know* it!"

Venable lighted a cigarette, and stood thinking.

"Those moments are few and far between, Peggy," he said at last: "they are n't my real convictions, or I 'd be different."

"Yes, I used to think that way, too,"— she smiled very sweetly —" but I believe, now, I was wrong. We are so strangely built that we have to live up to our fine moments even before we can really *want* to live up to them. That sounds like a paradox, but it is n't — often we do things, because we see that they are right, without any desire at all to do them. And somehow — it makes us happy, and stronger; have you not noticed it? The only way to change ourselves seems to be to make ourselves follow our best impulses."

"But just a moment ago you refused to consider my reformation in regard to children," he protested, smiling a little amusedly.

"Because it was not genuine, I think; it was only to get something you wanted." There was a smile on her face, but none in her voice.

"And once — you remember," he said slowly, "you urged me not to go into the fight. You said —"

"Yes — I know," Peggy interrupted, her face aflame, "and I was sincere in what I said, only" — she hesitated, distressed —" I was influenced,

because you had been so kind to me, and — because you were attractive, and I did not want to lose you — I — was all alone, and — besides — I did not see many things then, as I do now. I think, now, that Voltaire and Rousseau did not create the Revolution — they only precipitated it; it would have sprung up, sooner or later, out of the terrible selfishness and extravagance of Louis Seize — the people would have revolted, anyhow, when they began to be hungry. And it is so, in this war — they do not need anything to make them fight! *Mon Dieu!* The greatest book, or work of art in the world, would not stir them as much as one little story of German outrage. Could anything move a man more than to know that the women, the *children,* of his country are being violated? To-day, it is a comrade's wife; to-morrow, it may be his own."

Venable was silent.

"What time is it?" he asked suddenly, looking at his watch. "Good heavens! It 's three o'clock! You must be starved. Forgive me, Peggy-Elise — I have been so interested — I did n't realize the hour it was getting to be!"

"It is nothing," Peggy laughed. "I forgot, too. I have everything here for lunch — you work while I get it ready."

When she called him to sit down, he was gaz-

ing at his Victory with a faraway look in his eyes.

"Suppose the Germans should win — what would we do with this?"

"They cannot win!" Her eyes flashed. "But even if they should seem to do so, we would still need a Victory to — commemorate the triumph over selfishness in the heart of every man who has taken up arms! Is it not so?" She fixed her earnest, gray eyes on him questioningly.

"Yes."

"Eat your omelet," she suggested, as he sat staring at his plate, without touching his food. "It is not good when it is cold."

CHAPTER XVII

"WELL, if *you* don't know what Mrs. Eversham's reputation is, Mother, I do, and Is has got to stop going around with her." Allyn Austen passed his coffee cup to his mother. "Half a cup, please."

Isabelle glanced up from the egg she was eating, her cheeks flushed with anger.

"You can mind your own business, Allyn Austen," she said hotly. "I 'll go with whom I please! Mrs. Eversham is my best friend — if it were n't for her I would n't have any fun at all!"

"I 've heard some things about her!" Allyn retorted contemptuously. "I 'm not going to have my sister talked about!"

"Well, I guess she 's as good as the people *you* go around with! We saw you, the other night, with that Mrs. Taylor — Mrs. Eversham gave me *her* pedigree!" she said triumphantly.

"It 's different with men."

"Do you call yourself a *man?*" his sister sneered. "Why, you 're just out of short pants!"

"Don't make any difference — I 'm a man, all right!"

Mrs. Austen gestured to command silence.

"What 's the matter with Mrs. Eversham, Allyn?"

"Everything!" he accused vehemently. "I heard last night they want to get her out of this house."

Anne, who had listened to the conversation, in silence, nodded.

"I heard it, too — from Paulette. She says she has lovers, the way they do in Europe," she announced innocently.

"Anne!" the family exclaimed, with one flabbergasted voice.

"'Anne' what?" the child asked, in surprise.

There was an awkward silence.

"She says she gets presents and things, from them."

Mrs. Austen started to speak, but Allyn burst out:

"Paulette knows what she 's talking about, anyway!"

"She did n't tell you who gave Allyn his new diamond cuff-links, did she?" Isabelle demanded, with intense maliciousness.

Her brother's face went crimson; his hair looked almost bleached, against it; his blue eyes blazed; his lips twitched furiously. He jumped

up from the table, overturning his chair.

"Where *did* you get those links, Allyn?" his mother asked.

"It's nobody's business where I got them!" Anger choked him so that he could scarcely articulate. Isabelle smiled with goading triumph. He shook his hand at her, in a rage.

"I didn't intend to tell on you, but I will, now!" he shrieked. "Do you know what *she* does? She pretends to you she's down in Polly Eversham's apartment, but she meets Jack Suffern, there, and goes out to the theater, and supper, and everywhere — with him! You're upstairs playing bridge, and you don't know what's going on!"

"I've only been out with him a few times!" his sister defended.

"Who is Jack Suffern?" Mrs. Austen asked in a tense voice, that matched her white face.

"'Happy' Jack Suffern? Any one can tell you who *he* is!"

Isabelle burst into violent tears; Allyn flung out of the room, ignoring his mother's attempts to detain him; Anne vanished.

Mrs. Austen leaned back in her chair, her face in her hands, thinking — rather, trying to think. Her brain whirled with the things she had just heard. She realized, in a panic, that what Allyn

had said about her was true; she knew almost nothing of their life — they came and went as they pleased; and this was made more inevitable by the fact that she had given the older children a far too generous allowance, when they had moved to New York — she had many reasons to regret that act! As for Anne —! She was shocked and heartsick over the child's remarks.

She rose and paced the room, nervously, her lips set. At first, she tried to comfort herself by putting all the blame for the situation on her husband — he had had no right to leave them! He had thought only of himself! But she recalled, miserably, that it was only after she had refused to help him to get out of debt that he had gone away. It seemed neither of them had thought much about the children; they had simply done what they had always wanted to do! She wondered if he were enjoying himself. . . . She had never had a line from him, except the note asking that he be informed if anything were wrong with the children — it appalled her to think how very wrong things were with them, now. And she would die, rather than have him know — she remembered how stubbornly he had always opposed bringing up a family in the city — she would not call on him, no matter what happened.

"Isabelle," she said sharply, "I think that, hereafter, you had better see as little as possible of Mrs. Eversham."

Her daughter's attempted remonstrance was interrupted by the ringing of the doorbell. The maid came in and handed Mrs. Austen an envelope. She opened it with nervous fingers; it bore the crest of a certain exclusive milliner.

"The girl said she was to wait for an answer."

Mrs. Austen unfolded the sheet; it was a bill for two hats she had bought, one day, when she was bored — hats she had n't needed. She put a finger to her lips and frowned, studying the words scribbled across a bottom corner.

"We think you may have overlooked this trifling account, and will be glad to have you settle it. Hoping for your continued, etc."

The "trifling account" was for sixty-five dollars! She sat down at her desk and debated, worriedly, for a moment. Then she set her lips in a hard line and wrote a check for twenty-five dollars — "Lorette" could wait for the rest; the hats had n't been worth even that much — it was ridiculous the prices they charged! Nothing but a band of georgette crêpe on one, and a silly feather on the other! She made up her mind to trim her own hats, in future; she

always had to do something to the ones she bought, anyway!

She slipped the check into an envelope, and gave it to the maid; then she took out her bank-book. Of the $10,000 she had deposited, in late November, there remained to her credit exactly $2060! In four months, she had spent nearly $8000! At first, she had paid no attention to her expenditures; but in February, she had waked up to the fact that, unless she retrenched — vigorously — she would find herself, shortly, in a serious predicament. Two thousand and sixty dollars — she stared at the figures; it would not even cover the rent of her apartment for the eight months the lease had yet to run! Why *had* she been so extravagant. . . .

She took from a cubby-hole, a sheet of paper, on which were two parallel columns of figures; one was a list of her approximate monthly expenses, up to March; the other was what she had hoped to reduce them to. She ran her pencil down them, for the hundredth time:

Apart.	$300.00	$300.00
Maid	40.00	30.00
Groc., meat, etc.	300.00	150.00
Gas, elec.	10.00	10.00
Tele.	10.00	5.00
A. & I. (Allow.)	150.00	75.00

Gov.	50.00	——
Th. Tick.	150.00	50.00
Clothes	400.00	——
Laundry	30.00	25.00
Miscel. — Taxis, cards, lunches, charity, etc..	325.00	100.00
	$1765.00	$745.00

Her mouth twisted cynically as she surveyed the second column. She pushed the sheet from her, in disgust. All her efforts had met with failure. The children had been indignant over the proposed cut in their allowance; they accused her of squandering all the money on cards — it was obvious they considered her selfish and close. When she explained the situation, they received her appeals coldly; they appeared not to realize it would be to their own interest to help her out! Isabelle said she did n't intend to sit at home and miss all the fun. There had been a threat in her manner; Mrs. Austen understood it, now.

In the kitchen, it had been the same; the girl had shrugged, indifferently, when she had remonstrated with her for carelessness and wastefulness — she had found a half chicken in the garbage can, once; and, at other times, nearly a pound of the finest steak, quantities of bacon, chops, and all the left-over canned vegetables, for which she had paid importation prices. It made

her sick to see her money thrown away in such a heartless fashion!

