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The Heart's Justice

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BY

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House in the Hollow," etc.*



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THE HEART'S JUSTICE. II

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Chapter I

ROLF STERLING had motored out from Wedgewater on a little matter of business. As it was the end of the day the sun too was traveling in that westerly direction, but Sterling accepted the illustrious companionship as a part of the glamor that always attended him. He had been busied in the factory all day; the sun had been busied in the town. Now they jogged along together. The asphalt road shone in the oblique light. It skirted the harbor where the water was lively and the boats, flippant at their moorings, maintained a false brilliancy.

The semi-suburban street with its ordinary houses and obvious shops, thinning for lack of enthusiasm, was generously interpreted by the glow. But Sterling never rode for esthetic pleasure. In all probability he would find old David Harlow just getting home at this hour and what he had to say to him would be more kindly said outside the factory. When kindness did not impair his efficiency he aimed always to be kind! From which it may be inferred that Rolf Sterling took his mission in life without a grain of salt. It was the business of a man "up from nowhere" to keep his head screwed on tight.

In type Sterling was the sort of man commonly re-

ferred to as "a splendid specimen." Other adjectives made to shade themselves about him were "clean," "honest," and "efficient." The last fitted like a jacket. He was amply contrived and largely efficient. Without a pound of excess flesh he sustained the impression of immensity. His shoulders were the most primitive things about him: he dressed them well but they wanted to be bare. . . . His head was well-joined; he carried it with entire self-respect and turned it without lowering or disarranging its poise. The low brow was thoughtful, rather than mental. When, at infrequent times, there came a lull in the activity of his business brain and he was driven back into himself it was as though he stood helpless in the presence of a stranger. The blue eyes were colored cold by dreams of progress; had they ever dreamed love, their color must have changed.

Formidable in his knowledge of human machinery, pitiful in his own vast ignorance of self, he was the amalgamation of two minerals, parental crudeness and maternal intellect. His mother had been the serious servant of a cold, Christian family that had adopted her from an orphanage and impressed upon her their philanthropy. She was as thoroughly educated as she was thoroughly suppressed, at once equipped and inhibited. Certainly her natural refinement entitled her to recognition in polite society, and it was the quintessence of cruelty that she should be made to feel her dependence an insurmountable barrier. After a vain effort to identify herself with the plane above or the plane below, the poor creature had fallen between two stools and married a hardy Norwegian, one flung into the fishing town from a foreign sloop, neither quite a sailor nor quite a gentleman. He was convalescing

from an illness at sea, and when his health was restored, seemed disinclined to return to his own country and the fishing interests which had hitherto occupied him. He set up a ship chandler's shop in Wedgewater and, with his wife and boy, fared thriftily till death overtook him from a cut with a rusty nail.

Rolf and his mother, jumbled a little closer, were free of his brooding, exacting presence, yet more curiously confused by life than before. Her Madonna eyes stared into the future and found it as difficult to decipher as the past had been. The influence of her early training survived and she sent Rolf to school, she forced him to learn when he was as healthily indifferent as an animal; she succeeded in quickening that embedded spark which was to generate his later energy. She loved him always with a pain at her heart since she found him a stranger, as her husband had been, not a boy one could caress. He had none of the sweet ways of American lads. He was inscrutable with a cold northern doggedness. His very looks, unrelated to her own, affected her oddly,—the arctic-blue eyes remote in their vision, his hair of a dazzling gold like the sun on an iceberg! She doubted if he loved her, if his devotion was more than unthinking; home was where his clothes were mended and his meals prepared. But once in an appalling dispute about family with two big boys in school he learned that his mother had been a servant, his delicate, hovering mother. "Hired girl!" shrilled his tormentor, but the next instant his words shot back down his throat. Rolf's fist smashed into his jaw and broke it. But even the fist-blow was not so terrible as his sobbing indictment.

"You liar!"

There was a to-do, an arrest, and,

"But he did lie?" appealed Rolf to his mother, his mother with all the starch out of her, come to defend her boy.

"No, no, I did work. I worked for the family that brought me up," she humbled her pride honestly.

"But he lied all the same," cried the boy with the first flash of acute perception. "They couldn't make a 'hired girl' out of you."

After that Rolf had seen her with silent, savage devotion to her grave. In the years between lay relentless effort, and the slow sun-burst of success.

As the opulent roadster condescended through the outskirts of the town his mind was occupied with such practical speculations as the cost of paving, lighting, extending the sewer system. It is doubtful if he could have gone to Heaven without a try for the civic improvement of the Golden City. Occasionally the sun got in his way. But presently he came to the house of David Harlow, recognizable from the description he had received of it. David Harlow occupied what was almost a pension position in the Ship and Engine Factory of which Sterling was the manager, and rumor laughed resentfully at his pose of a lonely aristocrat. "Him an' his daughter, they think they're God!" was the current sneer. Rumor said he had "tinkered"—that was always the word to carry a cargo of ridicule in its hold—he had "tinkered away" at some invention or other for fifteen odd years. And one last damning thing they found to say of him; they said with blasting charity that he was "harmless."

Sterling, swinging from the car before the tarnished gray house, sequestered in its rank setting, mechanically appraised it. Dull as old pewter, it took its time in an

ungroomed field of sumach and asters and little, accidental landscape trees. The month was October, the long grass bitten gray by frost. Like a timid child with its mother the house clung to the skirts of the wood. Yellow leaves had fallen about it, lending an impression of festivity, like confetti at a wedding. The ruining color of the field, the blue ravel of smoke from the chimney above the high gabled roof, the weathered gray of the shingles, spoke of beauty in exile. But Sterling was resistant. Because he knew something of the tradition of the Harlow family he allowed himself to be shocked in a vulgar way. On this pilgrimage from the gate to the door he had mentally mowed the lawn, reshingled the house, substituted plate glass for the small, bleary window-panes and given moral support to a discouraged roof. He supposed they simply did not care or had not the means. This landslide of old families riled his contempt, since he belonged to the new families going up in roped procession like tourists on an Alpine peak.

But the brass knocker on the door, ardently polished, winked out like a rebuff. It made him almost eat his premature conclusions. The sunset had found all the little old-fashioned panes of glass and set up a conflagration, as though the house was lighted by a hundred candles within. Sterling lifted the knocker and registered his personality once and for all with a clear, uncompromising rap. The act accomplished, he involuntarily put on his appearance. He did this as deliberately as a man dons a rain-coat before a storm. He was not made for the amenities. It meant each time a calculated effort, but one to which he was equal. It was only another of the things he had had to learn.

He had observed his fellow climbers on the Alpine peak. He could summon a smile that was even captivating.

But he could not be kept waiting, though he should have known that it was the kind of house where one would be expected to. The second time he added a thought of briskness to his importunity. This second rap said, still with admirable good humor, tempered by testiness,

"Well, well, is no one home?"

It threatened remotely. If the door was opened now he would not need to be quite so genial. But the door was not opened. His appearance sagged, underwent complete rearrangement. He waited solidly another interval, then he lifted the knocker for the third time. He wondered why they had troubled to polish it since they did not trouble themselves to admit callers. This time he censured them.

Steps scurried, there was a breathless interchange of words within. Then the door, a warped and difficult one, was reasoned with. A colored servant, the shiny surfaces of whose face served alone to distinguish her from the background, was revealed. She was trussed with a starched apron, polished off with a frilled cap. Her mahogany face was pursed with inquiry. But when she saw that the caller wore a fashionable suit of gray plaid she believed in him at once.

"Good eben," she bobbed for gentry. "Sorry, Suh, to hab kep' you waitin'!"

"How do you do?" said Sterling. "Is Mr. Harlow at home?"

With distended, rueful lips, she shook her head.

"No, Suh, he haben't come. But he's expected im-mejet," she added with ostentation. "We been lookin' for him stedly this half hour, Yassir." As she spoke

she leaned forward from her waist, and her eyes popped along the strip of road, now dusted with twilight. "Would you be please to wait?"

"Thanks, yes, if you think he will not be long."

He stepped bare-headed across the threshold and was enveloped by the personal dusk of the house, home dusk, a thing remote from the dusk out of doors. Even if you cannot see you are confident. There are fires here; people have been living and speaking to one another all day and the intimate inconsequence of their remarks seems caught in the air. The negro woman closed the door, whereupon her condescension was palpable and amusing. She waddled beside him, adroitly steering, till he divined a living room, as dim as the hall. Then,

"Miss Muffet," she flourished announcement to some one as yet invisible, "a gumpman to see yo' father. Ase gwan fetch de lamp!"

His eyes accommodating themselves to the dusk, Sterling saw that he was in the presence of a young woman of medium height. She had risen upon his entrance and now stood pressed close against the mantelpiece, a withdrawn, unfriendly figure.

"Good evening," he said, hesitantly. His voice came out with crude quality against her silence.

She gave a slight, grave inclination of the head; if any words were uttered he did not hear them, but he felt that her eyes were leveled upon him with a remote calculation. Sterling was not adept at meeting people the whole way, but he made a proper effort at ingratiating.

"I hope I am not disturbing you. I am Rolf Sterling. I called to see Mr. Harlow."

After this establishment, he waited. The silence

gave to an elastic length. Then her unhurried voice said across the abyss,

"Won't you sit?"

"Thanks."

He felt terribly constrained. He sat, after she had done so, hemmed in by the discomfoting quiet. The log on the fire shot forth a baby rocket and showed her foot quietly extended. He took it for granted that she was Harlow's daughter, a princess in outlawry, and he was right. But for the life of him he could not diagnose her manner. It was not exactly forbidding—but she was so still, so remotely still. The people he had met socially were "good at small talk." When silence closed down they fluttered and beat against it hastily with words. Yet here was one of manifest breeding who could sit with composure through the vacuous minutes. He recalled what he had heard of them—"Him an' her, they think they're God." Could her silence be construed as snobbery? He wondered. Yet he told himself, bridling, that men of affairs did not call every day at that house off the main road—the inmates should be flattered to have their privacy invaded. And he had about him always the consciousness of sweeping health, good clothes, success, as tonic to the impecunious as a cold plunge to the weak-fibered. He entered like a great draught. But perhaps this was a house where only the softest breezes might insinuate.

After several clumsy throat-clearings, Sterling relaxed, bent upon proving that he too could wallow in silence up to his neck and be not one whit disconcerted. But, secretly, of course, he was glad when the negro woman returned bearing a lamp in full bloom, and the half-tones were eliminated, though there was something startling in the revelation. He blue-penciled his im-

pressions. The person called "Miss Muffet" was younger than her manner would have led him to believe. She might have been twenty, though he put her at twenty-five, a compact girl with a negligent kind of grace. Sterling divined that her reserve was something very different from self-consciousness. Of the latter she had not a trace. Her eyes were not large, but beautiful in coloring, red-brown like the centers of yellow daisies. They suggested the eyes of an animal, limpid but withholding, and were set beneath lashes so thick and curly that there seemed to be a double row of them. Her nose was short with possibilities of laughter, her sad mouth enclosed a gleam.

And then there was the room backgrounding her with consistent charm. It represented to Sterling an ease and sufficiency rather baffling, since mere money could not attain it. The rugs were worn and the furniture battered, but the lines of Heppelwhite and Chippendale remained incorruptible. There was nothing meaningless or without grace in that interior. It had evolved through years of culture and quiet living, without ever pandering meanly to the dictates of fashion. The whimsicality of the old samplers and the silhouettes on the wall survived in harmony with the files of modern magazines on the table, the books and flowers. Under the lamp was a tray of pipes; near by blazed a bowl of calendula. Sterling was unaccountably humbled. This was the way an obscure employee lived, David Harlow, known as "dry-rot." He thought of his own rooms, loud with electricity and obvious luxuries, and was uncertain.

As though the coming of the lamp had imposed obligations, had set them, willy-nilly, on a stage where they

must perform, Miss Harlow looked at Sterling and said,

"I think he won't be long now. Thank you, Vannie, that is better."

She had risen to adjust the wick, and he offered, "May I help you? Sometimes they stick."

He spoke as if every one were commonly wrestling with wicks, when in reality it seemed to him the most antiquated notion, the quaintest conceit. It took him back to his boyhood, to a small room on the bay front and his mother darning by a kerosene lamp while he sweated at his sums. As they bent over the lamp her cinnamon-brown hair touched his cheek and it felt furry and strong. He wondered if her eyelashes would feel the same way. It seemed to him that she shivered fastidiously, that, through her sensitized hair, she had been made aware of the contact. He became warmly self-conscious. He wondered what she was thinking of him, if she found him clumsy and commonplace. What she thought was that he was quite fine-looking in a healthy, middle-class way; when he turned his head at a certain angle the light struck his glasses and, blotting out the clear, blue eyes, made him appear abstract—a mere repository of brains and vigor.

Some trivial words had been exchanged during the adjustment of the wick, informality was on its way when the colored servant intervened.

"Miss Muffet, would you kin'ly gib me yo' attention 'bout de dinner?" she besought audience, and with a little, apologetic smile Miss Harlow rose to follow her.

But as their decorum led them no farther than the door, Sterling could still watch and admire her while the conference was taking place.

"Yo' done tell me to make de chicken fricassee,"

complained Vannie, "but yo' doan eber mention what vegetables to hab with it. Ah been steddysin' over it all afternoon, an' not rightly knowin' what yo' pa might fancy fo' change Ah been'n' boiled turnip an' onion. Dey's kind o' un-ordinary, an' dey's nourishin'."

The face of the girl lost its well-bred immobility, became suddenly a parade-ground for feeling.

"You shouldn't have done that, Vannie," she told her with a severity out of all proportion to the offense. "Oh, you shouldn't have done that! It's only lately Father can't abide onions, and he thinks turnip is the most unimaginative vegetable there is. Now you'll have to think of something else at the eleventh hour."

Vannie's mouth curved down leakily. She stood, a crestfallen creature of the jungle, her long hands dangling almost to her knees. But she made no protest. The two were soon oblivious of the outsider, lost in discussion of the approaching meal. And although Sterling did not follow the thread of their domestic reasoning, he was conscious of the word "Father," ever recurring like a refrain. "Father said only yesterday," "If Father's appetite were better," "Of course, Father," and so on, ad infinitum. He was startled to reflect that the object of their solicitude, their glamorous devotion, was the dim David Harlow, so negligible in the Ship and Engine Factory. Here he lived in a circle of prestige, a splendid spider in his web, cosily substantiated on every side. Sterling was deep in his wonderment when the conversation between the two suddenly snapped. Vannie went back to the kitchen like a general with a new plan of campaign, and Miss Marlow remembered her caller almost brightly.