When she dismissed Anne's governess, giving as a reason that the child disliked her — which was only partially true — she had also discharged the maid, who had always slept home because of the shortage of room in the Austen apartment, and engaged one who would sleep there, so that Anne might not be alone, nights. But, unfortunately, the new maid interpreted this literally, sleeping at the Austens', it is true, but spending almost every evening out! As a result, Anne had been sent down to stay with Paulette White, while their mothers played cards until all hours of the night.

Paulette and her mother had always lived abroad, until the war, much to their disgust, drove them home. A life spent in the continental capitals had made the child pitifully sophisticated. Mrs. Austen had suspected, for some time, that she was not an ideal companion for Anne, but she had not imagined that any child of eleven could possess the particular knowledge Paulette had imparted to her, in connection with Mrs. Eversham. From the way she had spoken, at breakfast, it was clear she had not understood the things Paulette had told her, but she soon would; she must not play with her any more. Yet it would not be so easy to issue the command.

She had either to leave her with the White child, whose mother was the leader of the little bridge-mad crowd, and to whom she owed money; or alone in the apartment; or give up bridge, and stay with her, herself. But that was out of the question, since she was now desperately depending on the nightly games to help her out of her difficulties. So far, however, she had lost more than she had won.

A sheaf of March bills lay on the desk before her. A nervous nausea seized her, as she went over them; when they were paid, her balance would be practically wiped out! Most of them were irritatingly innocent of items — she could n't tell what she was paying for — she might be paying for things she had never had! It was n't in human nature not to cheat, she had come to see, if there was no chance of being found out. She had told the maid, repeatedly, to save the slips that came with the orders, but it had been a waste of breath. Two hundred and seven dollars and eighty-four cents for a month's food! It was impossible!

She pored over the bills, for a long time, then began wearily to figure; if she paid only a third of each, and practised the closest economy, she would be able — *maybe* — to keep going, for another month or two. But she knew that she would not be able to give up luxuries without

embarrassment; her new friends would notice it, and she dreaded their looks and private comments; then, too, they would realize that it mattered to her whether she won or lost — and this was an intolerable thought! She wished all the talk of America going into the war would come to something! Then she would have an excuse for retrenching.

But, after all, what did it matter what people thought? They did n't pay her bills. It was unfair, it was cruel, that one should have to go into debt and live beyond one's means and be worried to death, for people who really meant nothing to one, except a good time. Mrs. Austen's lip curled. "Good time!" She realized, suddenly, that she had never been so wretched in her life. A wave of longing swept over her to be back home — a strange, new desire, to take hold of a place and run it herself, to do her own marketing, to make her own clothes, *to watch every cent!* If she had only had some idea of managing, she would n't be in this hole, now. If only she could keep her husband from knowing! But, in two months, at the outside, she would have to admit her failure. She stiffened at the thought. Little by little his silence had brought home to her his indifference; yet it seemed incredible he could care so little after all those years . . . he had found her attractive, in

many ways, she knew. Her eyes fell on the columns of figures she had just made. In a flash, she saw her husband, bent over his study desk, making similar columns. With a curious tightening around the heart, she understood, all of a sudden, why he had been unable to write! Her own worries, now, made it difficult for her even to think what to order for dinner. And Isabelle and Allyn had refused to make one sacrifice to help her. But had they ever been taught to consider any one? They regarded her simply as an exchequer — as they had their father. . . . Something Peggy had said came back to her: "Here in America, parents seem to have too much desire to be popular with their children; I think it would be better if they were to discipline them, a little, in order to make of them fine future men and women." She began to believe that Peggy was right.

Anne wandered into the room, climbed up on to the window-seat, and opened a book in her lap; but instead of reading, she stared at the chintz curtain, with a very dismal expression. At length she sighed.

"Don't you miss Daddy, Mamma — sometimes?"

Mrs. Austen raised her shoulders and gave a hard little laugh, to cover the surge of feeling the child's words had surprisingly awakened.

"No!" she scoffed. "When you've known your precious Daddy as long as I have, you'll get over paying any attention to his eccentric little absences."

"What's 'eccentric'?"

"Selfish!" her mother snapped out, before she had time to think.

"But Daddy went away to write a book and earn money — lots of money — so he could buy us all the things we want; that isn't selfish!" Anne argued.

Her mother laughed peculiarly.

"Your Daddy's getting the habit of staying away. If he missed us, he'd come back — don't you think so?"

"He is coming back, when his book's finished. If it's a success."

Mrs. Austen answered with a short, dry laugh. The child winced; her lip quivered.

"I'd be glad if we were all back in Flushing — or away from here, somewhere! All I hear, now, is: 'What'll we do with Anne?' It's no fun to be poked down with Paulette, or taken for a walk in that old Park, or left home with Maggie, all the time! I wish I could live with Daddy!"

Her mother looked at her, thinking hard; what she had said was true — at no time had she given much thought to the happiness of her youngest child. She noticed that Anne was looking thin

— her conscience smote her. *Some*thing must be done; yet what, in the circumstances?

One morning, two weeks later, she came in from marketing — in sheer desperation, she had tried doing her buying, herself, and had been dumbfounded at the saving it effected, and at the difference in quality — to find a note from Anne, tucked conspicuously over the transmitter of the telephone. It said:

"I have gone to see my father, so don't call up the police."

Mrs. Austen was frantic. She thought, wildly, of all the accidents that could befall the child on her trip, and there was nothing she could do, except telegraph, later, to know if she were in Montvale. For an hour, she paced the floor. She had just sent the wire, when the telephone rang; she could scarcely unhook the receiver, in her certainty that something had happened. Then the blood rushed to her head; her heart pounded; the voice at the other end of the wire was her husband's!

"I hope Anne has n't frightened you," he was saying, with unaffected concern; "I told her she should n't have come —" He hesitated in apparent embarrassment. "I — I hope you don't mind my having called up — I wanted you to know she was all right."

"That was very kind of you — but I was n't in the least worried," Mrs. Austen managed to articulate, in a cold voice.

Then she sank into a chair, trembling from head to foot, and buried her face in her icy hands.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE week beginning Monday, April 2, 1917, was for Peggy-Elise, one of such eventfulness, of such intense, crowding emotions as rarely comes into a life.

It began when she opened her paper, Monday morning, and saw the President's request that a state of war be declared to exist between the United States and Germany. Her breakfast went untouched, as she sat, luminous-eyed, and visioned America reaching out an invincible arm — back and forth, back and forth — across the Atlantic — dropping men and munitions and food out of a giant hand. Tears filled her eyes, as she imagined the elation, the wild hope, in the tired hearts of her countrymen at the thought of this new, powerful ally won to their cause — to her, it was an accomplished fact. Then began the filibuster that drew the scornful eyes of the whole world to the little group of men in Washington, and held them there for four interminable, blighting days. During those four days Peggy grew thin and nervous from suspense — it would have been enough, without anything

else; but, as it happened, this effort by a few chosen representatives to thwart the will of a great nation was forced into the background by events of vital importance to Peggy's personal happiness.

On Tuesday, over luncheon with Mary Hallam, and in the midst of an excited tirade against La Follette, she received notice that she was to sing *Mimi,* that night. Sofia Alvarez had a sore throat; there were many to take her place, but Signor Ferro-Ganacci had his own very excellent reasons for giving Peggy the chance. Principally, he wished to see how she would sustain a leading rôle, and how she would "take." Several subscribers, resenting the change in the cast, went home — and regretted it. The girl's success was instant and thrilling; the general opinion was that the Metropolitan had never seen a more exquisite, more subtly poignant, performance of Murger's heroine.

Peggy read the notices the next morning in growing bewilderment; could it really be she they were enthusing about?

In the afternoon Winthrop called for her.

"Ferro-Ganacci wants to see you," he said, his eyes shining.

"Are you not feeling well?" Peggy inquired solicitously, thinking that he was not looking quite himself.

"Oh — it's nothing, I guess — I've been just a bit upset, the last day or two — nothing serious."

The "seeing" resulted in a contract that left Peggy a little faint. She stupefied them all by refusing, at first, to sign it — she wanted to return to France and take the place of some one who might be acutely in need of rest — but they pointed out to her that, with her new income, she might, if she chose, send several strong, eager young women over in her place, and do much to help, besides. She yielded sadly. The truth was that she had felt it her duty to go — to carry on, for her father; but she saw that the greater sacrifice was to remain where she was, and do, indirectly, the work she longed to do with her own understanding French hands. She would have to be content with spending just her vacation abroad.

"I want to walk some of my excitement off," she said, as she and Winthrop came out of the theater.

"Is it impertinent to ask why you were so anxious to return to France?" her companion asked, as they swung into the avenue at Thirty-fourth Street.

"But I have told you!" she replied, in surprise.

"Is that — the only reason?" He brightened.

"I thought you might be going back to — to marry some poor wreck of a Frenchman." He spoke with an attempt at lightness.

"If I were, it would be but common gratitude, since he would have gotten himself wrecked defending my country." She smiled tenderly.

For blocks, neither spoke.

"Will you marry me, instead, Peggy?" Winthrop asked suddenly. "You are the only woman I have ever loved."

They stopped, of one accord, in a corner by a photographer's show-case. Peggy's big eyes were dark with distress. Winthrop put out his hand, quickly, in a restraining gesture:

"I 'm sorry to have hurt you — we won't speak of it, again."

Peggy blinked back the rushing tears. He pressed her arm, kindly — she felt his hand tremble.