"Our genius—" she made a little explanatory gesture—"we have to take good care of the family genius,"

and as though the thought of her father was a mellowing influence, she begged prettily, "I hope you won't mind us."

The first flicker of a smile showed. It was no more than an inch and a half long, and disappeared when Sterling sought to snare it with his own. Nevertheless the fact of it remained.

"Father isn't *really* delicate," she explained lightly. "It's just that he's a perfect child about taking care of himself. And you know how women have to mother their men!"

Sterling did not know—most unfortunately he did not know—since his own mother, the darning and the dinner pails were too far behind him. But he nodded omnisciently. His thought reverted quickly, anxiously to his own meals, served with impersonal perfection at an hotel. It was impossible to find better service anywhere. You were lucky if you could afford to live at the Mohawk. But his brow was furrowed with the innocent doubt of the man who has striven for success and wants to be quite sure he has really gotten the most for his pains. No woman waited for him at nightfall, weighing the merits of turnips and onions on the silver scales of their love.

"Your father," observed Sterling profoundly, "is not a young man. I daresay he comes home pretty fagged."

"He comes home very tired," she sighed ruefully. "It's the eternal, hateful grind that saps his life."

"Is his work uncongenial?"

The question sounded hot.

"No, it's what he's always been accustomed to. But of course it's a routine life, it's not creative, and my father is preëminently a creator." Her spirit, that had held aloof from her eyes like one in ambush behind a

window, came forward. Her voice thrilled with pride. He thought that her faith was the superstitious faith of a child. "Of course," she said, "you have heard that his real work is experimental. His workshop is there," and she showed him from the window a shed that the moon had just begun to marvel over. "We spend hours there, he and I, for he likes to have me with him. Of course I can't talk, but I sit and sew or I plan what we shall do with all the money we'll have when my father's ship comes in!" Her eyes danced merriment.

"Your faith in him," said Sterling ponderously, "must be a great help. I believe I've heard that he is inventive, but I don't know that I've been informed what it is he's working on now."

The tone was respectful.

"Oh," she shook her head happily, "perhaps I'll leave him to tell you himself." Then, veering to gravity, "But whatever might come to us I doubt if we could be as contented anywhere as we are in this dear old house!"

Sterling was incredulous. It was charming, certainly, but her point of view was directly opposed to his own. One progressed in the scheme of things like the nautilus outgrowing its shell. Instinctively he glanced up and what met his eyes was the complete discoloration of the ceiling, a cloudy map formed by the seep, seep of many rains. So this was the house she could not leave—the moldering old ruin where her genius housed her—a delicate girl. True, she showed no signs of tender health, but it pleased him to infer that she was frail; it gave greater scope to his scorn. The ceiling would fall if they did not soon reinforce that beam. And why were these draughts allowed to play about the floor? A moment ago she had mesmerized

Sterling till he was almost a subscriber to her cult, almost ready to believe that he had, perhaps, overlooked an exceptional man. He pulled himself out of the sentimental slough in which he had been maundering.

"I have come for the purpose of having a little talk with your father." He could not smother the note of condescension. "Of course you know—er, that is, I have undertaken the management of the factory!"

"Oh, yes," her voice had a soft maliciousness. "I gathered you were the manager when you knocked at the door. Mr. Moore is the only other one who comes. He taps very softly. But then, of course, he is only a foreman."

her guileless eyes turned away and he felt his collar tight.

Chapter II

SHORTLY after, David Harlow entered. Unconsciously Sterling had been watching for him as one watches for a stranger. He would not see him now as he had seen him in the shop—he would see him in relation to the house and its inmates. When the outer door gave Muffet darted into the hall, her fine dignity shed behind her like the crystal slippers of Cinderella at the ball. There was something curiously ardent yet at the same time open and boyish in the way she flung herself upon Harlow. This was no perfunctory greeting. It was rather the outgrowth of keen and hungry love, the expression of hours of loneliness. Sterling saw the daughter's arms close about her father's neck as though they would never let him go, her eager lips made little excursions all over his face. Here was a thing far lovelier than sentimental passion. And Harlow was so tender. To see a man pottering about his drab concerns in an engine factory was one thing, to see him in his rôle of father was another and very different matter. The scene dragged at something deep in the younger man's vitals, a reminder of an emotion at once exquisite and troubling, . . . familiar. Who can hope to understand that dim realm of the subconscious, that treasury of the spiritual where nothing known is ever lost?

They took their time too, and no little luxury of enjoyment on Muffet's part was sacrificed to the mention

of the waiting caller. Not until Harlow, with the playfulness of a great dog, had shed the first inundation of her talk did she remember him. Then David was seen to set her aside. His psychology altered. Here was the shadow of the shop falling across his threshold, and the man who cast the shadow was a giant, relatively speaking. Harlow's self-assurance stammered. He was back to his plodding inconsequence, unsure, obsequious. He peered into the room where Sterling waited, then with a rather anxious smile came forward to greet him.

"Mr. Sterling, how do you do, Sir?" The deference of the "sir" put the younger man miles ahead on the road of affairs.

It was natural that Sterling looking upon Harlow as a detail of his factory had never noticed him particularly before. But to-day all his perceptions were acute. The decree which he had come to issue was impersonal so far as he was concerned; he had looked on the task as disagreeable but one which he, nevertheless, had every intention of performing. In the face of the older man's cordiality it suddenly loomed colossal. They were shaking hands and Sterling felt the thrill of vital communication which is established the first time one places his hand in that of another. David's hand, in spite of his years of hard work, was a slight-boned, delicate one. He had the long, sensitive hands usually ascribed to the artist, an eye in every finger-tip—in reality the hand of the born mechanic.

He was of medium height, but his well-knit frame was no match for Sterling's rigorous brawn. He was slightly bent between the shoulders, and his stooping seemed the moral effect of disappointment. The abundant silver-gray hair that flowed back from his fore-

head shone like a radiation from his head. His face, though sallow from years of confinement, was ageless with the simplicity of the dreamer's. His were magical eyes, wise as the eyes of children, but in them failure had been published. The mouth with its litter of wrinkles at either side must have been the registry of many emotions. Laughter had made it as tired as sorrow, yet it was doomed to go on laughing—the tragic comedian's mouth. Sterling noted his democratic clothes and related them to the leak in the roof. But the next minute Harlow spoke and his slow, cultivated utterance marked him as belonging to that aristocracy "of mind, of character, of will" which Ibsen has proclaimed as the only one of true validity.

"This is a surprise and a pleasure," said David Harlow with old-fashioned formality. "Sit down, Mr. Sterling, sit down!"

"I thought you would recognize my car outside," began Sterling for lack of a better opening and went back to his seat by the fire.

Muffet had followed her father with an air of shy but happy possession and now watched Sterling furtively with her ambushed red-brown eyes. It was inconceivable that they had talked together. That part of her duty accomplished, she slumped unselfconsciously on the arm of David's chair. She might make it very awkward for Sterling by remaining altogether.

"Yes, yes, oh, yes," Harlow nodded vaguely, "I did see a—a kind of big yellow tom-cat sprawling in the road outside." His mouth twisted drolly about the words. "But I didn't think of it as being yours. No one keeps a car long enough these days to be identified by it. I thought it must belong to some hunters. There's a deal of partridge shooting along the road this

month and the birds are plentiful too. They tell me the breast-bone is cloudy this year and that means a stormy winter."

But Sterling had not come to discuss the breast-bones of partridges.

He said quickly, "I haven't much time for recreation."

The firelight struck his glasses and made him seem all polish and hard bright efficiency.

"But surely—" began Harlow.

"Oh, perhaps I shouldn't say that," he amended, anxious to qualify as an all-around man, "I swim every day and take exercise at a gymnasium. And then I drive—I drive my car for miles and miles on a stretch whenever I have anything to figure out. You've no idea how it helps!"

"But that way you can't take much account of what you're passing!"

"Um, no, I suppose not. Still, the speed is exhilarating!"

Harlow shook his head with gay incredulity.

"I've never been able to like motor cars from the point of view of pleasure. They seem to me the greatest inconvenience; they defeat their own ends. Go so fast that everything is a blur and a jumble. One minute you're looking at a cow and the next minute a man on a golf course. Think you see a cow putting at the eighth hole."

The girt Muffet laughed as at the greatest witticism and her laughter, so unexpected, so virginal, went ringing like a bell through all the corridors of the young man's consciousness. It must be intoxicating, he thought, to have the most made of one's attempts at

humor, even one's poor little attempts. But he only observed tritely,

"It's a product of the times, Mr. Harlow, and you must advance with the times even if your mental processes do get out of breath!"

Harlow smiled and the firelight touched him poetically. In that moment he might have been the last young thing on earth, Pan in his ancient youth, sadly amused by evolution. He spoke and the illusion perished.

"Agreed, but when we're running 'in high,' as the saying goes, we're missing so much. I have the profoundest respect for the man who dares step out of the procession long enough to decide what it's all about. I know this must sound contradictory as coming from one who has worked in the cause of speed and power. But you'll have to take it as my *alter ego* speaking! My daughter and I have tried to follow a cult of essentials, to decide what constituted the great and lasting pleasures of life and then to go after them." He smiled again reflectively. "We're great playfellows, great nonsense-makers." He paused to pinch her ear. "We stop very often and shake all the importance out of us. A good way is to lift your eyes at night and let them travel clear across the sky. I wonder how many people have the courage to do it!"

But Sterling caught him back by a visionary coat-tail.

"If we were all sky-gazers," he said sententiously, "we'd get no business done below here. If a man doesn't look where he's going he stubs his toe!"

The conversation drifted into more commonplace channels, the factory, the town, the new toll bridge that had been opened across the harbor. A silence fell, as easy as an old shoe. That was the spell of the house;

once you found yourself there, it was as though you were an habitu . It seemed to Sterling that the chair in which he was seated, a low, winged, fireside one, was indecently comfortable. It had the effect of scattering his ideas. A delicate aroma of chicken floated in from the kitchen, the snatch of a droning song.

“A gre-at, long freight-train an’ a red ca-boose
Brought sorer to mah door. . . .”

Sterling smiled interrogation.

“That’s our Vannie,” explained Harlow dryly, “or ‘Vanilla,’ formally speaking! It seems her mother had about exhausted the names for girls when she thought of the possibilities of the extracts. There’s a ‘Rose’ in the family and an ‘Almond.’ But you’ll agree that ‘Vanilla’ is the most high flavored.”

Forgetting himself, Sterling roared.

“But what’s the rest of the song about the sinister train?”

“I’ve never heard it,” said Harlow, “though she’s been singing that fragment for a good while. My mother picked Vannie out of a cotton field in Virginia when she was just a child. She does very well for us in a simple way. You’re living in town, are you not, Mr. Sterling?”

“Yes, I live at the Mohawk. It’s most convenient for a bachelor.”

His eyes rested innocently upon the cinnamon-brown head of Muffet who had taken her basket of mending from the table and was now bent laboriously over it, coaxing fresh tissue across a hole of discouraging size. She mended very badly and the task made her mouth adorably serious.

“The Mohawk,” took up Harlow with the air of

handling something fresh. "Well, I suppose that would be the proper place for a bachelor as you figure it. We like the country, though of course the character of this neighborhood has changed and not for the better. But there's a continual interest in the different seasons. Spring, for instance. You're let in on all the processes, so intimately concerned in the coming of the leaves that you actually think you help them to turn green! And then the birds." He pointed to a window, permanently blind since the shutters had been fastened from the outside. "We've had tenants there three seasons. The first season we thought of serving a 'dispossess,' but it was such a struggling family that it hardly seemed humanitarian."

"I used to sit inside and watch the mother bird feeding her young," put in Muffet for the first time. She lifted a face that was wonderfully alive and unconscious. "Dreadfully ugly offspring with voracious appetites. It must have taken all her courage to bring them up."

"Yes," chuckled her father, "and since then there's a family every year. So we never *can* get the blind open. You see yourself what advantages the location offers for refined Jenny Wrens."

Sterling stared and saw through the pane the feathery litter of their housing.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed, boyishly entering into the spirit of it, "then you can see the eggs and everything."

Once again something tugged profoundly at his vitals. He seemed to be in the top of a tree that was swaying giddily in the wind, his feet clinging to a precarious perch, while his lifted chin just cleared the rim of a nest in which lay three speckled eggs. The snapping

of a spark recalled him, made him remember the sundry conditions of his manhood and the call which he had come to make upon David Harlow and which was unfolding so queerly. He became practical and incredulous.

"But you don't—you don't deprive yourselves of the light from the window just to be accommodating?"

They nodded in unison; they wagged their incorrigible heads in delicious gravity.

"There are other windows."

The conversation had become so artless that Sterling was alarmed. He had not, as they say, in precise parlance, "stated his errand," he had given no motive for the call, and the strange part of it all was that his entertainers did not appear to require any. Yet they must know that he would not casually descend upon them. He had come with a fixed purpose and he was not a man to be easily swayed from a decision once it was made. He told himself that the daughter would eventually leave the room and he would say to her father what he had come to say. But, involuntarily, he began to form sentences whose trend was in the opposite direction. He was baffled by his own complexity.

"I happened," he heard himself saying, "to be passing by and I thought I would drop in for a chat. I'd like to know all the heads of our departments better, especially the old guard. Let's see, I believe it's thirty years you've been with the Ship and Engine!" His tone contradicted his sentiment on that score; that a man should remain for thirty years in one department like an oyster in a shell seemed to him absurd, but he made it appear that the time had been spent progressively.

His uneasiness showed itself only in that he gave the older man no space for reply, but continued with a quick, firm tread of words.

"Your staunch friend, Moore, has often spoken about the experimental work you do at home, that famous workshop of yours, so I had a fancy I'd like to stop and see it, that is, if you cared to show it to me."