"Don't let it disturb you, dear," he said. "If there had been any other way to find out, I 'd have taken it."

"There is no one like you!" the girl said fervently, "and I do care for you — only —"

When he left her at her door, she noticed, again, how badly he looked.

That night she could not sleep for thinking of Winthrop and the answer she had been obliged to give him. She felt horribly depressed. In

the morning there was a note from her uncle, asking her to come out to Montvale; he appeared so eager to see her that she put aside her feelings and went.

In the course of the afternoon the telephone rang in Mary Hallam's studio. Upstairs, Rensky, forced to stop work and hunt for a missing tube of alizarin crimson, suddenly realized that it had been ringing, at brief intervals, for an hour. Mary was out, of course; the matter must be urgent. He hurried down, and climbed in a window. A moment later, with a grave face, he went in search of Peggy; she, too, was out. He ran his long fingers through his pompadour, in perplexity, then scribbled a message. It was the first thing Mary saw, when she came in, two hours later; she stood staring at it, in consternation — there was no way to get hold of Peggy — she was undoubtedly on her way home from Montvale, now; there was nothing to do but wait. The telephone bell cut shrilly into her deliberations. She did not hear the front door open, nor her own, as she hurried to the stand. When she at last hung up the receiver, aghast at what she had heard, and turned round, Peggy — with strained white face and clenched hands,— was staring at her.

"Who is it — that is dead?" she demanded, with a violent effort.

Mary, rendered speechless for the moment by Peggy's unguessed presence in the room, could not answer.

"Who is it — who is it!" the girl begged, in a dry voice.

"Giles Winthrop," Mary faltered. "They operated last night — you heard the conversation." She paused. "They tried to get you, here, this morning, but — they had my number wrong —"

Peggy stared at her, with anguished eyes, until Mary could bear it no longer. She went and put her arms around her; but the girl gently pushed her away, and went to her room.

When Mary went up, later, to take her a bite of supper, she lifted a grief-changed, dry-eyed face to her.

"It has happened to me twice,"— her voice quivered with pain —"I was too late to see my father — too."

Mary regarded her with deep sympathy, for a moment. Then she said:

"Eat something, dear, if you can."

"It is so good of you— but food —" She shook her head.

The morning papers gave a column to Giles Winthrop's death; among other matters, it mentioned his genius for ferreting out fine singers, of whom the latest was Mademoiselle Lascelles,

whose recent performance of *Mimi,* etc. It mentioned, also, that except for bequests to two elderly maiden aunts, his large fortune was to be used for the care of a number of orphans in each of the war-stricken countries. Tears sprang, relievingly, to Peggy's eyes as she read it.

Early in the afternoon, Venable dropped in.

"Put on your hat, dear, and come out with me for a walk," he suggested tenderly. "I know how badly you must feel, but it 's a beautiful day and you ought to be out in it — it will do you good."

"You will not mind if I do not talk? I am not a gay companion, to-day," she said, her eyes filling.

He smiled, with understanding.

They walked down Washington Place to the Square, round the south side and up University Place, in silence. It seemed to Peggy that she drew strength just from Venable's quiet presence there beside her; in his arms, she had never felt so close to him. Suddenly, it came to her — a little bewilderingly — as a familiar idea will, when it ceases to be an idea and becomes a live fact — that she could bear *any* loss except that of the humorous-mouthed, handsome man at her side. With a loving glance, she swept him from head to foot; something in his stride, in the set

of his head, the tilt of his chin, caught her attention; she wondered if his work had been going specially well, or if he had had some good news that he had refrained from mentioning, out of consideration for her. They were crossing the Mews, at the moment. Feodor Sierzycki, coming out of his studio, hailed Venable.

"They tell me you are going to the front — is that right?" he inquired, his black eyes burning with their perpetual sombre glow.

There was a roaring in Peggy's ears; the street began to whirl; she waited, breathless, for Venable's reply.

"Yes." There was a note of suppressed exultation in his voice. "If war 's declared, I 'm going into the army — if it is n't, I shall join the American Ambulance."

Peggy did not hear Sierzyski's reply; she was aware, after what seemed ages, that he was gone, and that she and Venable were standing alone on the pavement.

"You are going, Gilbert — you —" She could not finish; only one thought was in her mind — one terrible thought: she had lost her father and her friend; now, she was to lose the man she loved.

Venable leaned down to catch what she said. "What, dear?"

She gazed at him in mute anguish.

He looked at her tragic face, then took her by the arm, and turned back toward his studio. Inside, he put her in a chair, and brought her a glass of sherry. When she seemed more herself, he sat down opposite her and took her hands in his.

"You wanted me to go, Peggy — did n't you?"

"Yes." She spoke in the brave, tired voice of one physically spent with sorrow, but strong in spirit. "I am glad,"— she made no attempt to conceal her suffering. "When did you decide?"

"The first time you posed for me, for the new Victory."

"So long ago! Why did you not tell me before?"

"Because I wanted to spare you, as long as I could."

"But you knew it would make me — happy," she faltered. "I urged you —"

"I knew it would half kill you!"

She caught her breath; her eyes fluttered shut and then quickly open.

"It was — the thing — I wanted," she managed to say.

"It was the one thing in the world you did n't want!" he asserted firmly, holding the hands she tried to release. "You wanted me to want to go, because you can't or you won't let yourself love

me, it seems, until I measure up to a certain standard. You 're such a stubborn little idealist that you don't get any pleasure out of life!"

"It is my nature," she said wearily. "What can I do?"

"Ah, Peggy, Peggy!"— he shook his head — "You have so much wisdom for others and so little for yourself. . . . When I said it was my nature to be selfish, you told me that was only one of my natures; what about you? Are you always going to crush the warm, human side of you?"

"When are you going?" she asked, heedless of his question.

"As soon as it can be arranged."

From then until the night before he left for camp, Peggy waited for him to broach the subject uppermost in her thoughts — and formerly in his; they met often, but though he spoke sometimes of the coming separation, he did not mention marriage. Day and night, she variously analyzed his silence. She grew thin and wan from loss of sleep; food choked her. All her old arguments against marrying him were forgotten in the new fear that he no longer wanted her to. Her love for him, her longing to slip her arms around his brown throat and be held in his sudden tight clasp, grew with the moments.

Throughout their last dinner, together, she kept her eyes lowered, lest he see the hungering adoration in them; when she could, she stole unobserved glances at him. Once, the terrible fear surged over her that she might never see him again.

The strain of the past weeks had stretched her nerves taut; the meal was an endless ordeal. Around them there was nothing but war-talk; friends stopped at their table to say good-by to Venable. When they were half-way through their salad, her fork clattered against her plate.

"Let us — go over to the studio," she begged. "I can't stay here — any longer!"

As they entered the dark workroom, Venable drew her to him; for a long time, he held her close, feeling the throbbing of her heart against his breast; once, his arms tightened convulsively about her, but relaxed instantly; then he stooped and kissed her on the forehead, with great tenderness. A breath, that was like a sob, shook her at the touch of his lips. He grew tense, then with trembling arms put her away from him and struck a match. She sank back limply against the wall.

When he had lighted the lamp, he said, without looking at her:

"Come and see what I 've done with the Vic-

tory — I 've been working on it this afternoon."

Peggy moved unsteadily across the room; it had been stripped of all Venable's belongings, except the Victory — Feodor Sierzycki was to make a plaster cast of it, later — and she foretasted the ghastly loneliness that comes to one at sight of a dear friend's deserted quarters. She had no tears to ease her agony,— within, she was an arid, stony, scorched wilderness, in which life withered.

"It is magnificent," she said, in a spiritless voice, gazing at the figure with apathetic eyes.

Venable slipped a supporting arm around her slim shoulders; she leaned against his side, resting her head on his arm. He looked down, and saw that her eyes were closed, and her lovely lips parted in a kind of rapture.

"Dear!" he breathed, "dearest!" and bent his face close to hers. There was not a flicker of resistance. He drew away from her, bruskly. One of her hands fluttered appealingly toward him.

"Peggy!"— his voice was harsh with feeling —"don't make it any harder for me than it is — you don't understand! It is n't easy to go through these last hours, so that neither of us will have anything to — regret, in the coming months — with whatever they may bring. If I

could ask you to marry me, it would be different; but under the circumstances, I can't — I *would* n't —"

"Why not?" she asked, her cheeks suddenly flushed. "You may never come back —"

"Peggy — if I could be sure of *that,* I'm afraid I would n't give you time to change your mind! What prevents me is the dread that I *may* come back — come back — blind or horribly crippled — so that the only thing I could do would be to give you your freedom — or live with you, and go mad under the intolerable feeling that you stuck to me out of pity! I could n't endure it!" His vanity, his old consideration for himself, still lay uppermost.

Peggy turned soft, wistful eyes upon him.

"But love knows nothing of pity, dear! It knows only — love! If I were to be hurt — maimed — would you want to leave me?"

He hesitated.

"No — certainly not — but you might want to *free* me."

"Yes — you are right — I would free you at once," she said, in a dead voice.

"I suppose that sounded awfully selfish —"

Peggy was silent.

"Will you take me home?" she requested, at last.

He stared at her, incredulous.

"You mean we are to part like this?"

"Yes."

"You would let me go away from you — like this — perhaps forever — just because I said a little thing like that?"

"It was not a little thing."

"But, my God! — you don't suppose, really, that I'd desert you, if you were injured — do you? I said what I did, offhand — I wasn't thinking. It's too silly!"

"That is just it; the truth comes out when one is not thinking."

He uttered a little exclamation of annoyance.

"I don't seem to be able to please you at all, Peggy-Elise — I'm sorry I can't go away feeling that you like me a little. Are you ready?"

"It is because I — because I love you too much —" she explained brokenly. "Some day — perhaps — you will understand —"

"You are in love with an impossibly ideal person — I understand *that!*"

She made no answer, and he saw that she was ghastly white and looked very ill. She swayed; he sprang forward to steady her, just in time to catch her limp body in his arms; she had fainted.

She was so long coming to, that he finally telephoned, in alarm, for a doctor. The doctor ordered her put to bed.

"Looks to me like a nervous breakdown," he

said, replacing his thermometer in its case. "Has she been under a strain?"

"Yes." Venable was inwardly cursing himself for his selfishness in having forgotten it for a moment. "Good Lord! I ought to have realized!" he thought.

Mary Hallam took charge of Peggy. In pursuance of the doctor's order that she was to be kept absolutely quiet, she grudgingly permitted Venable five minutes in which to say good-by. He said it to a confused, limp Peggy, who appeared not to sense what it meant. There was not a quiver of response in her cold lips that he pressed in such passionate contrition, such hungry yearning, for an answering pressure that he might construe as forgiveness. He carried one of her pulseless hands to his lips, and released it in despair. He thought she smiled, once, but it could have been a sudden flare of candle-flame lighting her face. And with this dubious comfort, he was compelled to leave her.

CHAPTER XIX

PEGGY lay in a kind of torpor for several days, refusing food and rarely speaking, except to say that her head ached, that all of her ached. By the end of a week, she got up, a little shaky, but otherwise fairly well. The first thing she did was to read the letters Venable had written her from camp; she had been too listless to open them before. He was not a letter-writer — certainly not a love-letter writer; still, he managed to convey to Peggy something of his misery. In her suffering, they brought her a kind of lethal comfort, the effect of which was certain to wear off, however, with the return of vitality to her nerves and brain.

As soon as she was able, she made arrangements for her passage to France; she planned to remain there until her work called her back.

The Metropolitan's New York season had closed; the company was going to Boston for a week, and Peggy went with it, against the doctor's orders — he had prescribed absolute rest. She called Anne up, before she left, to tell her she was going; also, that she had secured accom-

modations on a Fabre Line boat, sailing "sometime in June." Anne uttered a wail over the wire. Then she cried excitedly:

"Guess what, Peggy! Daddy 's come back, and we 're moving to the country — to-morrow! Out to Montvale. We 're all packed up — wait a minute!" she said, turning to tell some one in the room when her cousin was to sail for France —"Mother wants to speak to you."

Peggy was amazed by her aunt's affability, her solicitude. She wanted her, it transpired, to come out and stay with them, until she sailed; the change of air, rest, etc., etc. Also, they would love to have her with them. Peggy accepted, full of speculation. When she had last seen her uncle, three weeks previously, he had had two months' work to do on his book, and did not intend to return to his family until it was accepted. She wondered what could have happened.

What had happened, was this. In the first place, Anne's visit to him had shattered any belief that the child was happy without him. She had whirled in on him, driving away at his book, her blue eyes black with joy, her thinned cheeks vivid, clear crimson, her voice almost a sob in the rapture of seeing him. She had climbed up on his lap and hugged him and kissed him for ten minutes, and then had curled

up in his arms, with a sigh of utter satisfaction.

He had been so shaken by the child's emotion that he could only strain her to him, in silence. After her first excitement had worn off, her tongue had begun to rattle. In telling her father the things that had happened to her, she unconsciously disclosed much of the state of her mother's affairs. Here and there, he caught glimpses of his wife's extravagance. Then followed the amazing fact that she was doing her own marketing, told quite innocently as an important detail in Anne's account of how she had slipped out, that morning, and run away to him. In the same wholly unintentional fashion, she revealed Isabelle's intimacy with Mrs. Eversham. He pricked up his ears at the name — he thought he had heard it, sometime, in an unpleasant connection.

Thus it went, until he had the whole disquieting picture.

He took Anne back to the city, in the evening, and left her at the door. He was tempted to go up, and see his wife and family, but was afraid that what he might learn would destroy his peace of mind and wrench him away from his book. He asked for only a month more of freedom, he told himself in justification; then he would go back and resume the burden for the rest of his life.

But back in Montvale, anxiety dogged him. Either through ignorance or impotence, their mother was permitting Isabelle and Allyn to travel at their own gait; he felt that they were in very serious danger. He pictured them, in their hot, unprotected youth, victimized and in disgrace. Walking the floor, hour after hour, he realized that whatever right he had had to leave his wife to her whims, he had had none to abandon his children — it amounted to that; no fame on earth could obliterate the shame of their ruined lives. In the last analysis, he alone would be responsible — had he not chosen their mother? And, since he had not chosen wisely, he should have done his utmost to protect the children from the consequences. That was what Peggy had meant, the time she had said he could never be free — The bonds of parenthood were forged of imperishable stuff — they began at the cradle and ended at the grave.

In the ensuing days he tried to persuade himself there was no immediate danger; that a month, more or less, would not matter. It was no use. By the end of the week he had determined to sacrifice his book, if need be, to the welfare of his children. He locked up the little Montvale studio, with a heavy heart; the precious hermit days were over.

He arrived at the hotel about half-past nine

in the evening, and sent up word that he wished to see Mrs. Austen. She was not at home; he stood debating what he should do.

"Did you say you were *Mr.* Austen?" the clerk inquired.

"Yes."

"Well, your little girl wants you to come up — she 's a great little girl," he added, smiling.

Anne was alone — the maid was out, as usual; Mrs. Austen was upstairs in the Glovers' apartment, playing cards. Anne wanted to call her, but her father said he would wait till she came. How did it happen Anne was alone? Anne opened her eyes, wide. She said she was often alone — she did n't mind — she read. She nodded toward the open book on the table.

"Where are Allyn and Isabelle?" he asked, at length.

She shrugged her ignorance of their whereabouts.

At eleven o'clock, Anne, sleepy but protesting, went to bed. Her father helped to undress her, tucked her in, and read her to sleep, after assuring her that she would see him, next day. Her happy kiss thrilled him.

Twelve — one o'clock — came, but no family.

At twenty minutes past one, gay good-nights sounded outside the door, and Mrs. Austen hurried in. Her husband stood by the mantel-

piece, facing the door. When she caught sight of him, she stopped short, and stared; the color rushed out of her face and in again; then, with a heroic attempt at her old flippancy, she said:

"Humph! — you 're rather a stranger! When did *you* arrive?"

"Considerably earlier than you," he replied, nettled by her tone. "Is this the time you usually get in?"

She raised her eyebrows.

"Is that your affair?"

"Yes — I think it 's my affair," he retorted with ill-advised heat, "when you go out, night after night, and leave my child alone till all hours!"

She laughed mockingly, with a bitter twist of her handsome mouth.

"I love that! You go away for months, on your own sweet little business, and leave us to our fate — and then reproach me with neglect! Why did n't you take your precious Anne with you?" she taunted.

"You know perfectly well that I could n't have done my work with her there!"

"'Work'! You make me laugh!"

"You 're welcome to construe my absence as you please."

"I know you too well, my dear," she said, with

intense bitterness, "to believe that you've spent all these months working chastely on a book!"

"Nevertheless, it's what I've been doing." He turned away, hopelessly. Out in the solitude of Montvale, he had planned to take more than his share of blame for the pass to which, he had reason to suspect, they had come; but now, in his wife's antagonistic presence, he shrank from humiliating himself; she would only mock him — her scornful manner had already insidiously poisoned his new courage. He drew out his watch.

"It's pretty late for Allyn and Isabelle to be out, is n't it?"

A harassed expression banished something of the air of bravado from Mrs. Austen's face.

"Where are they?"

"I don't know. Isabelle's with Mrs. Eversham — I suppose; Allyn's probably at the theater — they'll be in soon. They're not usually as late as this."

The bell rang. She opened the door; to her amazement, Mrs. Eversham brushed excitedly past her.

"I've just had a telephone message from Jack Suffern," she panted. "He and Isabelle —" She stopped, at sight of a stranger.

"This is my husband, Mrs. Eversham," Mrs. Austen explained, coldly. "What 's the matter with Isabelle?"

She frowned.

"Can't I see you alone, for a moment?"

"Anything that concerns our daughter is as much my affair as my wife's," Mr. Austen said sharply.

Mrs. Eversham looked from one to the other, irresolute. Finally she drew an impatient breath, and flung out her jeweled hands in a gesture of acquiescence.

"I won't waste time on details," she said in a hard, light voice. "Isabelle and Jack went motoring, it seems — after supper. Jack just telephoned me that they 'd had a breakdown, and could n't get back, to-night. He said he had taken Isabelle to a farmhouse —" She paused. "That 's a lie — of course." A sneer dragged down the corners of her cynical mouth. "He has a place, out in Westchester County — and that 's probably where they are."

"Good God!" Mr. Austen gasped, his face ashen. "Where is this place?" He reached for his hat.

The woman shook her head, rapidly.

"It takes nearly an hour to get there, and then,"— she hesitated —"it might be —"

He nodded.

"What 's the 'phone number?"