Harlow's face glowed. He had accepted the call as a mere friendly manifestation, on the part of the big, buoyant young manager. But this interpretation pleased him more. His hands trembled as his nerves were unseated.

"Yes, I suppose I've been something of a tinkerer all my life," he admitted with the modesty of the man who lovingly deprecates the work that is his passion, "and my interest has always centered about the perfecting of ships, the safeguarding of life and so forth. I've often thought of trying to interest you in some of my pet theories, Mr. Sterling, but with your time being so valuable and all that you have on your mind I hardly liked to approach you." He broke off expressively. "It's very good of you to come of your own accord. It would give me the greatest pleasure to take you out," and he indicated the arbitrary lines of moonlight and darkness that formed the workshop. "If you've time now—or if you could give us your company for dinner, perhaps afterward——"

Sterling rose reluctantly.

"I'm afraid I scarcely realized how late it was when I stopped or that I'd have so long to wait for you. Unfortunately I made a dinner engagement in town. It's with the President of the Old Whaling Bank and I shouldn't like to keep him waiting. But another time——"

All the light left David's face, it became a cold, gray façade, fatalistic in acceptance. He nodded lifelessly. He was the sort of man made for reverses, just as Sterling was the sort made for success. It seemed to him now that the young man's coming had been a whim and that the possibility of the call being repeated was slight. Great then was his surprise when Sterling said:

"Suppose we make a definite date for it. Saturday afternoon might suit us both."

The color raced back to blanched cheeks.

"Saturday afternoon, by all means. And perhaps then you'll stay and dine with us. It would be the greatest possible pleasure to have you. Muffet, my dear, won't you add your word to mine?"

Muffet rose with alacrity and taking her father's arm stood leaning upon it sweetly.

"Do come!" she said in a low voice.

His eyes roved to her.

"Thanks, I will."

He turned from the mellow fire where all the good of living seemed centered and suddenly, as typical of their half whimsical, half rustic life, he saw that there was a field cricket on the hearth. It lifted its whirring voice and again the sleeping boy in Sterling woke drowsily.

"A cricket," he marveled, "and in the house. I suppose it's hard to keep them out."

"Oh," protested Muffet, "crickets bring good luck! We leave the house unscreened all summer so they can come in."

Chapter III

THAT night after his dinner with the president of the Old Whaling Bank, Sterling returned early to his rooms at the Mohawk and, turning a button of the electric switch, suffered the publicity of the ensuing light. It came through suspended globes of imitation alabaster and brimmed the small foyer and the living room beyond. The apartment comprised four rooms, the bedroom, bath, a formal sitting room and a so-called "den" done in the usual dingy browns and furnished with mission-leather pieces of size and importance. On the walls were a map of the western hemisphere, a steel engraving of Theodore Roosevelt, several worthless lithographs of animals and a really authentic oil sketch of a five-masted schooner under full sail. The last Sterling had bought at a summer exhibition of art into which he had incongruously strayed. It had struck his fancy at once and he had been rather pleased than otherwise to find that it came high. His only instinct about it was that it told the truth. It was a moving thing, full of life and energy. A gay wind filled the sails, a healthy sun showered them all over with color; the sea cutting to either side was translucent yet weighty with salt. That schooner was going somewhere, somewhere real, yet there was enough of a legend about it to clothe its mission with romance. When Sterling felt his forces becalmed he could always look at it and gain locomotion and a certain freshness of direction. The idea fascinated him.

But even the schooner could not redeem the "den" which was a pitiful, complacent room. You were supposed to enter it in smoking jacket and house slippers, to select a pipe from the burnt wood rack on the wall, then leaning against the leather read something light and restful by the lamp which stood subserviently at your elbow.

To-night Sterling forgot the tried formula. He did none of these things, only, flinging himself into the chair, sat dully surveying his dubious comforts. In the light of new knowledge their deliberate offerings seemed meretricious. Take that room of the Harlows. The chairs were variegated. Not one purported to be the chair for a tired business man. Nothing in that interior advertised itself. Yet you could be comfortable there with carelessness and self-respect. You could read or you could not read. You could have a fire and warm your shins without the clap-trap contrivance of a gas log. He cast the aspersion of his glance upon the cold artificiality of the last. It was not just that the Harlows "had it over him," vulgarly speaking; he rather felt they "had it over" Wedgewater's most pretentious families. He was dully angry, because he could not explain why it was so.

From his dim doubts of "the den" he turned to doubt of himself. Why had he acted the way he did in reference to David Harlow? What had caused him to become weak and vacillating? A week ago he had decided in his plans for the factory that the old-timers, the "dry-rot," must be gradually weeded out and their positions refilled with younger, more assertive men. It was a difficult, a delicate matter to handle, but for intuitive reasons he had decided to begin with David Harlow. Harlow carried one of the longest records for faithful

service, and at the same time seemed the one most likely to accept dismissal passively. He was getting on in years and he had "his hobby." They would put him on half pay, as was customary in such cases and his service would terminate with good feeling all round. He had gone to Harlow's home to break the news gently, and he had come away leaving the impression that his call had been a mere friendly overture. Was it the lonely, aristocratic pride of the man which had deterred him? Or was it (he touched on the thought awkwardly) a motive which had to do with that strange, silent girl who took so little account of him.

He had a grim, childish amusement in the thought that he could summon the image of her before him, and she was bound to come. She was there now, like a commandeered spirit from the "Arabian Nights." She stood among the leather chairs, defiant and elusive, yet unable to escape. She might as well take up her mending from his stout mission table and bend her cinnamon-dark head in resignation. She or her father, it mattered little which, had offended against his sacred business precepts, had weakened his campaign of efficiency till now he would have to abandon it. He leaned back in his chair and watched her small, reluctant ghost in its shy occupation of the room. A sensation overtook him of contemplative luxury. "Now that we are alone," he said to the ghost, "let's have it out! Are you or are you not a queen of snobbery? . . . Is it shyness that makes you so inaccessible or do you think I'm a curious, clumsy sort of animal? . . ."

He bent over to get a peep at her eyes and suddenly all that red-brown, furry hair was spinning spider webs across his own. "Hark," he said, "there's a cricket on the hearth!" and she replied plausibly, "Crickets make

excellent cooks. We've had one as a servant for years!" There were a lot of little velvet notes in her voice that swarmed on the air like golden bees . . . and he started to count. . . .

But when he had counted a hundred he saw sunlight scouring the floor, and sensed a chill in the air like seven o'clock in the morning.

Chapter IV

IN David Harlow's youth it was fashionable to live in the country. The big house just outside Wedgewater had been built at the close of the Civil War as Ebenezer Harlow's gift to his bride. The pleasant lawns were defined by box hedges and there was a garden where Jasmine, his young wife, her delicate hands protected by garden gloves, would spade about her perennials or later gather the giant mignonette, the sweet-william or sky-blue canterbury-bells. In the stable, long ago become a fiction, Ebenezer Harlow kept his sorrel trotting horse and a pair of sprightly bays to draw his bride each time she rode out in her small, modish victoria with tan linings.

The house itself shone with love and harmony. For never were two so sweetly matched as Ebenezer and his Jasmine. She was one of those women whose gentleness and patience must make them as saints to men. Some one had said to see her each Sunday kneeling in the family pew at church, her clear, cameo face uplifted radiantly, was worth more than the sermon. Ebenezer, of stouter stuff, was hardly more complex. But adoring her demure piety, he would often deliberately shock it. He liked to see her lift her small, protesting hand and to hear her remonstrate when he had told a wicked story,

"Ebenezer, remember to be an example to your sons!"

That was when there were three characters to be

shaped. As for the sons, the two oldest reverted to some lawless ancestry. Albion and Joseph were lusty youths who seemed to have none of the inhibitions of the Harlows. To the distress of their gentle mother and their stanch Christian sire, they were born devoid of all respect for authority. No sooner were they in jeans than they began tying tin cans to the tails of dogs, smoking corn silk in their father's pipe, stealing apples with which to pelt pedestrians, and lugging a sling shot to Sunday school. A certain worldly great aunt, who, it is to be feared, was rather edified than offended by the expert profanity of Albion and Joseph, remarked relishingly,

"Dandled on the knee of Piety and how they do swear!"

As men they swore and bullied their ways, and amassed fortunes, whilst their youngest brother David was still struggling in a morass of love and uncertainty. It was David, of course, who came in for the greatest share of their mother's love. David was her own like chick; the others were strange ducklings. Ebenezer used to say it was a shame how she babied the boy. But, as his mother knew, David was not the sort that could be made insupportable by kindness. He looked a Harlow. He was dark and introspective with a dependent wistfulness, a sensitive reserve, and even at the age of five a woman-worshiper.

Never did he return from play without some token for his mother—sometimes a bit of glass he had seen shining in the road, sometimes a flower. He would fall asleep in her arms, and looking upon him with his parted lips and fallen lashes she would think there must be some beautiful dream just under those closed eyes.

As the harbor was so close, the life of ships came

early to intrigue his imagination. He would sit for hours in the salty grass, his chubby hands on his knees, and watch the busy craft with a great scowling pre-occupation. He was the sort of young lover who longs to do something big for his adored. The many projects which he entertained in his mother's behalf were nearly too heavy for him to carry around,—one day he would build a yacht to take her round the world, the next he would own a railroad. But always confused with the idea of the stupendous gift was the significant quality of power and locomotion.

What his brothers thought of him at the age of five they very nearly thought when he was fifty. They would peer from the elevation of their success upon David, still blissfully theorizing below, and say to one another,

“Didn't I tell you?”

They did this from time to time as though to make certain that he stayed unsuccessful. They would have been greatly disconcerted had he fooled them.

From the first the rude, unimaginative games which the older boys played failed to interest David. He was too busy in his world of science, too much engrossed in the building of his funny little water wheels and stone crushers and pile drivers. When he had nothing in particular to do he would scuff about slowly, emitting the thoughtful “choo-choo-choo's” of an engine, and no doubt experiencing all the internal sensations of one.

But mostly he built boats.

“The boy's a mechanical genius,” prophesied his father; “he'll be the head of a great industry. Wait and see!”

But he had overlooked the fact that David was not and never would be executive. Nevertheless as the

boy grew the salt bay fostered vast dreams; his mother's faith was their benediction. Nothing was needed to make life a thrilling adventure save love—which he soon discovered. When he met Rhoda Lockwood he was twenty-five, a young man full of gallantries, picturesque, idle graces. The Harlows, the true Harlows, were courtly men, and David bred true to type. Broad-shouldered, slim-waisted, he had the handsome sweeping brow, the charming mouth and fastidious speech so winning to the opposite sex. He had gone two years to college, then pleaded that he be allowed to take up work. Accordingly his father had secured for him a position as helper in one of the departments of the Ship and Engine factory where he had elected to work his way up. In college he had met many maidens but his dream of feminine perfection being a lofty one, he had returned scatheless. But hardly had he done so than he lifted his eyes to see Rhoda Lockwood, poised above the horizon like a dainty moon.

Rhoda Lockwood thought him the handsomest of all the Wedgewater swains, but when told that he was working his way up in an engine factory, she lifted her brow uncertainly. It was during an Easter holiday and she had come to visit one of the Clayton girls, who was her roommate in boarding school. She had come with all the glamor of her fashionable training behind her and had taken Wedgewater's younger set by storm. Because of David's superlative good looks and the fact that she was weighing his assets she allowed him to escort her to a dance and next day drive her out behind his father's fast "Lightning." "Lightning" was skittish from lack of exercise and decided to run away with them. But the entire time this was taking place Rhoda Lockwood made spirited conversation. Her les-

sons in *savoir faire* had emphasized the importance of being at ease in all situations. So she simply treated the equestrian exhibition as though it were the usual thing. And though poor David was too busy managing the unruly mare to make intelligent replies, yet he was terribly impressed by her behavior and could even remember afterward some of the things she had said.

"I think spring is the loveliest season of the year, don't you, Mr. Harlow?"

This as the horse reared backward and very nearly toppled into the carriage. When the stress of the ride was over and David at home again with his mother, he put the most elaborate interpretation on the girl's self-control.

"It was wonderful, Mother," he confided with fervor, "wonderful the way she ignored the whole awful business! I could feel the perspiration streaming down my face because I simply couldn't get her out of the carriage and I knew Lightning had every intention of breaking our necks. And Miss Lockwood talks as calmly as though there were no such thing as danger."

His mother, biting a thread to hide a quizzical smile, looked up soberly. David's pride was more precious to her than all else in the world, but the spectacle of his adolescent infatuation, so serious and so comic, touched her humor.

"But, dear, I hardly see the point in her acting that way. I should think it would have made it harder for you!"

A shade of annoyance passed over his face; it was to be seen that he was deeply smitten.

"I should think any one would admire courage like that," he reproved her grandly and his dignity was all prickles.

"But, darling," protested his mother, trouble and tenderness in those wise eyes, "I meant no offense, I'm sure. It only seemed so—extraordinary because in a situation like that I'm sure I should just have held my tongue and prayed."

Intuitively she knew what was happening to him. No doubt it was that very day David transferred to Rhoda the gift of all he had dreamed for his mother; he settled upon her, as it were, the mystic yacht, the great railroad, and all other potential properties of his brain and imagination. Nearly every vacation thereafter she came with the Clayton girls. She seemed to have no definite home obligation though there was the well-established pretension that her connections were brilliant. She would come with a great trunk of beautiful clothes which smelled like field flowers in summer, and she would dance and coquette and air her accomplishments.

At David's request Mrs. Harlow invited Rhoda and the Clayton girls to dinner. The Clayton girls were wholesome pieces with the usual equipment of hair and eyes and jollity. But Rhoda was not so easily disposed of. She had the magnolia beauty that accompanies Titian hair, and affectations dripping from every finger. In spite of that bright head Mrs. Harlow's impressions were of cold materials,—those dazzling pale arms had more of blue than pink beneath the skin. They suggested marble under the moon and the low-cut frock of pistachio-colored poplin fell into plastic folds like the drapery of a figure in a fountain.

But despite the pretty poise and careless elegance which characterized her that evening Miss Rhoda's brain was functioning mathematically. Her aunt, the capable woman whose management had brought her

where she was, had been careful to instill a trenchant doctrine. "When you are sure you are making a sensible marriage you can afford to be sentimental," she had told her niece. Accordingly Rhoda had admired the handsome David, but with reservations. Emotionally she had burned no bridge behind her. But now she saw the Harlow home unfold itself in somber richness; though Mrs. Harlow inclined to be old-fashioned she was undeniably a patrician and blood was an asset second only to fortune. To be first in Wedgewater might not be a magnificent goal for one so educated, but she need not consider that residence here would be necessarily permanent. She approved of the heavy silver of the dinner service, the gossamer cups of Sevres from which she drank her after-dinner coffee, the genial rotundity of Ebenezer Harlow which marked him a gentleman of ease.

All evening the candle-light which Mrs. Harlow still affected shone upon Rhoda's prettiest manners and the gestures of her pale, pointed hands. She conversed quite dazzlingly of the latest books and plays and music, yet Mrs. Harlow was sickly certain that if one scratched beneath the surface no blood of character would show. She felt like a spectator at some fatal performance as she watched Rhoda act and saw David, Byronic with his mahogany curls, his lean cheeks of exquisite sculpturing handsomely flushed, paying court to her. Who shall gainsay the divine clairvoyance of mothers? . . . After that evening Mrs. Harlow's health was never so good. . . .

Rhoda's guardians, an aunt and uncle, appeared for the wedding and appropriately dissolved when it was over and nothing authentic was ever known of them.

The woman was frankly materialistic; her natural softness had evidently suffered in a hard school. The man looked the kind of questionable financier whose fortunes fluctuate. If they made their niece no dowry, they at least left her alone to work out her salvation without the unhappy shadow which their relationship might have cast upon her.

Jasmine Harlow knew that some ironic destiny had made Rhoda the dictator of her son's life. He had idealized her in the most preposterous, blind way, but how could she tell him so without the risk of alienating him entirely? She chose the harder part,—she held her peace, and no word of criticism ever passed her lips.

It had been agreed that David should continue with his work in the Ship and Engine factory. He needed only the beautiful young creature whom he adored, his dreams and his occupation. But he had not realized how many comforts are required to make life supportable to one with fashionable tastes. If Rhoda were denied the least of these luxuries, she would play the languishing lady till David, near heart-break, despaired of ever maintaining her in real contentment.

At the end of the first year Ebenezer Harlow died and David came into his inheritance. Rhoda promptly took a new lease on life. She was able to employ two servants, to ride in her own carriage, and to entertain in a small but distinguished way. As her husband was so handsome and so devoted and as other women envied her her lot in life, she was reasonably happy for a time. But when, during the third year she learned that she was going to have a child, permanent gloom descended upon her.

Mrs. Harlow, wearing her widow's veil, came period-

ically for brief visits and always bade her son farewell with a brave, bright smile to hide her tears. But the tears were there and David saw them, and later in life he knew why his mother had wept for him.

Chapter V

I

BEFORE she died old Mrs. Harlow was able to hold in her arms David's daughter, and to bestow upon her the jingling nursery name which in later years was to prove adhesive.

"Little Miss Muffet," she cooed with the freshest of maternal rapture which flows mysteriously back into quite autumnal hearts, given a baby to release it, "you are your father's child!"

"No," disclaimed David uneasily, fearing Rhoda's jealousy, "she's her mother's—really."

"David," insisted Mrs. Harlow, leaning over to drive home her point by a pressure of his knee, "she is your child. Wait and see!"

Poor David, who would have liked so much to be happy with both his wife and his child was allowed to find profit in neither. From the day of little Rhoda's birth the spur was applied to him. He was made to feel that a quite extraordinary concession had been the bearing of this child, and that her presence in the world would necessitate no end of readjustments, morally and financially. Rhoda began to talk about the expense of bringing her up in the smartest fashion. Her planning was on so large a scale that David trembled before it. She pointed out that since his mother was not

likely to last many years (David winced) they might as well move into the big house on the Wedgewater road at once, and establish themselves in dignity.

For sufficient reasons Mrs. Harlow would not have suggested the arrangement, but she offered no objection when it was proposed by Rhoda. Her only course was to efface herself, which she did promptly and thoroughly. She gathered up her skirts when she saw them coming and retired with a rustle of silk, giving Rhoda, without reservation, the reins of government, an act of gallantry on the part of a gentlewoman whose reign had comprised over thirty wise years. It might have been said of Jasmine Harlow that all her gestures were graceful. If David was distressed to see his gentle mother thus superseded in her own establishment, he knew better than to protest openly. These two understood each other perfectly and never resorted to a covert word between them.

David's child was sickly and undernourished. Rhoda refused to nurse her and was in a continual stew about nurses and doctors. She said repeatedly that little Rhoda was not a pretty baby and that for a girl-child not to have beauty was a decided handicap. She gave parties to console herself and tried to forget that overhead in the nursery the infant was crying itself almost into convulsions. Often old Mrs. Harlow, fine-drawn lines in her pale face, would leave her chamber and under cover of the racket below steal to the door of the room wherein a trained nurse labored at her wit's end to quiet a hungry, infuriated little human being, savage for sustenance.

"Dear, dear," she would sigh helplessly. For she was never allowed to interfere.

II

When David had been ten years married the old-young look was already settled on his face and his mother had lain five winters under a blanket of snow, five summers under incredible moss-pinks as radiant as her cheeks. He was the shabby husband of an insistent gilded wife, the father of a little girl grown strong and shy, with roving, red-brown eyes and a perverse, inaccessible nature. Rhoda would take her south winters or north in summer, while David stayed home, drudging in the shop, but he was always on the platform when they returned, sweet in his deprivation, welcoming them warmly.

Rhoda took pride in the cinnamon curls of Muffet, dressed the child elaborately and sought to make her precocious. When David pleaded that "showing off" was against the child's inherent nature she would say, with the touch of asperity that was hardening her pretty mouth,

"You tend to your old engines and let me bring her up in my own way!"

But with all her striving Rhoda's social success, a forced fruit at best, displeased the palate of the discriminating. Her popularity proved inconstant. Wedgewater, an intensely sober, exacting community, created its own standard. Her pretensions being as high as her handshake, Rhoda had always looked upon the factory with a contemptuous eye.

"It is very lucky," she said, "that your father left us something—though it's little enough. I can't think why you persist in that old rut."

But David, enfeebled though he was by aspersions, did persist with a sort of mean, broken-spirited tenacity.

She could spend his father's money but he would have his work. Even though he made no spectacular progress and whenever it was possible for another to slip by him in a thin passage that other always did, yet he adhered to his dogged ways, his workshop and enthusiasm, called by Rhoda "hobbies."

Bored to extinction in her provincial setting, coddling the belief that she was a superlatively gifted woman if only she could find her audience, Rhoda played and primped through lonely days, even occupying herself with the child, who was neither as clever as her side of the house nor as handsome as the Harlows. Rouging and polishing her nails throughout the day, manipulating a mirror before another mirror, everlastingly posing before her audience of one, her sad, listless little audience, she would ask,

"Am I beautiful and are you happy to have a beautiful mother?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Even though your father takes no notice . . . and this hateful house is shunned by all the stupid, hateful people . . . and you and I are virtually prisoners?"

"Yes, Mother."

"You will remember always that you were born a lady as your mother is a lady and common things are not for us?"

"Yes, Mother, I mean no, Mother."

Thus interminably the dreary duet. Occasionally it varied.

"Coming home with his hands of a day-laborer, looking so dull and tired and shifty, because he's a failure," brooded Rhoda and the child asked,

"Mother, what is a failure?"

"A failure is a man who hasn't made the most of his opportunities. It's your father's own fault that he comes under this head. I could have helped him anywhere; I had the brains and the beauty. But he was insane over machinery—as if those are the only wheels that turn."

But the child was repeating like one who learns a difficult lesson,

"A failure is a man who . . ."

Just what happened between that time and the days when Rolf Sterling knew them was kept most sedulously guarded. If the residents of Wedgewater ever knew there was nothing to refresh their memories. No word of the mother and the wife was heard upon the lips of either David or his daughter. They lived alone and Muffet Harlow apparently wanted no one but her father.

"Your child, David," his mother had said. . . .

Chapter VI

I

SCARCELY had Rolf Sterling drawn up at the gate of the Harlow house on Saturday than the door flashed open. It twinkled inward and there stood old David, vibrating welcome. There was no Vannie this time to prolong the ceremony: entrance was immediate and intimate. Sterling too felt impatient though not for the reason that Harlow was impatient. Harlow thought with a great glow of simple gratitude how good Sterling had been to come, and Sterling thought about Harlow, the smug old fellow who kept his pretty daughter well hidden from the eyes of the world.

They were again in the room of his first encounter, among the beautiful, battered things hallowed by their daily usage. Sterling had thought of it a hundred times in the interim and wondered if his reaction would be the same. He was pleased to find that it was. The paneled chimney-place with its pendant warming pan, and bellows, its wonderful old Staffordshire ornaments, the low, chintz-covered chairs drawn near, these and the other arrangements of the room repeated their rightness. Wherever there was a bit of wood showing in the old chairs it was worn thin as thread-bare satin. . . . The fingers slipped along it suavely . . .

Old Harlow, shaven, with clean linen showing be-

neath the dark, shapeless jacket, was the embodiment of Saturday afternoon. His thin, gentle mouth smiled whimsically: his eyes beneath their ledgy brows were twinkling; the tuft of hair that sped back from his forehead shone glamorous as frost. Sterling thought of him in his department at the factory and was unable to reconcile the picture with the man he saw before him now. Here his distinction was undeniable—there he was but one of fifty draftsmen, all of whom now moved with greater rapidity. He had ascertained that on several occasions Harlow had grown dizzy at his board and been surprised by the other men with his head sagging. But after the administration of a drink and a few minutes in the air he had insisted on continuing with his work and had been terribly upset because his old friend, Elijah Moore, summoned from the pattern shop, had suggested telephoning his daughter.

“Well now!” from David delightedly and he made the gesture of hands on knees, recognized from time immemorial as signifying something cozy in the nature of a beginning, even if it be only plump and racy talk between two gossips.

“I’m glad you came early. We’ll have a good long time before us. . . . I’d ask you to take off your coat but we’ll be going out to the workshop at once, I think, and it’s sometimes a trifle chilly. I—er I should prefer taking you out before Elijah arrives. Best friend in the world, Elijah Moore, but—er—erratic,” and with gentle cantankerousness, “he gets ahead of me in my own talk. Now I like to explain things progressively, but Elijah, he’s jumpy—has the cart before the horse every time, and if you can’t understand him he gets waspish. . . .”

“Elijah,” mused Sterling, smiling. “Oh, Moore!”

And, since he was not obtuse he saw the whole tickling situation,—the two old cronies had waited for this day, Elijah with no interests of his own being a stockholder in all of Harlow's. He saw also that Harlow was childishly determined to demonstrate his own invention in his own way, and to enjoy the full flavor of proprietorship. Innocent enough, but was it not comic the way he was getting ahead of Moore, cheating him out of the show by crowding in the workshop the first thing, no doubt getting Sterling there just a "lit-tle" bit earlier than Moore expected!

"All right," he said good-naturedly, "let's get about it," but his eye grew vagrant.

There were sounds in the house, anonymous ones. Was Miss Harlow at home or was the lump-footed Vannie responsible for all of them? He told himself that his only interest in Miss Harlow was the wish to solve her psychology. But this hypothesis did not explain why he had hoped he might be alone with the family for the evening meal. At any rate that hope had been nipped by the mention of old Moore as an accustomed guest. Moore would of course be the kind of man who formed regular dining-out habits, a Saturday and Sunday-nighter!

Stupid with his conjectures, Rolf followed David Harlow out-of-doors. Though the afternoon was bright, the field, it could hardly be called a lawn, looked bleak with the heavy, matted fall of maple leaves, that had lain sodden through several rains.

"There are two theories about leaves," remarked David incorrigibly over his shoulder. "Some believe in raking them up, and others in letting them lie. I believe in letting them lie." And he chuckled.

How characteristic that was, mused Sterling, and

years afterward in thinking of David Harlow he would remember that dry voice with the chuckle behind it, drawling, "There are two theories about leaves—" Now Harlow forged ahead over the rough ground almost at a dog-trot. He had lifted his collar about his ears, and his ears looked gleeful. He had resisted the furtive glance up the road which was in the back of his mind but Sterling, catching the wave, did it for him and grinned when he saw that no one was in sight.

"Take care of your head," recommended David and Sterling bent to graze the low lintel of the door.

"There now," chuckled his host, "there now" being only second in sequence to "well now." It represents a more mature plane of enjoyment; it is getting well along toward the heart of the matter. He turned with a look almost appealing to Rolf and suddenly he saw him as a symbol. There in the subdued light of the shop, rising from the dust of disillusion, was a young man more beautiful than pictures, if youth amounted to anything, youth and plastic perfection. There was nothing spiritual in Rolf's appearance. Nor did he know that he was magnificently conceived for manhood. But Harlow was suddenly thrilled by his hugeness and vitality. It was as though Sterling was something needed to complement his sterile years, something wheeled into his life as the wooden horse was wheeled into Troy. Tears came to his eyes.

Rolf, all unconscious of the emotion he had quickened, was examining the room. It was neither particularly light nor adaptable to the sort of use Harlow had made of it. All the marks of old years were there, dust-covered patterns hanging on the walls, now moldy as discarded theories. But one marked the man's progress by the evolution of his tools and contrivances up

to the point where everything was quite triumphantly modern.

A high desk was littered with drawing-boards and draftsman's tools, triangles, T-squares, protractors and the like. At the work-bench Sterling's practiced eye assimilated the detail of small tools and a precision lathe for very fine work. Nearby he noted other machines of Harlow's own ingenious design and manufacture, the craftsmanship of which appeared perfect. A gasoline motor furnished power for the shop. Sterling's heart warmed to the workmanlike interior. If he had a soul to understand anything it was the absorption with, the heroic adherence of a man to his own line, his work, his dream. He knew he was standing in the sanctum of David Harlow's lifelong endeavor—the region of his research.

The atmosphere trembled.

"Now then," said David.

II

An hour later Muffet Harlow, looking from the window, saw Elijah Moore coming up the road. He was a small, birdlike man in a wispy overcoat, holding his head sharply to one side and walking with a little hitch in each step as though in an effort of exaggerated sprightliness. Amused, she ran to open the door to him. He was the only habitué of the house and she knew him very well.