"Westchester — 73."

He was already at the telephone.

"Westchester — 73! Westchester — 73!" he thundered, in reply to the girl's drawling, "What number did you want?"

For ten minutes, the throbbing silence in the room was broken only by echoes from the infrequent, early-morning traffic in the street below, and by the empty ticking of a silly little French clock on the mantel. All ears strained at the crackle of a voice in the receiver.

"They don't answer?" Mr. Austen shouted, aghast; "they 've got to answer! Try again!"

Another five minutes lagged past. Then he beckoned imperatively to Mrs. Eversham, and thrust the receiver into her hand. She flashed him a furtive glance of admiration.

"Hello!" she called: "Is that you, Jack? Yes — Polly."

Mr. Austen took the receiver from her.

"Mr. Suffern," he said in steely tones, "this is Miss Austen's father, speaking . . . yes, her *father*. I want my daughter here as fast as you can bring her. If she is n't back, within an hour, I 'll notify the police."

The listening women caught a word, now and

then, of an indignant protest coming over the wire —" car "—" breakdown "—" impossible." Mr. Austen cut it short.

" That 's not my concern! You took her there — now you bring her back! " He snapped the receiver onto the hook. " Where did Isabelle meet this man? " he asked, rising.

" Through Mrs. Eversham." Mrs. Austen colored as she made the admission. " I tried to —".

" He 's scarcely the sort of man to introduce to a young girl," he cut in, looking sternly at Mrs. Eversham.

A contemptuous smile curled her lip.

" It would have been rather hard to avoid it. Isabelle was in my apartment, day and night — the poor child seemed to have nowhere else to go." She looked defiantly at Mrs. Austen. " I kept her under my eye, as much as I could, but you really could n't expect me to chaperone her every minute. Besides,"— her eyelids drooped insolently —" I have n't that protective parental feeling."

Mr. Austen flushed. After a moment's thought, he said:

" You are right, of course — and my wife and I both want to thank you for your help, to-night." He glanced at the clock. " It 's late — so we won't keep you any longer."

She fixed him with a pair of amused eyes; then turned on her heel and went to the door. He opened it and bowed as she passed, her head high, her skirts drawn aside.

For a half hour, Mr. Austen paced the floor; his wife stood by the window — alternately, she looked at the clock or peered into the street below. Twice, cars stopped at the curb; she watched, tense, while people stepped out, but Isabelle was not among them.

As the clock ticked off its leisurely, unconcerned seconds, the paralyzing fear crept over her that what had befallen other girls — girls she had read about in the papers — might already have befallen Isabelle. She had always thought of them, somehow, as naturally inclined to be bad — quite as much sinning as sinned against.

But Isabelle was not bad — she had simply been allowed too much freedom. Mrs. Austen stared out of the window; in a sudden agony of realization she saw that selfish absorption in her own pleasures had brought this terrible thing on her daughter. She tried, feebly, to justify some of her neglect on the plea that she had played cards to help herself out of her desperate financial predicament; but, then, it had been her own criminal extravagance that had gotten her into it. If Isabelle — A nervous

chill convulsed her. Her frantic voice shattered the stillness.

"She ought to be here, by now!"

"I would n't worry — I think she 's safe," her husband reassured her. "I interfered in time — she 'll be here at any minute." But he spoke with a conviction he was far from feeling.

"It 's fully an hour since you 'phoned! You ought to have found out where she was, and gone after her!"

"What good would that have done? If he did n't intend to bring her back he certainly would n't have dared to risk staying there."

"I forbade Isabelle to go with Mrs. Eversham, when I found out her reputation!" She spoke in a distracted voice; her white face twitched.

"Well — when you live in an apartment house, it 's almost impossible to keep children from getting in with the wrong people."

She had expected him to reproach her, had been ready for it; instead, he had been reasonable, lenient. Her old ungovernable, hampering pride suddenly gave way.

"Oh, Bob,"— there was a hysterical catch in her voice —"I wish we were out of it all — I 'm so sick of it! — I 'm so sick of it!"

He went over and put his arm around her shoulders; she leaned against him, her handkerchief to her eyes. Presently, he said:

"You have this place on a lease, I suppose?"

She nodded.

"It would have about — seven months to run?"

"Yes."

Neither of them had been aware that an automobile had stopped below, delivered a passenger, and darted away, so that they started violently, their hearts pounding, when the door-bell rang.

Mr. Austen sprang to the door; his wife followed, sick with suspense. If it should *not* be Isabelle —! Then she sank, shaking, into a chair, as she heard her daughter's voice.

The girl came in, sobbing wildly. Her father took her in his arms and pressed her head to his breast; she clung to him in a frenzy of relief.

"Oh, Papa!" she cried; "— if you hadn't telephoned —!"

His arms closed tightly about her, his face stern, terrible.

"Are you —?" Her mother put the vital question, in a tense voice.

Isabelle nodded.

"But if Papa —" She broke into a fresh storm of weeping.

"I think perhaps you 'd better go to bed, now, dear," Mr. Austen said, with infinite tenderness.

She lifted her pretty, tear-blotched face to his

to be kissed. He thrilled as he touched her trembling young lips.

"Try not to think any more about it to-night — you 're all right, now."

Three hours later, the elevator-boy helped Allyn into the darkened apartment. . . .

CHAPTER XX

WHEN Mr. Austen had learned that his wife had gone through all her money, that she had only a trifle over a thousand dollars left, he had sat for a long time, thinking. He had been shocked, disgusted, at first; but, by degrees, he saw that perhaps this experience was what she had needed.

"The first thing to do," he had said, "is to get the children away from here."

Mrs. Austen had acquiesced, fervently.

"We can sublet this place — there won't be any trouble about that. I figure that we have between us — about — $1700 — I guess I have nearer eight than seven hundred left out of my fifteen"— he was referring to the money he had received, the previous November, for his scenario, "Labor." "There 's no absolute certainty of having any more, for quite a while — I 'm going to finish this book — it 's sure to sell — and I won't have time to do any pot-boiling; so we 'll have to make what money we have go a good way."

His wife had shown eagerness to agree with him.

"It would be a little embarrassing, I think, to go back to Flushing and have to live on a reduced scale. Besides, the Donnellys were a bad influence for the children." His lips had set in a hard line at mention of them.

"I don't want to ever *see* Flushing again!'

Mr. Austen had looked at her, and debated.

"There's a place up in Montvale," he said, at length, "about a quarter of a mile from my studio, a beautiful old place — nine rooms, lots of ground — it may lack a few conveniences, but I think it would do. It rents for forty-five dollars a month. I wonder how you'd like it?"

"I'd like any place," she exclaimed, "where the children would be safe and I could have peace! And you'd have your studio all to yourself, to work in, and —" she hesitated, the color rushing into her cheeks —"you could be home with us, too."

A long look had passed between them. He had taken her hand and stood gazing down at it:

"Then we'll go to Montvale."

It was Peggy's last night in America; on the morrow, she was to sail for France. In response to her aunt's invitation, she had spent her last two weeks with the Austen family, in their new home at Montvale. She had come to them a lit-

tle timidly, a little dubiously — it was impossible, in view of Mrs. Austen's treatment of her during the year, not to be a shade distrustful of her new cordiality; but when the latter had met her at the station, and kissed her with unaffected warmth, the girl's uneasiness had vanished. She had marveled at the change: her aunt looked years younger; the old, querulous, cynical expression had almost been replaced by one of happiness.

They were in the kitchen, now, getting the dinner things out of the way.

"Don't bother to dry those dishes, Isabelle; they were rinsed in boiling water — they 'll drain dry. I 'm trying all sorts of lazy ways," Mrs. Austen laughed, turning to Peggy, "now that I 'm playing chief cook and bottle-washer, myself."

Her niece smiled appreciatively.

"It keeps you in the kitchen a great deal, when you have not a servant."

Her aunt raised her shoulders in the old characteristic gesture, but she smiled as she did it.

"We all have to do our 'bit,' now. Everybody 's beginning to give up servants — you 've no idea the difference it makes in the bills! Mrs. Olcott — next door — lost her cook just before you came; she went to work in a munition factory. I guess we 're through here, now,"— she

glanced around. "Oh — there 's a saucepan! It can wait till morning." She whisked off her apron. "Come on out on the porch."

Allyn and Mr. Austen, with Anne on his lap, were discussing the war, when the rest of the family joined them. Peggy listened, with a full heart. She was thinking how different this earnest talk was from the careless talk she had heard that day, almost a year ago, when she had come among them — a stranger. . . .

"I get sick every time I realize that Allyn has enlisted," Mrs. Austen said to Peggy, in a low voice, in which there was a ring of anguish. "Of course, I 'd have hated him *not* to want to go — too," she went on, her blue eyes alight with pride, "but the aviation branch of it is so terribly —" She could not finish; Peggy turned away from the ache in her eyes.

"Gee! Dad! I wish you were in it!" Allyn exclaimed.

His father's face took on an intense sadness; he stared, unseeing, at the far-away, darkening hills.

"Oh, I 'm so glad you *can't* go, Daddy!" Anne cried, almost strangling him with a hug. "You and I are doing our share, here!"

There was a shout of laughter.

"Well, you need n't laugh! My beans are four inches high! You did n't plant those beets

for me to-day, Allyn Austen!" she accused. Characteristically, she had commandeered the services of the entire family, for the care of her "war-garden."