"And how are you to-day?" he chirped, flattered by the attention. He invariably began his sentences with "and," which made his talk, even after a long interruption, seem miraculously to tide over. He gave her an affectionate handshake.

Pleasure, like any other unwonted emotion, aggravated the nervousness which caused him to walk, talk, and gesture in jerks. He removed his hat and shook out his hair, which was never smooth but rose in separate incrustations like feathers. His unconsidered mustache was as awry as the rest of him.

"And how is your father?"

He rubbed his hands as in relishment of some promised pleasure.

"And Mr. Sterling," rather more cautiously. "He hasn't come?"

"Oh, yes, he's come," she shocked him innocently. "He came an hour ago and he and father have been denned out there ever since!"

She waved her hand in the direction of the workshop. Mr. Moore looked calamitous. His hands flew in every direction.

"Tchk, tchk, tchk," he rued with his tongue, and "Dear, dear, dear, dear, dear."

She asked impishly,

"Is it so bad?"

"I should so have liked . . . if your father had trusted to me in presenting the matter. . . . No doubt I should have come earlier, I should have been on hand."

Muffet thought of the pig and the wolf in the old nursery tale and how the pig had outwitted the wolf by going so early to the fair. Her eyelids shivered over eyes burdened with laughter.

"Never mind, perhaps you're not too late now! You'd better go right out and see if you can't impress the impressive Mr. Sterling!" She pronounced the name with mocking deference.

"I tell you what I think," whispered Elijah, hesitating in the passage and reclaiming his hat. "I think

if you were to smile at him just as you're smiling at me now." He wagged a finger.

"Oh how idiotic!" but she blushed.

"He's va-ry smart," bobbed back Mr. Moore with great archness, "and va-ry well-to-do!"

Convulsed, she caught him by the coat-lapel and whispered in his ear. It was a fuzzy ear and in her impetuosity she pressed so close that she felt its rabbit-like rim against her cheek.

"He smells of shaving soap," she disposed scathingly of the "va-ry well-to-do" Mr. Sterling.

III

When, after dark, the three men came in Muffet was in the sitting room. David had not mentioned her, and a keen anxiety had grown up in Sterling that for some reason she would withhold her society altogether. His dim anxiety was only dispelled by the surprise of discovering what her father had been about. This discovery had knocked askew all the planets in the solar system of his brain. Harlow had pursued a line of reasoning eminently practical and plausible, and had achieved a result, which like all clever ideas, appeared to have been simple from the start. He had given years to the perfection of this smooth mechanism which he now proceeded to demonstrate.

What he had to show was a small model of a valve and a valve gear for a Deisel engine, one which functioned without aid of cams or springs, positive in action and practically noiseless. Its light reciprocating parts were made with an ease of lubrication and accessibility. Sterling's trained faculties recognized its merits at once, and his surprise was his greatest tribute to the

inventor. For two hours he listened and assimilated, raising objections for the interest of having them overridden. His admiration for the older man was evidenced in the new tone of deference in which he addressed him. This in the first flush of enthusiasm. For the better part of his life he had been interested in the building of the Deisel engine, but Harlow's exhaustive study of it made Sterling's knowledge seem superficial in comparison. After all, Sterling was an executive, not a creator. But what good had Harlow's genius ever done him since he lacked just those tough, pioneering qualities which inhered in the younger man? One thing was certain,—without moral assistance he would never attain to the commercializing of his invention, valid though it was. And Sterling was already asking himself how vitally concerned in its promotion he cared to become. . . .

At length the afternoon ended and in place of such heavy preoccupations came tripping the pleasant, personal ones he had temporarily set aside. Was she or was she not in the house? On entering he had immediately asked to wash up, and old Harlow had led him up the shallow Colonial flight of stairs. At the top they had paused in idle confab over the presence of a stout oaken gate. Sterling asked carelessly if Miss Harlow had been the last child in the house.

His host paused, breathing delicately from the climb.

"It was not placed there when she was a child," he said in a low voice, "but later when she was nearly grown. I discovered that she was walking in her sleep!"

Sterling's impression was of a deeper significance than the words implied. It was just something in the expression of Harlow's face, an eyrie reminiscence.

"I was afraid she might get hurt," he concluded simply.

Sterling made no comment but his heart went suddenly quiet, like water when the wind goes down. They traversed a square hall with a beautiful window at the end, its many white bars enclosing stars on a background of burning blue. A ship's lantern, carrying oil, threw faint discernment on the old English prints and the family portraits crowding the walls. Harlow indicated a door.

"The bathroom, Mr. Sterling, I'll wait for you below." And he went shuffling down again, singing a moody old song, half gay, half melancholy, but in this instance indicative of capital humor. When Sterling descended to join him, Muffet Harlow was standing beside her father in the sitting room. She wore an unfashionable dress of black velvet that accentuated the slimness of her figure. At her neck was a narrow collar of embroidery which might have belonged to one of those serious ancestors Sterling had encountered in the upper hall. Her small, beautifully-shaped wrists were set off by tight bands of the same quaint linen.

"How do you do?" she proffered, leaving the circle of her father's arm and stepping forward. She gave him her hand and stepped back again conclusively, this time winding her arm across her father's shoulder. There was an affectionate abandon in her way of doing this. It was as though the few hours of separation had been hard on them both. The fact that she had found no sphere in life other than being a child to him made this attitude poignant, pitiful. They stood facing Sterling and Elijah Moore, two friends come to break bread with them, but in reality facing the world.

Muffet's dark eyes, widely set and roving with the

shyness of introspection, became suddenly focused. Soon she would ask Sterling, "What do you think of my father's invention?" not thus crudely perhaps, but in substance the same, and she would judge him entirely by his reply. Soon, with admirable finesse, she had accomplished the query, and Sterling was searching about for some delicate material in which to clothe his reply.

"I think it is very interesting," he spoke guardedly at last, "very interestingly thought out. I recognize that, theoretically, it is sound. But in practice it is hard to say just what conditions may affect it. Personally . . ."

Muffet's brow was sensitively screwed as though she thought he were hedging, but Elijah Moore took the doubt in good faith, wheeled convulsively from his contemplation of the canary, and vociferated,

"Such an argument has been raised before, Mr. Sterling, and we always tell them——"

Old David, overtaking him, was childishly eager.

"That in the event of a thorough trial——"

But Elijah fairly jumped from the floor.

"Not at all—that wasn't the point I intended to make, David. Will you or will you not allow me to speak?"

"But whose invention is it, Elijah, yours or mine?"

"Yours," shouted Elijah, empurpled. "I wash my hands of it!"

Periodically Elijah was given to flare in this way; periodically David, irritated by the friendly interference without which it is doubtful if he could have lived, trod upon Elijah's toes. "I wash my hands of it," Elijah would cry and for several days would remain away, courting overtures of apology from his friend. Then the reestablishment of the old intimacy and the

assurance from David that Elijah was the foster parent of his invention. This evening, inopportunately, they came to scratch, but before the peace-makers could intervene Vannie appeared on the threshold, announcing supper.

IV

It was just such a meal as one would have anticipated in such a house. The dining room slanted like the cabin of a ship, the ceiling brooded low, like an oriental typhoon, but they ate, from a wonderful old table of Santo Domingo mahogany, food celestial. Vannie moved about behind them in starched solemnity, obsequious and heavy-footed. When the meat course came David excused himself with a look of sly hospitality and was heard descending to the cellar. Elijah coughed decorously and fiddled with his forks, as it was known to him that in honor of Sterling's visit they were to be treated to Harlow's most venerable vintage. A tremor of intelligent laughter passed over the face of the girl, the inaccessible girl who might be so precious if one were allowed to know her.

Presently here was old David returned with a carefully dusted bottle. As he hovered at a side-table, his back eloquent of his activity, Vannie passed the glasses. And again Elijah coughed and fiddled with his forks. There was to Sterling something grotesque in this glee of a cadaver. Then the gratifying explosion, the impetuous flow of champagne. Muffet crinkled her nose and gave Sterling one fleet, shy glance of conviviality, which impelled him to his feet in premature intoxication,

"To the invention," he said heartily, "to its successful adoption!"

"The invention . . ." "The invention . . ." an ecstatic murmur.

"Gentlemen, I thank you!" The gray-haired, credulous old man was bowing his naïve complacence. Never a doubt in his mind, marveled Sterling, that he was the winner of the race.

Swept away by the spirit of the toast, Muffet Harlow slipped from her chair and kissed David on the cheek.

She did these things, thought Sterling, profoundly moved, with a simplicity, a certain lovely merriment that seemed to have gone out of style.

Though as yet Muffet had "made" no conversation with him, he was completely absorbed by her, those fine, smooth hands, like separate entities, those mental hands that could not darn nor, he would warrant, cook or sew, but that had expressions of their own, attitudes, thoughts. Her face in all its half-revelations held him. It wondered about life . . . and this wonderment filled Sterling with a holy amazement, gripped him to the point of pain. . . .

Moore was privileged to chaff her intimately. Moore was sixty and a widower. No harm in that, no reason why he should give himself such airs about it. The girl was tolerant of him as she would be of any old harmless foggy, he thought, but he had seen laughter in her eyes over the champagne, over the quarrel.

They retired to the sitting-room and Sterling made bold for ingratiation. They were, after all, the logical two to talk. They were young, Sterling's thirty-five years offsetting Moore's sixty—once she learned how, she would find it healthier to consort with youth. But being a bad conversationalist he found it awkward to

make a beginning. She had, apparently, no interests outside her home.

"Do you go often to Wedgewater, Miss Harlow?" He was as wooden as that.

"I walk in every day to market. I love marketing. Father says when you see it as an esthetic delight it ceases to be drudgery. But I find when I look at it that way I forget to drive bargains!"

The softest laugh. Such a rich, considered voice, too. He was certainly not given to visualization, but as she spoke he saw her voice, silk on one side and velvet on the other.

"Have you friends in Wedgewater?"

"No, relatives." Though the distinction was seriously made he suspected her of playfulness.

"But surely you have distractions in town, you attend church gatherings or—or call on your girl friends," he ended lamely.

She shook her head.

"I could have no greater friend than my father."

"Naturally not but without lesser friends as well I should think you might be lonesome."

"Why?"

"Why?" he floundered stupidly, wishing, of course, to express the well-founded conviction that life must not be narrowed down to such a point.

Muffet was sitting on the edge of her chair without much creating the impression of permanency. Also Sterling was aware that just outside their range of talk lean Elijah hovered. His troubled intuition told him that Elijah was about to pounce upon them and end it all by taking Muffet away. He had actually burrowed in some closet or other and found the checker board and the intention of checkers shone in his eyes. Yes,

surely he would pounce . . . But in the meantime——

"I don't understand," said Sterling, greatly pressed, his eyes resting upon the cloudy head of the girl now bent in the faintest boredom. "I don't understand how you manage to live without coming in contact with people. There are so many organizations that tend to draw together—to unify—the church, as I said before and the clubs——"

She laughed a shade ironically.

"They wouldn't care for us."

"You mean you wouldn't care for them?" His face was scarlet.

She raised him candid eyes.

"Yes, I suppose that's what I meant!"

"Why, see here," he guarded savagely against the invasion of Moore. "We've a great crowd of young people down at our church. I attend the First Congregational—not from any strong sectarian preference, you understand, but because it was the first one I happened to go to when I came to Wedgewater." He said that with a large magnanimity, an assumption of broadness which made her smile. People of his stamp, she mused astutely, contended that all branches of Christianity were one to them, whereas in reality they were incapable of intensive religion; they found no glory in the stars save as a form of convenient incandescence. She saw his well-intentioned enthusiasm, his probable all-roundness and popularity behind the statement. She saw him as a man not only executive in business but a community lover as well. She saw him handing down Christmas cornucopias to a band of boys and girls no less enthusiastic than himself. Strange, book-bred divinations

on the part of an innocent girl who had really never lived at all, they were astonishingly correct.

"If you don't go to town how do you spend your days?" he was hurling at her desperately. Oh, Elijah Moore!

"I waste them," she answered perversely, "on anything that catches my fancy. And Sundays we walk all day, my father and I . . ."

My father again. What adulation in the word!

"Even if it rains?"

"Even if it rains, it's irresistible then. The rabbits are hopping about and the wild geese flying. We're all over mud and mad as March hares!"

Elijah was imminent with the red and black checker board under his arm.

"Will you," asked Sterling, "that is would you and your father dine with me at the Mohawk some time soon?"

The spirit of the rainy day, so elfin in its appearance, withdrew from her eyes.

"You are very kind."

Again she was remote, defiant, not for cultivation. The truth came to Sterling startlingly,—“These people have been hurt . . .”

"And what," old Moore was chirping at her elbow, "would you say to a game of checkers?"

He had pounced.

Chapter VII

LATER Sterling was taking Moore home in his car and engaging in a rather one-sided conversation. It was a sweet, stabbing autumn night, bright stars above hanging in uneven lengths as though pendant from invisible chains. The wind blew in a great scythe, the whole earth seemed in passage, and Sterling's machine, projecting its own vision before it, slid smoothly, knowingly along the asphalt road. Beside him Moore sprawled in the low roadster like a discarded scarecrow, his feet extended stiffly before him, his mustache askew, and one ungloved, bony hand clutching at his hat. He was unaccustomed to motor cars and Sterling's facility in handling the thing amazed him. He was proud to be so endangered, so jeopardized, but not, as Sterling finally comprehended, quite up to conversation.

"Fine people, the Harlows!" was the younger man's obvious bait as they spun beneath the night.

Moore turned his head like an automaton, but immediately faced front again, his tear-blinded eyes responsible to the road.

"Oh yes, the Harlows—va-ry fine folks!"

"You've known them a long time, I take it?"

"Ha, thirty years—leastways Dave. There's—there's a team ahead!"

"Yes, I see it. These fellows ought to carry lights. Thirty years, you say? That is a long time. Have they always lived out there?"

"What-say? Wind blows so hard can't hearyear!"

"I merely asked if they had always lived in the old house."

"Oh, well, practically. The place is kinder run down now but it was a mighty fine house in its day."

"I can see that," mused Sterling, and, typically, "it needs paint, and a lot of fixin'!"

He broke off to negotiate a corner and Moore's sigh of relief could be heard above the night wind.

"Guess you didn't mean to take that quite so fast!"
A nervous laugh.

"Oh, I knew I could make it."

The younger man's profile bent above the wheel was speculative. There was something in connection with the Harlows which he did not understand. Old Harlow was not a widower, that much he had ascertained, but neither was there any mention of a near or remote Mrs. Harlow. The girl and her father had lived alone for many years; their conversation compassed only the fact of each other! But their very inbred gentleness made the possibility of a family estrangement difficult to imagine. What, then, was the explanation? What was he supposed to think?

"And Mrs. Harlow," he mused a trifle too carelessly, "is dead, I suppose?"

Under the darkness the color mounted his cheek. Moore's hesitation seemed to accuse him of prying.

"No," came Elijah's voice against the wind, "she's alive—fur as I know." That was all.

Sterling felt the rebuff and wished that he had not chosen so unpropitious a time for his question. He was frankly curious about Mrs. Harlow but not from the idle standpoint of the gossip; it was rather that he wished to understand the Harlows intelligently.

Wedgewater's main thoroughfare, its new and scintillating "white way" lay before them, a long vista of bubbles. But Sterling was not through with Moore, not half through with him. It was unprofitable to attempt talk out-of-doors with the anemic little man whose one available and listening feature appeared to be his nose. But suppose they were supping in some mellow place . . .

"Where do you live, Mr. Moore?" he temporized pleasantly.

"Division Street, forty," replied Elijah, gradually emerging from his overcoat. "But you can drop me anywhere. I still got the use o' my legs." A high cackle.

"I was thinking," came the magnificent suggestion, "that you might like to stop in a while at my apartment and have someting to warm you. It's not exactly a June night!"

Sterling had eased to stop before the effulgent Mohawk and was hopefully slipping the gear into neutral.

"I live here, you know!"

"Yes, I know," admitted Moore fluttering in his scarecrow fashion, recalling his embarrassment anent Mrs. Harlow and with his weather eye cocked for further catechism.

If Sterling just wanted to pump him—But there had been the mention of something warming, which unquestionably meant a nip, and the cold night had made Elijah more than usually vulnerable. He hesitated and his will went flabby.

"Don't care if I do," he surrendered sheepishly and climbed out in a flurry of excitement.

During the five years of its existence he had never entered the Mohawk, one of a chain of modern hotels

indigenous to the state. Yet he had shunned it through no lack of interest. In fact, all during its course of construction he had made it the destination of his Sunday walk, poking about over the broken ground with his inquisitive stick, and later admiring its imposing proportions with civic pride. No, his desertion of it, his failure to become a patron lay rather in the lean superstition that it cost you "a dollar a minute" to go inside. Now he followed Sterling across the big shining foyer, with its marble columns, and its Byzantine tiles, its sweeping luxury of chairs and rugs and electricity, into a rococo elevator as large as an office. The hotel was comparable to the man in whose wake he followed, built on a strong foundation, and always adding another story to its height.

So far no one had demanded toll of Elijah and he alighted with relief at the seventh floor. The corridors were confusing; it was wonderful how Sterling knew his way. Before a certain door he paused, fumbled for his key-ring and admitted Moore to those impersonal rooms of his where he was supposed to be living in the lap of luxury. To right and left he snapped on lights so that Elijah winced and dodged the glare—he felt exposed somehow. But impressed. Oh, distinctly so. There was the hotel-like reception room with an obese velvet sofa and two fat offspring in the form of chairs, quite a family of heavyweights. They sat about in vapid splendor like persons with not much to occupy their minds. Adjacent to this salon Moore glimpsed the bedchamber, fresh from the hands of the maid. The bed had been turned down—that was one of the offices they performed for you at the Mohawk—and the stiff, white linen looked arbitrary and cold as marble. Then there was "the den," only a shade less concise and

empty but to Moore's eyes beyond criticism. His eyes dwelt upon the gory leather chairs.

"My, my," he said with restrained admiration, "how comfortable you must be!"

"Oh, yes," agreed Sterling dubiously, wondering why he could not effuse as heartily as he wished. "Take off your coat and we'll sit in here. It's more homelike somehow. I'll ring for a waiter . . ."

As he gave the order over the telephone Moore removed his overcoat and warmed his hands at the radiator which was concealed under an ornamental lattice. They subsided comfortably in the catsup-colored chairs and made desultory conversation, in anticipation of the waiter who appeared almost immediately. Like a well-rounded robin he eyed little Moore, a winter bird that wanted feeding, a sparrow in poor circumstances.

"Bring us some sandwiches," directed Sterling. "What would you say, Mr. Moore, to some toast and caviar?"

"Anything, anything," Moore waved his hand humbly, though his heart fell at the thought of caviar which he had always heard associated with ptomaine poison.

"Caviar," nodded Sterling, "and some orange juice and ice."

Why orange juice, wondered Moore who, belonging to the old school, was unfamiliar with the ingredients of a cocktail and its *modus operandi*. Could it be possible Sterling would offer him a cold drink on such a night? Quelling his anxiety, he found a sick smile and wore it on his face, determined to be appreciative whatever sort of refreshment he was given. But the production on the part of his host of a bottle of Bicardi rum, and other spectacular liquors made his heart to

purr and simmer like a tea-kettle before boiling. The sandwiches came and after the first sip of cocktail he ventured upon one, then another and another. Sterling ate caviar but to Moore's great surprise he let the drink alone.

"I keep it for my friends," he explained with entire truth and Moore, looking at him, understood why he was so wholesome-looking, with frosty blue eyes unobscured and a skin like a boy's.

The conversation was now a derrick which Sterling could swing at will, so he talked of the invention.

"It's well thought out," he said again. "It amazes me. And yet it's the most natural thing in the world that a man all his life associated with the Deisel engine should have taken this line of improvement. The valves have always been noisy!"

"Yes," said Moore, "and dirty. I've been on the subs when I've wondered how the men could stand 'em."

"It bowls me over," continued Sterling, "when I think of the men who are probably engaged in experimenting along the same line! When I think that right in our own shop—well, I can't believe in it yet. And still the model appears to function perfectly. A remarkable thing about it is the easily controlled latitude of valve actions in regard to opening and closing——"

"With provision for ample cooling," interrupted Moore, his glass aslant, "don't forget that, so that the parts subject to heat can be kept within a safe working temperature and not subject to warping."

"I know," nodded Sterling thoughtfully, "all valves of the conventional poppet type have been susceptible to warping unless equipped with some cooling system, always of questionable reliability."

Thus they warmed to their theme.

"He's kept his ideas pretty close, hasn't he?" from Sterling.

Moore grinned.

"He's never let any one in on 'em but me. Now it don't matter. He's got his papers clear. And when this valve is adopted—I say when it is—there's some people in town will sit up an' take notice. Crack-brained dreamer, they call him, old Harlow, a plodder! Ha!" Moore submitted to having his glass refilled. "You're going to work for it, with the company, I mean? You saw enough to-day to convince you of its possibilities.

"Yes," murmured Sterling, very far away, "seeing is believing. And I'll do what I can. But it may mean a long time, Moore, a long time. And much opposition——"

He broke away from his speculative spell.

"Tell me," he asked abruptly, "has Mr. Harlow always been so—well, a moment ago you called him 'a plodder'?"

"David," mused Moore, sitting on the edge of his chair and looking lovingly upon his third drink, "was quite a nervy young fellow in his day. Handsome as fire, polished too, and a real catch with his prospects and all. He inherited a tidy bit from his father—at least it was something to build on—but he married an extravagant wife and she went right straight through the whole business, yes sir, she turned his pockets inside out, you might say, and what he hadn't lost, she spent."

Sterling moistened his mouth.

"And what was she like, this Mrs. Harlow?"

Moore took a deep breath.

"She was the most beautiful woman that ever stepped foot in Wedgewater."

"Whew, you don't say?"

Moore nodded.

"An' David was all hands and feet about her, hands an' feet an' solemnity," he added, pleased with the coining of the phrase. "She'd knock your eye out, she would."

"Was she like—Muffet—I mean Miss Harlow?"

"Well," demurred Moore, "I can't say she was. Muffet took from the other side. Muffet looks softer somehow—softer."

Sterling was leaning forward.

"They've been alone some time now?"

"Yep, Dave and the girl. It's wonderful what's between 'em. Lord, it wouldn't do to whisper in her presence that her father hasn't done as well as he might 'a' done, shoved ahead, I mean. Seems like she's as set about him bein' a great man as her mother was set agin it. If it hadn't been for Muffet I daresay Dave would have gone down an' out. He's not made o' stout stuff, more's the pity. I daresay he would have got plum discouraged at times without his girl to buck him up. But she's made him a devoted daughter. An' somehow they've never wanted any one else in the house, though there was quite a pa'cel of women folks would have been glad to come, aunts and what-not. There's one now that swarms on 'em every year, hopeful-like they'll let her stay. She's one o' those long-livers. But she'll never git in, not if I know the Harlows!"

Sterling was tapping the arms of his chair, a frown caught between his brows.

"But good God!" The exclamation was ripped from him. "Harlow can't live forever and then what's to

become of her, the girl, I mean? She ought to marry."

Moore took a complacent swallow.

"She never will. No, sir, I doubt if she ever will."

"Why not?"

"Wouldn't leave her father. Besides she's not the kind of girl that gets to know men. But, pshaw, she'd make the sweetest wife a man could want if only he could get her to see it that way. I tell you what, if I was a lit-tle younger and better looking——"

"Ha," laughed Sterling prematurely.

He knew that Moore was going to say he would speak for her himself, a little joke of his, no doubt, but, regarding Moore, the dilapidated old fellow, it did not appeal to Sterling as a very good one. He had an aversion to hearing it completed.

"Of course," he took up a trifle belligerently, "it's absolutely no business of mine, but I can't help wondering about this Mrs. Harlow and why she didn't stick to the ship. It's a bit odd, their never mentioning her, you'll admit? One is entitled to one's thoughts and from the fact that she has dropped away from their lives I infer——"

But by now Elijah Moore had reached the plane of audacity where he would have slapped the proverbial lion in the face. He had lost his awe of Sterling, who still sat coldly and stupidly sober, plaguing him with questions.

"Young man," said Elijah, making his hand soar upon the air, "you jest go right on supposin' an' inferin', cuz there's no one in this town could tell you anything about her." There was something terribly comic in his insolent eye and the voice that was just beginning to misbehave. "I could," he added perversely, "but I won't!"

Chapter VIII

I

WHETHER or not it was pleasant to waken in the old house on Wedgewater Road depended upon whether or not you were a member of the Harlow family. There was that about the old house which would not let one forget for an instant the line of descent.

Muffet never forgot it, when she was walking the mile to market with a basket over her arm, or bickering friendlily with Vannie, or cutting hickory whistles with her father in the spring.

As for David, the consciousness of race was the fine staff which upheld him in all disappointments or failures. A recluse, yes, but it was for Nature's purposes that he conserved his strength and the essence of his personality. Emerson wrote: "Nature protects her own work. To the culture of the world an Archimedes, a Newton is indispensable; so she guards them by a certain aridity. If these had been good fellows, fond of dancing, port and clubs, we should have had no 'Theory of the Sphere' and no 'Principia'. They had that necessity of isolation which genius feels." And Ibsen: "Think it over, my dear B. A man's gifts are not a property. They are a duty."

So David was often in his workshop before dawn, a bleak enough figure, unshaven, and with the wan light

of early morning playing the enemy to his youth. And David was at his drawings in the shop the span of the day, always thinking like an inventor, looking forward jealously to the free, earned time of the evening. He never knew what clothes he was wearing, nor in what pitiable condition they were become by his own negligence and Muffet's worse thrift of mending; but Ah, David with an unpaid bill in his pocket was the merriest of playfellows on a holiday, the merriest and tenderest, so that it was small wonder Muffet loved him, defended him against all the world, and with her maternal needs so filled, gave no thought to the normal woman's future that might well be in store for her.

Her day went something in this wise. Either she was prompt and breakfasted with her father or she overslept and found under her door the inevitable little note that was both a bulletin and a leave-taking. On this particular morning she opened her eyes deliberately a little late and rested in pleasant deferment of that moment when she must don clothing and personality and begin once more to be a Harlow. The bed in which she lay would have been accounted rare among antiquarians. Muffet had slept in it for many years and her dreams had been tranquil ones. At night her father kissed her many times, almost as a lover might have done, and said, "Rest well, my darling," with always the deepening note of feeling, of finality.

Then Muffet went to bed and read by a candle, or lay marveling over the strange cubistic designs made by the moonlight on the gabled walls. She read a great deal and with discrimination; like David she had a whimsical mind that went always to the unobvious phases of things . . . And sometimes she thought

of love, as she had learned it in the realm of literature. But she simply and honestly knew no need of it for herself. No doubt for the simple reason that the maternal side of her nature was abnormally developed and fulfilled. Her whole concentrated being was in the love she gave her father.

And always on waking she lay thinking of him with a strange, mature, mirthful indulgence. No doubt he had gone. The room was garrulous with sunlight—a simple sort of room, good to wake in. The furniture was dignified, the floor painted and islanded with New England hooked rugs. The walls about which the sun now played in vibratory, deep-sea waverings, were in flowery, faded decoration. The few articles of the bureau and high-boy sufficed for her simple needs. An innocent room, but not a young girl's room in the stereotyped sense. Far from it. No photographs picturesquely inscribed. No souvenirs of this or that "prom," this or that football game. Nothing of the sort. This girl has been much alone. She has no giddy young friends with whom she has become easily allied. They would think her old-fashioned. And she would think them dull in comparison to her father. Muffet is not a prig, she is only intolerant with a hot, high-handed pride which is the youngest thing about her. Will her pride ever be cured? It has been so sore and for so long a time, ever since she started feeling like the parent of her father. . . .

In school that autumn she had deliberately written her name as "Muffet." Muffet Harlow—hence much laughter and chiding. The teacher had protested and the children had giggled and pointed the finger of scorn at her behind their books.

"Little Miss Muffet, she sat on a tuffet, eating her Curds and Whey,
When along came a spider and sat down beside her and frightened Miss Muffet away."