"Do it to-morrow, sis," Allyn laughed, saluting.

"Isabelle! Don't knit any more," her mother commanded; "you 'll put your eyes out in this light!"

"I have to finish this to-night; they 're sending away the box to-morrow."

"Well, then, go inside and work where you can see."

Isabelle left them.

Presently, patches of light appeared below the shades of the living-room windows, and struck across the porch. Inside, Isabelle was humming softly. A silence fell upon them all. The faint, clear, golden afterglow from the sunset melted into the deep crystalline blue of the summer night sky; the stars shone out with sudden brilliancy all over the heavens. The strident grating of crickets rose from the grass, drowned by the occasional, long, minor bellow of a bull-frog. A mournful, almost human, call shivered through the night.

"There 's that screech-owl, again," Mr. Austen remarked.

His wife shuddered.

"I think they 're the most eerie things — they sound like lost souls."

After another prolonged silence, she said:

"Is n't this the sleepiest place you were ever in? I can't keep my eyes open after nightfall." She yawned. "Is n't that terrible?"

"You get up very early," Mr. Austen offered, in explanation.

"Just think! By this time to-morrow night, Peggy 'll be 'way out on the ocean!" Anne slipped down from her father's lap, and went over to her cousin. "Oh, Peggy — I *wish* you were n't going!" she said, settling herself at the girl's feet and resting her head against her knees. "But you 're coming back?"

"I hope so, *ma mie*." Peggy's low voice was tremulous with emotion.

Isabelle called out from the living-room.

"Peggy, come on in and sing something for us!"

"I 'm afraid I cannot, to-night, dear — I do not feel — in the humor to sing."

"Just one song — Peggy," she urged.

"Then it will have to be a duet." She went inside, Anne following. Isabelle was heard protesting, there was laughter; then they began to sing the "Barcarolle" from "The Tales of Hoffmann."

Mr. Austen settled down in his chair, leaned

back his head and closed his eyes; his wife stretched out comfortably and propped up her feet on a wicker tabouret; Allyn leaned forward, elbows on knees, chin in hand. He hummed the music and his mother joined in.

"Your voice sounds very pretty, to-night," Mr. Austen said, turning to her. "Why don't you ever sing?"

Her shoulders lifted, in the dark.

"I can't sing — Mary had the only voice in the family." She referred to Peggy's mother.

"You sing very well."

When they had finished the "Nuit d'Amour." they sang the duet from "Butterfly," and then some things from "The Persian Garden." Peggy sang softly, in order not to drown Isabelle's voice.

"Gee! We 'll miss these *soirées* when you 're gone, Peggy," Allyn said regretfully, as the girls came out on the porch.

"Don't you think my voice is better, since Peggy 's been helping me with it?" Isabelle inquired generally. She turned to her cousin: "I wish you were going to be here, right along."

Peggy smiled, marveling. The marked change in her cousin's attitude toward her baffled her; something Mrs. Austen had said, the day she arrived, explained it, partially:

"I 've lost my whole family — Isabelle and Allyn have gone over, body and soul, to their

father." She had spoken with her old flippancy, but no bitterness tinged it. "Isabelle and he are getting to be regular cronies!" She had laughed. "Has he told you that she 's learning to do his typing? Takes care of his correspondence — it 's killing!"

Peggy decided it was probable that the girl's new association with her father was responsible for the change.

"Oh-oo!" Mrs. Austen exclaimed, stifling a yawn and rising stiffly from her chair. "I 'll just *have* to go to bed! Come along, Anne."

Anne went without protest, after ardently kissing her father and Peggy good night. Presently, Isabelle followed.

"Well —" Mr. Austen said, at length, in a meditative tone, "— my book is almost finished."

"I am so sorry not to hear the end of it," Peggy remarked. "I will, of course, when it is published, but — I am so interested!"

"Did I show you the letter I had, to-day, from Mr. Hammond?" He drew some papers from a pocket, and bent over into the light to look through them. "Does n't seem to be here." He reached into another pocket, and another. "Humph!" he said. "That 's funny — I particularly meant to bring it up, to show you, but I must have left it at the studio — it 's the finest letter I 've ever had about my work, and it means

a lot — coming from a publisher like Hammond."

" I would love to see it," Peggy replied eagerly. " Could n't we walk over to the studio — it is not far —? "

" Would you — are n't you too tired? " His face was boyishly alight with pleasure. " I 'd really like very much to have you see it. It 'll be moonlight in a few minutes —? Will you join us, Allyn? "

" Nope — I 'm going to turn in — I 've got the sleep-bug, too." He paused in front of Peggy. " I may see you — over there — before long,"— he tried to keep the pride out of his voice.

" You expect to go soon? "

" Well — comparatively speaking — I have n't begun training, yet," he grinned, " but I ought to get over, this year."

As Peggy and her uncle left the macadamized road and turned into the little wood-path, that was a short-cut to the studio, he broke the silence that had held them since they had left the house.

" Does the family strike you as being happy? "

" Very! " Peggy said it heartily.

" Well," he remarked, after a pause, " that 's something,— anyway."

" What do you mean? "

" I mean that my sacrifice has n't been altogether in vain."

"Are you not happy, then, yourself, my uncle?"

"'Happy'? No! There's a certain satisfaction, of course, in having done my 'duty,' and it means a great deal to have the children closer to me — but —"

They moved on, for a little way, in silence. The path, mottled with moonlight, wound through a thin growth of white birches; the woods were very still; the only sound was the faint swish, now and then, of Peggy's skirts.

"Look out for that boggy place, somewhere here," Mr. Austen cautioned.

"It is a perfect night," Peggy said dreamily, as she stood on the studio steps, waiting for her uncle to unlock the door.

"Yes."

When he had lighted the lamp, he called to her to come in.

"Here it is," he said presently, going over to her, a letter in his hand.

She had dropped into the big chair by the fireplace. He stood watching her, as she read; with a tightening of the throat, he thought how utterly dear and desirable she looked, there, under the soft radiance from the student-lamp. . . .

When she handed the letter back to him, she said:

"That is a wonderful letter — but then, they must have liked your book very much, to have taken it before it was finished. I should think that would make you happy —"

He regarded her for a long moment, before speaking.

"Yes — but I wonder — if you can understand the kind of — unhappiness that comes from facing a future — in which you will have no one — with whom to share — happiness; no one who will be happy just because *you* are happy, and not because your success will give them things they want, things that mean happiness to *them* — clothes, luxuries — Your aunt is doing her best, doing wonderfully, but already she 's planning to have an automobile, if my book makes any money, and to buy a fine phonograph, and — Oh,— it 's perfectly right, of course, and natural, and I 'll be only too happy to give her things, but — well — do you understand what I mean — Peggy?"

Their eyes met; the girl's filled with pain, at the deep yearning in his. She nodded slowly.

"Of course you do! You 've always understood everything — if you had n't, if you had n't been fine, strong — all through — the family would have gone to smash, by now — Lord knows what would have happened to it! When you first came to live with us, you know, I was just

ready to bolt! I don't think you'll ever realize how much you've done for us all, one way or another—!"

"But I did nothing—what else could I have done? Shall we go back, now?"

"Go back? Yes—I suppose so. . . ." His brooding eyes searched hers; she felt the hunger in them: "I wish we might go on—go on—together—forever!" Then, as though unable longer to command himself, he abruptly flung open the door. He did not even look at her as she passed him and went out into the moonlight.

CHAPTER XXI

IT was not until Venable had been in France for several months, that he quite understood why Peggy-Elise had wanted him " to want to go." He had felt it his duty, of course, but at the time he did not entirely share her feelings as to the ideals which should actuate him. He was not indifferent; there were grave wrongs to be righted: Belgium should be restored, France regain Alsace-Lorraine, England be supported in her championship of the smaller nations — yet none of these things drove him irresistibly to the front, but rather a desire to justify himself in Peggy-Elise's eyes, to win her respect, and, incidentally, his own.

In France, a new spirit gradually began to grow within him, even while his regiment was still in training far behind the firing line. The phase, in which he had thought first, of himself, his success as an officer, and secondly, of the cause in which he was enlisted, had given way to one in which he thought of the success of America, as a nation. From thinking personally he had begun to think nationally; in the third phase,

he thought internationally, concernedly, of mankind.

The " blue devils " assigned to the work of training his regiment in the intricate details of modern trench warfare told many stories, calmly, without excitement, without passion — stories that caused Venable to turn cold with horror, at first, and then to grit his teeth in somber rage. He, his comrades, would show the world what America would do! Yet these men did not speak of shattered villages, maimed and murdered prisoners, bestially brutal acts of lust, outraged women and children, as things done by the enemy against the French, but as evidences of a mad philosophy, a horrible thing not unlike a disease, that was creeping slowly forward, threatening to spread its venom over the whole face of the earth. The menace was a menace to mankind; that France happened to be in its path was incidental; her sons would perish, if need be, that not France, alone, but the world, might be saved. Nor was this curious, impersonal feeling confined to the French! He met soldiers of many races, men who had faced death in inconceivably horrible forms — who knew the effects of poison gas, of liquid fire, from personal experience, who had been patients in bombed hospitals, who had gazed, stupefied, upon obscenely desecrated churches — in all these, he found something big-

ger than personal pride, bigger even than national pride, an almost religious devotion to an ideal. These men, who went into battle with flowers in their caps and songs upon their lips, who suffered so silently, and died so simply and nobly, were actuated, sustained, by a sublime purpose. They fought, not that France or England or Belgium might profit by it, but that humanity might profit by it, that generations yet unborn might have the boon of peace, of security, that they themselves were denied. It was a wonderful thing, this tremendous willingness to die for others, even others they had never seen, never would see, and it thrilled Venable as nothing in his life had thrilled him. It smacked of that universal brotherhood of man, that dream of the Utopians, now, apparently, something more than a dream.