"But surely you were not christened that?" pursued the teacher.

"Yes," she had lied miserably.

For Muffet was a supersensitive and she had seen her father's face that morning when old Vannie, then young Vannie, had called her Rhoda. "Let's have it Muffet," he had said, and in his hearing no one ever spoke the name Rhoda again. Rolf Sterling had divined of them, these people have been hurt, but he was far from knowing what ate into their proud hearts.

II

Muffet slid from bed with pink toes shrinking and curling till they fumbled their way into bath slippers. Her slender young body in a slip of nightgown shivered against the morning cold. Her face was pale beneath the great mop of thick, stubbornly curled hair that came only to her shoulders. She yawned and stretched her arms, tautening her body till it was tall and arrowy, delightfully boyish, but with firm young breasts no larger than apples that made the delicate woman of her. She anticipated her father's note and found it, and, having sought comfort in a wrapper, proceeded to read. It was written on a piece of common paper torn from a flour bag and said,

"I'm off, my pet, while you slumber. Cat in the kitchen attending to its whiskers. Been a fracas of mice all night as evidenced by cheese on pantry floor. Must set trap. Made mention of it to Nicodemus

[Nicodemus was the negligent mouser] but no signs of shame. Dreamed last night the factory was making our engine, and you and I dining from gold dinner service. P. S. Like as not plated." And across the bottom ran a childish fence of kisses.

Muffet laughed and dwelt for a time in her father's missive which had shaken her completely awake. And soon she was on her way to her bath, her slippers clacking carelessly over the bare floors, her nostrils sniffing approvingly the faint aroma of bacon which now permeated the house.

Later, emerging, there was Vannie, tiptoeing in elephantine fashion up the stairs and pausing to rest heavily on the gate at the top.

"So yo'se awake, is you, Miss Muffet? Yo' breakfast on de back ob de stove!"

This was supposed to be a reproach; in reality it partook of the nature of a threat, the back of the stove representing in Vannie's mind a cold storage region of utter resignation. When Muffet or her father had stretched her elastic patience to the snapping point she would always say with a great, lugubrious mouth, "Yo' dinner on de back ob de stove." In the present case it was a fondly false statement. She would boil an egg and make fresh toast once she was able to focus her eye on the delinquent below stairs.

And that was precisely what she did, when Muffet was seated in the room which slanted like the cabin of a ship. The girl had more color now and her clear complexion was set off by the heavy coral brooch which she wore as the one adornment of a plain dress. Upstairs in the attic were trunk after trunk of feminine clothes, all of the rich texture of a bygone day, and these were being constantly remade for Muffet. Her

heavy black velvets and taffetas and poplins seemed to catch her back into a softer age of women; she was perpetually a person in a frame.

Now she sat, a shabby young aristocrat, in the shabby old house, beautifully unconscious of the travesty of her position. There was the precious odor of good coffee, good toast, and an egg precisely pondered. And Vannie in and out, in and out, obsequious, painstaking, making a little ceremony of the breakfast. And a continual talk between them anent David, an absolutely absurd and solemn conversation that had only to do with him. How he had felt about the dinner a few nights previous, what he had most enjoyed, what he had said later to Vannie in the kitchen, the possibility that he would eat a mutton chop that night. . . . But to-day Vannie dared an innovation. She began deliberately to speak of Mr. Sterling, Mr. Rolf Sterling, in terms of the highest praise.

"He looks lak he's mebbe got two, three thousan' dollars laid by cool an' handy. Yas, Mis' Muffet, an' he could buy whatever-all he hab in mind fo' de right leddy. . . ."

"Now you're being subtle, Vannie," Muffet remarked dryly, "but the motive underlying your remarks does not escape me. Do I need anything that I don't already possess?"

Oh, that stubborn Harlow pride. Vannie hung her head.

"Dey's times we do skinch, Mis' Muffet, dey's suttinly times we do skinch," she intimated darkly, then, brightening, "but hit's fittin' an' proper a young leddy ob yo' looks an' talents should be united in bonds ob wedlock. . . ."

Muffet covered her ears. Vannie's wide ducklike

mouth quacked on. . . . At the end of five minutes, having heard the entire argument, Muffet deigned her condescension.

"You wouldn't understand, Vannie, you simply wouldn't understand. I'd as soon think of falling—I'd as soon think of romance in connection with Elijah Moore as this Mr. Rolf Sterling——"

"Now, fo' de Lawd," lamented Vannie with eyes to the ceiling and the bacon platter lifted like a votive offering, "Ah knows dat yo' is failin' in yo' mind!"

So they bickered.

III

At nine o'clock she went to market, walking the mile to the stores along Wedgewater Road. The morning was a buoyant one, informed by sunlight, and with one of those racing skies of Autumn. Where the cloud shadows skimmed across wooded hills there were long amethyst shadows upon the pink and brown and these were constantly changing, reshaping. The marshes were still rich in rust; the blue-jays a flash of surprise, a color-thrust in the soul long to be remembered after they had flown. Nature was full of promise even at its dismantling and Muffet Harlow felt it gratefully.

After a quarter of a mile of the country road she was on asphalt, beside the bay and stimulated by the sight of the blue water fretted into a million little waves. A whelming tide went out to sea and this was the highway to France, to Spain, to fabulous countries she had never seen, but with which she felt a curious affinity. And now she was in the sunny shop where she marketed. She hated buying meat, but here was her

butcher, one whose coarseness was somehow impressed with her, though her purchases were ever very small, and pay was slow. He stood among the grotesque quarters of animals hanging like hapless Bluebeard's wives, and he sharpened his knives for the work he had to do. Already his apron was gored—his straw cuffs showing marks of appalling immersement, his hands alienated from any personal purposes, and he smiled at her and asked her what she would have to-day. Oh, they were brave men, these butchers, brave and hardy in their profession. She pitied them for not knowing that they were to be pitied. She felt herself a coward, buying squeamishly and only looking at the meat when it came on the table. Other housewives were meticulous and spoke expertly of certain cuts, had thrifty ways of utilizing even the waste portions. Not so Muffet. She gave her order and turned her back to make a purchase of fruit. When that was done her meat package was ready. But the fruits and vegetables engrossed her—the great globular yellow oranges with the incense of their own blossoms, the paler lemon, the egg plant in its thrilling purple veneer, like an enormous grape, apples, too, with their honest cheeks, and the snake-striped watermelon. She liked the little sprouts, secret and hard, fresh salad and greens of all kinds; she even liked the dusty brown potato, but not the bourgeois squash or pumpkin or the more ordinary turnip and carrot. . . .

And now with the little basket filled she can turn and go. But no, she is detained. It is the butcher, who is also the shop-owner. He takes off his hat. "Miss Harlow, one minute. I'm sorry to detain you. It's just that little matter about the account. I'd appreciate it if your father——"

"Oh, really, hasn't that been done? He's so forgetful—You shall have a check at once——"

A smile and a thanks, another smile from Muffet, whose cheeks, however, are crimson, and she leaves the store with high head. But there is no glory left on the day—it is in tatters.

She hurried up the road as though in stress to leave the burning thought behind. . . . She cast an accusing eye as though she would blame the Ship and Engine factory across the road, that untidy pile of brick and cement slapped down by the water, with its busy, begrimed, smoking chimneys, its appalling, avaricious industry. She had always feared it. As a child it had been merely because of its noise, the incessant clatter of air chisels. Now it stood to her as a symbol. Over there somewhere, her father labored from seven in the morning till six at night, taking his noonday meal from a box, like the lesser laborers. Naturally he did not sprawl about with it as did they, limp on the grass in summer like dislocated toys. No, he would sit tiredly in the drafting room, speaking a gentle word with any one who happened to be near. He would perhaps go outside a minute and smoke. He maintained always the air of a well-bred man, a little set in his ways. Nevertheless the thought was distasteful to Muffet; tears came to her eyes when she saw him leave in the morning with that telltale box and come home with it at night.

The day passed with her reading and sewing and now all the afflicting thoughts of the morning were put away, and she prepared for her father. She made the fire bright, looked to the table a hundred times, brought the day's paper and spread it conveniently, found his slippers, combed the cat. She made herself extra-

ordinarily attractive, with a bright ribbon at her waist. And he came as he had been coming all these years, haggard, handsome, moved to be taking her in his arms and kissing her, his rare guarded child. And always a little jest. "Did you walk?" she asks.

"No, the President of the United States rode by and gave me a lift."

So their days, one after the other.

Chapter IX

I

SUNDAY was the day David devoted to his daughter. It was a riotous day or one of wide religiosity—you might take your choice. They had ways of spending it which precluded the possibility of disappointment. Rain did not daunt them or a fall of snow; they were accustomed to finding either felicitous; they were to be met on the highways or byways dressed for the weather and with the irresistible spirit of vagrancy shining in their faces.

A month had slipped into the discard since that first evening when Rolf Sterling had dined with them. Nature had moved to that swift dismantling which is like the clock's highest count in its function of the hours; the latest is only the earliest. And like the clock Nature was undismayed, informed of secret purposes; weary, but never tired.

"I hear my bones within me say,
'Another night, another day. . . .'"

Winter came early that year, and the first snowfall lay on the ground under its intrenchment of ice in thin, tight-lipped severity, with the sky overhead iris-purple, the smoke from blanketed farmhouses yielding it a paler, bluer faith. Oxen were wonderful that day when the Harlows met them, in a country lane,

sepia red on that snow twilight of morning. Country folk rode to church in high buggies, behind their shaggy horses, and peered out at the man and girl, brave to walk over the frozen, slippery ground.

Old David wore a black coat, frayed at the sleeves, and a gray muffler; he had a seal cap with ear-lappets, but his cheeks did not turn red as in his lustier days. They looked more delicate despite his zest in the outing. Muffet's coat was of old-fashioned sealskin, with little golden channels showing beneath the black. She had a fur cap of chinchilla that came low about her head and showed only a fringe of gypsy-dark hair. Her cheeks glowed with vitality, her eyelashes looked particularly long and thick out-of-doors, she smiled continually at everything and called her father's attention to the most ordinary objects. And the crimson scarf of wool, knotted about her throat and streaming in long ends nearly to her feet, completed the touch of gypsy wildness in her appearance.

They were talking now of the mice they had caught in their trap the night before.

"A whole family of them," Muffet said. "Poor things, no doubt they're thankful to be together in prison. But imagine Mr. and Mrs. Mouse and the five children starting out for an innocent evening's entertainment, and intrigued by the smell of cheese into thinking it was quite a good café. The children cautioned about their manners, too, I have no doubt, before stepping on that fatal spring."

"And as it was descending into the grill," completed David quite seriously.

"But just at first," surmised Muffet, "they must have been deceived in their surroundings. They served themselves as in one of those new cafeterias, and there

was cheese all round, cheese crumbs on all the little gray jackets of the children. And then, when it was time to go home—oh, it's quite too grisly to speak of——”

“Infernal conspiracy,” murmured David, the corners of his mouth twitching.

“How—how naked their poor tails looked,” she repined feelingly, “especially when you set the cage outside the door this morning to let them freeze.” Was there a hint of reproach in that?

David took his hands from his pockets to vindicate himself.

“What other course could I pursue? I couldn't let them loose for Nicodemus to—no, that would have been barbarous——”

“Oh, well,” said Muffet, shuddering childishly, “we won't catch any more! This war on them makes me thoroughly sick——”

“But what of our pantry shelves, and our clothing, and our self-respect——”

“We've sacrificed them before——”

They suddenly faced one another and laughed. The road narrowed and wound to explore a forest of trim cedars like toy-trees in a play-village. Between the symmetry of their cypress-like growth the brush was brittle and darkly gold through the snow, the wild raspberry vines, arched up and back, forming intricate wickets of red wire. Stone walls tumbled everywhere and were iris-gray like the sky, and all these somber tones melted one into the other as in a huge water-color painting.

Once a rabbit escaped the brush before them and went hopping down the road, lippity-lip, lippity-lip, unconscious of the comedy of its tail; once a flock of

wild geese went over with anxious cries, and David looked at his daughter a thought pensively. But gayety was restored when they found their bean-pole hut in a deserted field at the end of the three-mile walk. Here they were accustomed to keep a rude kettle, a coffee can, and a little harvest of dry wood through the winter. Soon David had a fire and Muffet was unpacking the small knapsack he had brought on his back. They made coffee and took turns warming themselves in the hut which barely admitted of one person. The fire flared up in thrilling, gratifying flames and in all that blue winter desolation burned as brightly as hope. They had their coffee and sandwiches and made very merry, aiming their remarks at the dilapidated scarecrow who occupied the field long after the corn was harvested. Because he wore a top-hat and a cutaway coat, they called him Beau Brummel and always greeted him respectfully on arrival or departure. They regretted that he had fallen upon hard times.

And now it was afternoon, and time to trudge back the long three miles home. The sky was heavy with snow, too, and David did not walk *quite* so fast as was his wont. But still, of course, fast enough. Take Elijah Moore,—quite an express train in the pace he set, but Elijah was debarred from joining them in the walks because of a tendency to go lame. . . .

Still David would never admit to Muffet that he felt fatigued. And Muffet was a veritable child of out-of-doors! Noticed everything, loved everything. Ate heartily of the luncheon, stood over the fire with her hands in her pockets like an engaging boy, danced to keep her feet warm, was radiant at the lark.

They were perhaps half way home, moving rather less zestfully in the darkening day, when a strange

thing happened. Nosing down the country road came a motor car; remarkably bad going it must be having, too, with the ruts frozen and traitorous under the thin icing. Muffet and her father stepped out of the road and seized the occasion to rest on a convenient fence rail. There they were, in their quaintness, their cuddling caps of seal and chinchilla, their wool scarfs, there they were incredibly when Sterling's yellow car came curving and cavorting through the ruts. . . .

He was all surprise, though his excuse for being where he was did not germinate so rapidly nor was spoken so glibly as he would have liked. Well, of all the—! Of the two pedestrians David is the more agreeably surprised: he has already felt a twinge in one leg, though he has not told Muffet. And of course Mr. Sterling is insisting that they ride. "But can we manage it—so many of us?"

"Oh, easily, I think."

"Muffet, my dear, you're the smallest, perhaps we'd best put you in the middle."