"Yes," one English Tommy had said, "we 'll 'ave to stop the bloomin' blighters 'ere, or wot 's the use of 'avin' a 'ome to go back to?"

A French medical officer expressed a not dissimilar thought.

"It is, as one might say, a cancerous growth in the body politic, monsieur. You, I, all of us — we are like the white corpuscles, the phagocytes in the blood. We rush to the infected point, we attack the poisonous bacteria, we die. When enough of us have died, the cancer is over-

come, and civilization is saved. That is all."

Gradually the immensity of the thing began to grow upon Venable. There was a Scotch regiment billetted near by. He talked with the men; all of them seemed to understand quite well the thing they were fighting for, although none of them said much about it. One old top sergeant, who had been through the hell at Mons, summed up his convictions briefly, but to the point.

"A mon that canna see the richt o' it, sir," he said, "wouldna believe in God." Venable had not thought much about God for a long time.

One day, on the outskirts of the tiny village, he came upon an elderly priest, who, with the assistance of a girl of twelve, was trying to drive an unruly cow into the stable. Venable, with a smile, went to their aid, and he and the old man had a brief talk.

"You are American, yes?" the curé asked, and seemed pleased when Venable replied in his native tongue. "The good God Himself has sent you to help us—'Follette' is a stubborn animal. You see, monsieur, we must do our best, the little Blanche and I, since the young men have other work to do, God's work, monsieur." He smiled, very sweetly and nobly, his face for the moment transfigured. "Though so many will never come back, we are glad, for we know that Christ Himself has come again into the world, not in the

flesh, as He came before, but in the hearts of men. Through this so terrible war, monsieur, love will come to rule the world. I am old — I shall not see it. But it will be as I say." He spoke with the air of a prophet. Venable went back to camp, strangely moved. These people, unquestionably, looked beyond the tragedy of the moment.

That night, he had a strange new mood of prayer. He had not felt so, for fifteen years. "Sell all that thou hast . . . and follow me," came to him from some forgotten teaching of the past. Had not these men, these mechanics, farmers, shopkeepers, artisans, given all that they possessed? Were they not giving their lives? For his children, should he have any, his people, no less than for their own? A feeling of shame swept over him, as he realized how trivial his own motives had been. He could think of no adequate words, but a sense of gratitude filled him, that he was able to do his part, however small, in the service of humanity. He saw clearly, now, for the first time, why Peggy-Elise had "wanted him to want" to come to France. In spite of a pricking conscience, he had felt that there were other men, less talented men, whose duty, more than his, lay in the foul, rat-infested trenches — selfishness, purely, as she had so surely known; littleness, that held him earth-

bound, without the vision to see, as she had so surely seen.

It hurt him, now, to realize that he had been even a little irritated, angry with her; it was because of this feeling that he had not gone down from camp to see her, until the day of her sailing for France. They had lunched, hurriedly, at a noisy hotel, and talked of his work and hers. Instinctively Venable felt that she did not wish to speak of their love; it was not until they said good-by, at the gang-plank, that the seething emotions within them welled to the surface. With Peggy-Elise, contrary to his past experience, they took the form of tears, silent tears, dimming her final vision of him. Venable gave his feelings expression — it was characteristic of him. Not to kiss her, to hold her in his arms, caused him acute suffering. He assuaged it, momentarily at least, by drawing her to him and kissing away her tears. Perhaps he even fancied that he was consoling her, rather than himself.

They had passed each other in midocean, in the early autumn, Venable *en route* to France, Peggy-Elise hurrying back to New York for her season at the Metropolitan. Just before she sailed, she had told him, in a letter, that she loved him, yet it did not entirely satisfy him, for it came at the close of a long description of her activities with the Red Cross. She had been

singing, in the hospitals and rest camps. Venable had had a feeling of jealousy, at the time; Peggy-Elise, he had felt, loved something even more than she loved him. Now, at last, he was beginning to understand what it was.

It was from the simple, brave faith of the people about him that he learned his deepest lessons. When his regiment, with others, went to the front line, he spent much of his spare time (when his company was not on duty in the trenches), talking with the old woman in whose house he was billetted. The village was a scant six miles behind the front, now; during the storm which swept over France in the first few months of the war, it had been for a time in the enemy's hands. They had left cruel marks, not alone on stone and timber and all growing things, but on flesh and blood as well — innocent, harmless flesh and blood, that remained, showing the pitiful scars. The old woman, Madame Chiché, fascinated him. Her face held a fixed, unalterable look of terror. It was some time before Venable learned the exact reason for it; she seemed indisposd to talk about herself, and spoke instead, with a stern cheerfulness, of the victory that was to be. At last, however, she told him the story. Her neighbor, a younger woman, had a daughter, Elise was her name. Venable gave a start, as he heard the familiar syllables, and a picture of

his Elise flashed through his brain. Perhaps monsieur had seen her, Madame Chiché went on — the tall girl, with the corn-colored hair. She was seventeen now, and of a *beauté extraordinaire.* When the war came, she had been but fourteen, a child.

Venable had seen her. A flash of Madame Chiché's terror leaped in his own eyes.

"You mean the — the girl who is mad?" he asked, almost brutally. He had seen the child in the village, with some of the school children. She babbled incessantly of meaningless things; Venable had felt a profound pity for her.

"But, yes. The poor one. When the Germans came they took her. It was here, in the street, before this house. Remember, she was but fourteen. There were ten of them who shared in this crime. They had drunk the wine from the cellar of the *Maire.* They were as devils. The mother they forced to witness what they did. She, also, went mad, and ran screaming to the river. It was better that she did not live. I, also, saw this thing. At the moment, I said to myself, there is no God. But I know better, now, monsieur. When the Germans had gone, I brought the child to my house. Now Sister Marie cares for her, at the ruins of the convent, where she teaches the little ones. This war, monsieur, I believe it is a scourge, to make

us think of others, we who have for so long thought only of ourselves. Punishment — that, monsieur, is in the hands of the good God. He will do what is right. For us, it is only to wait, and help those who have suffered more than we have. But this I will say, monsieur: The burning, the destruction, the killing of our men, even of our women, in the mad rush of the invasion, I can forgive, even I, who am not God; but that which these men did to that child, that, monsieur, I cannot forgive. You will find, when you have seen more, that the most terrible, the most unforgivable thing of this so terrible war, has been the mad passion, the lust of these men. Passion — bah!" She spat upon the ground. "It comes from the devil himself!"

This conversation produced upon Venable a profound effect. His thoughts reverted to Peggy-Elise; she had told him that he did not understand love. Had he, through all these years, confounded it with passion? His own words came back to him with singular vividness. He had prided himself upon being a pagan. "I want marriage to be a source of pleasure, not of annoyance." *His* pleasure. Peggy had accused him of selfishness; now he knew that she had been wiser than he. Love lay in giving, not in taking. These people about him, understood. He sought out the afflicted girl, where she played

with the other children, and lavished upon her the wealth of his newly awakened love. She gazed at him, wide-eyed, not understanding. Her mind was that of a very young child; she prattled of dolls, and the things of infancy. Only by gifts of chocolate, of flowers, could he appeal to her; yet, in the end, she came to trust him. At times, wild spells came over her; she would run from every one, even from the other children, and going to the ruined chapel of the convent would climb the altar steps and lie there, weeping, refusing to allow any one to approach her. On one such occasion, Sister Marie appealed to him for help. He went to the child and spoke to her. To his astonishment, she crept quietly, pitifully, into his arms and allowed him to carry her to bed.

It was through this girl, who, while quite unlike her, reminded him so poignantly of Peggy-Elise, and through the other children — little waifs of the first invasion, for the most part — that Venable came to learn his final lesson. These eager little tots, merry-eyed in spite of the tragedy of their lives, shy as elves at first, came gradually to regard him as a big brother. When he showed them some American games, told them stories of the Indians, and deftly modeled little figures for them out of clay, they elected him one of them. To his surprise, he

found awakening in himself a paternal feeling, a love for children that had hitherto been utterly foreign to him. He had regarded them, in the past, as disagreeable little annoyances, to be secluded in the care of nurses. The thought of being a father had left him cold; that, too, had been at variance with the ideas of Peggy-Elise. He realized, now, that it had been but another expression of his selfishness. She had been right. One had to give, to children; he had been unwilling to give, of his time, his energy, his comfort. Now he began to grasp the, to him, surprising truth that in giving, as he was giving, to these little ones, he was receiving in return more than he gave. For his chocolates, his picture-books, the small labors of his hands, he was being repaid a thousandfold in affection, in sheer joy at seeing others made happy.

These things came to Venable during his periods of rest. Throughout the days and nights in the trenches he was the eager, intelligent, efficient officer, caring with unselfish devotion for the comfort, the welfare of his men; they, too, were in a sense children, for the time being in his care. Yet it was with a thrill of the purest happiness that he came back to the village, and realized how sincere was the joy with which his little friends greeted him. "The big monsieur," they called him, with inflexions that were inex-

pressibly tender. Peggy-Elise had thought the creating of such as these a nobler thing than even the creating of a Phryne, a Victory. Perhaps it was, Venable thought, since God, the master artist, concerned Himself with it, had even concerned Himself to create *him*.

The sector upon which Venable's regiment was stationed had for months been a quiet one. There was some sniping, some daily "strafing" — enough to keep either side aware of the other's presence — but nothing remotely approximating a real battle. When the weather was bad, the trenches were viciously uncomfortable, but the men made the best of them, and joked lightheartedly about their hardships. Venable had been on two fair-sized raids, and had won commendation for his able handling of his patrol, in a rather tight situation. A listening post had suddenly been attacked; prisoners had been taken, two men of another company, surrendering only when their ammunition had been exhausted. The force of the enemy's attack not being known, the patrol had been recalled, and a heavy barrage placed along the opposing trenches. Venable called for volunteers, went through the curtain of fire, and returned with the two prisoners and an addditional two of the enemy. It had been a brave enough act; but in a conflict in which cowardice, not bravery, would

be a matter of note, he had neither received nor expected more than the handshake of his battalion commander.

When the storm at last *did* break, it was Venable's fortune, or misfortune, to be at rest behind the lines. It was late afternoon, and he had just left his quarters and was going toward the ruined convent for an after-school hour with the children, when an orderly dashed up with the news that the Germans had begun to deluge the trenches and the country for miles back of them with gas. A moment later, a gas shell of large caliber exploded some hundred yards away, along the bank of the river. A siren whistle sounded the alarm. It was the first use of gas on this sector, so far behind the lines, and Venable did not have his gas mask with him. He turned. Already the few people in the streets were hurrying to cover. Then he glanced toward the convent, in one wing of which, still intact, Sister Marie maintained her little school. His duty, his orders, in case of attack, were to affix his gas mask at once; to get it, he would be obliged to retrace his steps to his quarters. He turned swiftly, then hesitated, stopped. Would the children in the convent be safe? Would Sister Marie know what to do? Would the unfamiliar warning be understood? A shell, with its deadly fumes, bursting in or near the school-

room, would consign those eighteen little souls to a death too horrible to contemplate. They must seek refuge in the deep stone cellar of the building, at once, and there, with moistened handkerchiefs and doors sealed with wet cloths, wait until masks could be supplied them. He hesitated no longer, as a shell burst not fifty yards from the building. Clearly, the Germans were using its shell-torn tower as a landmark for their artillery, in their effort to smother the village and the troops they knew to be in it.

When Venable burst open the door of the schoolroom, he found the children huddled in a terrified group about Sister Marie. She, thinking them the victim of an air raid, had gathered them around her, waiting for the storm to pass. Previous experience with such attacks had taught her that they passed quickly, and that there was less safety, in the streets, than beneath the heavy stone roof of the building in which they now were; of gas she suspected nothing. Venable, already a bit faint from the fumes through which he had been obliged to pass, in order to reach the door, explained the matter in a few staccato words. Sister Marie grasped the situation, at once, and led her charges through a wide doorway to the hall, from which access could be had to the ancient cellar. On the way, Venable

snatched from the desk a jar of water, in which there were some flowers.

"Take this — for the handkerchiefs!" he ordered, moistening his own in it as he spoke. "I'll get a bucket from the yard — you must wet your dresses and hang them over the door until help comes." He sprang into the yard and returned almost immediately with a pail of water, from which the children were in the habit of drinking, during the day. They had all gone into the cellar, now. Sister Marie stood beside the steep stone steps; her face was white, terrified.

"Elise has run into the chapel!" she said. "I could not leave the others."

Venable thrust the bucket of water into her hands; then he pointed down the steps.

"Hurry! I'll get her!" he cried. His voice was drowned in the roar of an explosion, close at hand. He dashed into the chapel.

There was a jagged gap in its high, leaded roof. A great blur among the benches showed where the projectile had fallen. The air was heavy with the deadly fumes. He saw Elise, a huddled white mass, at the foot of the altar; heard her choking cries. Then he staggered up the aisle, pressing the wet handkerchief to his nostrils. The white face of the Christ, upon the

great crucifix over the altar, looked down pityingly through the slowly mounting vapors.

Venable put his arms about the terrified child. She lay quite silent, seeming to find comfort in his nearness. The gas fumes, heavy, deadly, acrid, rolled over the steps of the altar. Venable took the wet handkerchief and bound it tightly over the girl's nostrils and mouth, telling her as he did so that she must not attempt to tear it away. Then he picked her up, and, holding his breath, groped down the aisle and through the schoolroom to the open air. His lungs seemed on fire, his eyes burnt like coals. A momentary vision of goggled figures in khaki rose before his eyes, then he collapsed upon the grass.

Peggy-Elise came back to her work, a little apprehensive, if the truth is to be told. Her success of the previous season seemed like a dream. She was singularly lacking in confidence; she needed Giles Winthrop to encourage her, as he had from the beginning. But Giles Winthrop was gone — and would not come back.

She went to the opera house, the night she was to make her début in "Lucia di Lammermoor," horribly depressed, her nerves jumping; she felt that nothing but failure awaited her in this her first coloratura rôle. Her triumph, that night, created a furore in musical circles.

She found herself suddenly the rage; she was photographed, interviewed, written up in the women's magazines, invited everywhere. With it all, she continued to live in her little room in Patchin Place — she had never been able to leave it, because of the memories of Venable with which it was crowded. That she made her home in such humble quarters was laid to eccentricity. People went down to Greenwich Village in the hope of catching a glimpse of her. But her popularity meant little to her, without the people she loved.

Paolo Breschi was more enamoured of her than ever. He implored her to come and live with him.

"It will do you good!" he urged. "*Dio!* It is not natural at your age — at any age — to live without love! There is nothing else in life! And," he added naïvely, "I am a very good lover."

Peggy smiled sadly and shook her head.

"Come and try it, anyway — until we are tired, yes?"

She had to laugh, then; he was so gorgeously frank. She had a kind of affection for him, and a certain respect. He had no conception of conventional morality, she knew; he was, in fact, gaily *un*moral. He had his own Panlike code of right and wrong; it would be wrong, for in-

stance, not to use the senses you had been given — not to taste the last drop of pleasure they could bring you! That was what they were meant for — what else? Peggy admired his sincerity, while seeing, clearly, through his sophistry.

All through that bitter winter and spring she thought of only three things; they were her singing, her relief work, and Venable. She forced herself to think of Venable least, in order that she might retain the necessary courage to go on at all. A ceaseless, surging desire to go to him, to be near him, never left her; she tried to forget it in the manifold activities with which she crowded her life; but the focal point in each day was the poignant moment in which she read the casualty lists from France.

It was in early March that the impending terror of all those months became a reality, and when the concrete fact finally forced itself upon her unwilling mind, she sat gazing at the line of type, quite dry-eyed. "Captain Gilbert Venable, of New York," she read, in the list of wounded. That was all. She sat still for a long time, with a feeling of helplessness that presently became maddening. Now, for the first time, she felt that Venable needed her. Always, before, he had only wanted her. Some maternal instinct, deep-rooted, caused her to stretch out her arms; she

could have taken him in them as she might have taken a child.

There was nothing she could do, it seemed, but wait. She could not go to him; if for no other reason, her opera contract, her war work, held her fast. Also, she knew the insurmountable difficulties that would be placed in her way; were all the tortured women on this side to rush to their men, the capacity of the transports would have been taxed. She must suffer and wait, as the other women suffered and waited, hoping for the letter she felt sure he would write, or have written, as soon as his condition permitted it. A cablegram she did send, to Bosquet, but the days passed and no reply came. After that, she walked through life dazed, numb, sustained by the knowledge that as soon as he could be moved, he would be sent back to America for treatment. The possibility that he might not come back at all she refused to admit, even to herself, although it stalked like a grim shadow, forever at her side.

It was on a tender afternoon, toward the end of April, that the tension finally snapped. Coming wearily from a long rehearsal, her body tired, her brain preternaturally acute, she mounted the steps to the little studio in Patchin Place, dreading the long hours that lay between her and the coming day. Thoughts of her former meeting with Venable, here on these narrow stairs, swept

over her with a startling sense of reality; it was as though he stood at her side; the air about her throbbed with his presence, with an almost terrifying sense of his nearness. A chill of fear suddenly curdled the blood in her veins, her hands were like ice; had he come back to her — there — in spirit? Was he — was he —? She had scarcely strength enough to open her door.

A figure stood near the window. All the bits of color in the room, the green jar on the mantel, the blue and gold of a strip of Chinese embroidery, the diapered sunlight on the table-top, whirled about in a fantastic blur, like some monstrous firework. Then in a moment, everything became rigid, clarified.

"Peggy-Elise," she heard Venable saying, in a weak, uncertain voice, "Peggy-Elise."

He came toward her. Her heart contracted as she saw his wasted face and hands, the look of suffering in his eyes, but beyond all this, she saw something more — *the* something more for which she had waited — longed.

"Mon âme!" she breathed. With a look of perfect trust, she laid her arms about his neck.

He gazed down into her rapt eyes. Suddenly, the old whimsical smile slowly twitched up the corners of his mouth.

"Will you marry me, now, Peggy-Elise?" he asked weakly.

She drew his head down and kissed him.

THE END

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