Sterling is already out and assisting her. Muffet, grave, remotely lovely as some one out of a painting. She speaks a few perfunctory words. Is he crowded? David is in gratefully—the car is very low; first you sit, then drag your feet after you. He says dryly, "I believe I am assembled."

And now Rolf is behind the wheel, delicately on guard lest his great bulk completely crush the girl. His overcoat is English and colossal, it has a peculiar man-scent of homespun and good cigars. Muffet is just under his shoulder, so crushed against him as to seem almost a part of him. She feels the muscle in his shoulder when he carefully slides the gear into low, then second, then high, the unconscious settling back.

She wishes her father had refused to ride. The conversation is all between Rolf and her father.

It is with her, of course, that Rolf would speak, but she is not like other girls. She gives a man no opening.

"We haven't had that dinner," says Rolf jovially, warring against her dignity, "and, let me see, it's been a month. Oh, Miss Harlow, there's—er, there's a play coming to the Criterion next week. I've wondered if you would care to see it with me?"

He has managed that much without turning; difficult to converse with one who is playing the cushion, as it were, to the small of one's back. Rolf's neck between his hat and coat is crimson.

"Oh," from Muffet behind him, "if you would like to have us!"

David perceives her mistake. "You mustn't mind her, Mr. Sterling. It's just that we've been together so much, you know. Muffet's a home-body, and she feels herself lost without her old watchdog, eh, Ducky?"

Sterling laughs unsuccessfully.

"Naturally I meant your father, too," he lies in great discomfort, and navigates more ruts.

And the truth is at last alive in David. Why, bless his soul, but Sterling is interested in the girl for herself. Preposterous notion. He does not see that it is more preposterous on his part not to have reckoned on such a possibility, never to have plotted a future for her. In sweet, smug selfishness he now deplores the certainty that Rolf will be disappointed. Muffet wants no man but her father. Has she not said so a million times? Certainly the love between them has no precedent in all the annals of history. He begins to pity Rolf, and such pity makes him happy. Even if Muffet were not so disinclined, Sterling would hardly be the

man to satisfy her, a much slower nature, kind, but heavy in comparison. He hastens to pour oil on the troubled waters, but Rolf has already changed the topic.

"Is it possible you've been walking all day?" he asks, "and in the snow?"

Muffet relents.

"Our Sunday dissipation. We've visited our cedar forest, and dined with a scarecrow. See, our knapsack is empty."

"Oh," from Sterling, wistfully, "and I've been to church and repented of my sins."

He laughs mirthlessly.

"We too have heard a sermon," says Muffet, mischievously, "but not your kind of sermon."

"And what was the text of the sermon you found out there?"

"The parable of the silk hat and cutaway coat," suggested her father archly. "All material things come to the same end and are only fit to scare away the crows."

"Walking is all right," remarked Sterling toploftily, "but I haven't patience for it any longer. Then, too, I don't like to be passed on the road."

David nodded.

"I see your point of view. The development of the gasoline motor's a very interesting thing."

"Which reminds me," said Sterling, "I've decided to take up your work on the valves at the next directors' meeting. Can't say what will come of it, but at any rate we'll see how it is received. I'm hoping they'll at least ask for a demonstration!"

Although he had confidently looked for something of the sort, David's heart was pumping heavily.

"I'm deeply grateful, Mr. Sterling. I'd hardly hoped—I'm sure it's too kind of you to give it your immediate support——"

"Oh," said Rolf, airily, "there's a saying that one must be a little too kind in order to be kind enough. Here we are so soon. I wish it might have been longer."

They drew up at the old house, and David climbed down stiffly. Rolf was out and ready to give Muffet his hand, and this time she gave him the preference to her father. It was prettily done.

"Won't you stay and forage with us for supper?" She lifted her eyes through the fringy lashes and he went weak all over, the great, smitten fellow.

"Thanks, no, I really can't this time. But perhaps again, if you'll ask me."

"Come often," said David, with real feeling. "Come very often."

Rolf was looking at Muffet, at the quaint short jacket. He wanted to cover her in silver squirrel to her heels, a coat that would cost a thousand dollars. She would have said more that was pleasant, but she did not choose he should think her bidding for favors or too sensible of his condescension toward her father. So they went up the path to the house and Rolf swung back in his car, whistling.

II

After their supper Muffet took a lantern and went out of doors to look at the mice, still animate in misery despite the cold day.

"Oh Father," she reported, "they haven't died. Isn't

it stubborn of them, and isn't it—heroic? But the thermometer will certainly drop before morning. Their tails were chillier than ever. We—we won't catch any more."

"No, we'll surrender and be gnawed." A twitching of his whimsical mouth, whereupon Muffet threw herself into his lap and beat him with affectionate fists.

"You're laughing, and pretending not to understand. It's out of principle I'd let them live. It seems unsportsmanlike when they've—they've struggled so long——"

The outcome was that before they retired they stole forth sheepishly, evading Vannie, and brought the cage into the woodshed where it was warm.

"And having kept them from freezing," remarked David to himself next morning, "there seems no point in letting them starve."

Making a droll face of it, he went to the pantry and presently returned with a handful of cheese crumbs. The stricken rodents were now scurrying round and round, their benumbed state having given place to hope. There he stood, feeding the small enemy, when Vannie lumbered down from her quarters and found him.

"Jes' yo' see here, Mr. David," she warned, coming into the woodshed and showing an outraged face in the early morning. "Ah isn't gwan to house no varmints, Ah isn't. I'se gwan drown dem low-down critters immejit."

"Oh," said David, fairly caught, and relieved after all that he had found one to administer the *coup de grâce*, and he added with more respect, "as you will, Vanilla Extract Thompson."

“Mister David,” objected Vannie, rolling her eyes with a look of unutterable reproach, “Ah done been tellin yo’ ah mah life dat ‘E’ in mah name stan’ fo’ ‘Enid’!”

Chapter X

I

WHAT a splendid type of man!" effused many mothers of marriageable girls in Wedgewater, and each had her mind's eye on that up-and-coming young man, Rolf Sterling.

He was to be seen at church each Sunday in commendable devotion; he always said and did the consistent thing, the incontrovertible. . . . Such a comfort! And such a pleasure to look at him, head and shoulders above other men, his face shining with the enthusiasm of an uncomplex soul. Thus had he conquered those cold inhibitions which were his heritage from his northern sire. He would have preferred, in truth, to play the recluse. But he saw that it was not done, that there were all sorts of sides to a rounded success, and success was his god. It called upon him to make strange and diverse offerings, and he pandered to it anxiously in such ways. Later he listened for applause, and was never disappointed.

During the six months which preceded his meeting with the Harlows the mechanism of his life had seemed perfect. Physical well-being and mental efficiency characterized his days.

At night he probably had a swim in the pool at the gymnasium and emerged more fit than before; he dressed and dined with one of the families whose daughters

had not all married, and to whom his visit brought a stimulating flutter. They fed him exquisitely while the young candidate talked in girlish fashion, leaning her elbows on the table. Beneath the table she had always her best foot forward. But strange how much alike all these nice girls were, and the mothers who wanted him to "feel at home" and the fathers who made him so comfortable in their libraries, through cigar smoke deferring to him in all financial opinions.

Now all was changed. Christmas had passed and the fag end of winter was at hand, and Rolf was curiously irritable. When he was not occupied with business he kept up a feverish fermentation in himself of conjecture, complaint and really childlike amazement. Why had his success made so slight an impression on that sequestered girl out Wedgewater Road? Was she fundamentally different from other girls? The latter had ways of showing that his attentions were far from distasteful. The hovering consciousness of sex made them more palpably feminine, proclaimed him the man by inference.

But Muffet Harlow—pshaw, a rose set with sharpest spine. And nothing of a coquette. Or was she really too coquettish for coquetry? Here his cleverness confounded him. In a sex-ridden age she shone immaculate as a lily, though she had none of the lily's holy, conventual perfume. On the whole, the simile of the rose suited her better, the spiney rose. She refuted his most precious doctrines with a naughty whimsicality that made him feel the fool. Yet her hard, bright honesty was more tantalizing than the soft wiles of another woman.

Rolf fumed, lost weight and something of his old assurance. He revenged himself mentally by putting

her where she belonged, pitiful, small aristocrat, with her mind all fists! And because of an envy of David he entertained the thought that even her father's vaunted invention might come to nothing. In that case what would support her pride? He was pledged to take up the matter with the company, but having given it his advocacy his power would be at end. Of course, in the event of failure here, there were other engine-builders to whom David might offer his findings, but the chances were overwhelmingly against him. The man's age, his whole personality stood in his way. . . Thus reasoned Rolf.

In the meantime there were the girls to whom he might have returned when Muffet Harlow flouted him, but he was not the man to go off at any tangent of consolation. Instead he went about with the ache of irritation inside him and permitted "the pitiful, small aristocrat" to rub more salt into his wounds.

II

"That leak seems to be spreading," he observed irrelevantly one day, eyes roaming heavenward in her living room where she was giving him tea.

He had called early in order to be alone with her before her father returned.

"Yes," she said gayly, her hands busy among the tea things, "the ceiling leaks and the furnace is old and if we don't get a coat of paint this spring we shall drop to pieces." And, ironically, "Amusing, isn't it?"

"How do you mean—'amusing?'"

"I mean it's a spectacle to watch the disintegration

of other houses when your own roof is holding together! Pity becomes a luxury. . . . Two lumps or one?"

Outrageous Muffet! Sterling crimsoned furiously. He swallowed hard.

"You say those things—" he began and stopped. "It's as though you disliked me for having gotten on—as though you think me self-centered. See here, Miss Mu—Muffet, do you dislike me?"

He reached forward with an arresting gesture and stopped one of those white, roving hands with the fragile finger-tips.

"Do you—do you dislike me?" he precipitated the question in desperate hazard. "I know it's in you to be different because of the way you are with your father——"

"Father," she said quietly, not withdrawing her hand or appearing to notice that he held it, "it's my life to be as I am with Father!"

"But you haven't answered my question?"

"Well then no, I don't dislike you. What would you say if I told you I pity you a little for the way you've 'gotten on'—a tear for success!" She coined the phrase wickedly.

"What's wrong with the way I've gotten on?"

"Nothing," mildly. "That's just the trouble. There's never, apparently, been anything to stop you. It might have been better if there had, if you'd been bruised and beaten and thrown back on yourself. Instead you've gone on steadily bettering yourself and providing for your future in a material way. Have you really been able to do all this without some—some spiritual sacrifice?"

"Sacrifice?" He hung forward stupidly.

"Can any man of absolute independent thought and

action attain success—that's what I want to know. Are there not always compromises, little ones at first, then bigger and bigger?"

"Come now," he laughed loudly, primed for argument, "is that your indictment against me? Why it sounds like socialism," and his pronouncement of the word thrust it into disrepute. "Now listen." He put his tea-cup back on the tray, his whole being eloquent of refutation. "You're a woman and you've gotten all your ideas second-hand. From books, I daresay. I'm no reader myself." Almost with pride he made the statement. "I keep in touch with scientific thought but for the rest I'm too busy to bother. But I know about capital and labor from first-hand experience, and that's more than most writers do. They preach a lot of sentimental rot that won't go down with men who've gotten out and sweated—" He was keen for the flavor of the word and looked to it again for his effect, "gotten out and sweated for a living!" Muffet smiled, smiled at how square his lower lip had become and how he contrived to talk with it aslant, rather than at what he was saying. "They're consumers, not producers, these 'wordy' chaps; they sit in their wretched little attics or studios or libraries——"

"Alone with the stars," she suggested mischievously.

"Alone with egotism, and other little soul maladies of envy and discontent——"

Though she had never heard him talk this way before she recognized a characteristic prejudice. Nothing new in what he said, not even an individual opinion!

"If I'm anywhere I'm 'up from nowhere,'" declared Sterling, square-lipped in deadly seriousness. "There's no department of that factory over there in which I haven't——"

"Sweated!" she put in triumphantly. "Let's have it 'sweated!'"

"Sweated then! And I don't recall ever having had a chip on my shoulder against the system. I had honest treatment all the way up because I gave honest satisfaction. My policy was the policy of the organization. As for sacrifices——"

So he talked and shaped himself in Muffet's mind as the practical person he was, the opposite of a dreamer. She believed that his ambitions took little account of the individual, that what he did in the way of community benefits, the model tenement houses he had been instrumental in building, the playgrounds to be thrown open in the spring, the company's club room and restaurant, was but his *modus operandi* for building better engines. What was thereby induced to flower in a man's own soul was a means to an end, not an object. No, as her father had foreseen, he was not the man to take captive her imagination. A strain of wistfulness in his make-up might have made all the difference.

Muffet had let him unwind at will, thoughtfully nibbling her toast the while, but when she saw him with ammunition spent she found her chance and said,

"I was going to ask which you would rather be, a successful failure, one who fails while doing the work he loves best or the man who succeeds in an alien sort of occupation?" and he knew that she was holding a brief for her father.

The question put him back into thoughtfulness.

"Theoretically," he answered, "I'd rather fail in my own line but practically—well there's something definite, satisfactory in coming off top-hole with any job that's of benefit to the world even if it isn't the

one you're most keen about. No, I'll be honest. I'd rather succeed someway, anyway, than the other thing."

"Oh," she said in tremendous noncommittal brevity, and with that word she gave up hope of him.

That father, thought Rolf, had become for her a fixture in his niche of greatness and he wondered if it would be necessary to dislodge him before gaining dominion over her mind. . . . When the door opened their fireside seance was suddenly thrown into the discard. Rolf stood stiffly as Muffet darted into the hall, his elbows resting on the white chimney shelf with its colony of pewter tea-pots. Once he glanced up at the ceiling and mechanically dealt with the condition of that spreading leak.

"Why, it's Mr. Sterling," came David's voice and he entered with Muffet still clinging to his shoulder. All her combativeness had left her and she looked soft and girlish in her happiness, brown eyes humid with love and the jest that they seemed always to have between them.

"He's cold as about fifty icebergs," she said airily of David but whether to Rolf or to herself was not clear, "and his cheeks are rough as graters!" Her sweetness seemed to satiate the air. Rolf felt her, "a wild odor in the soul," and smiled feebly above a new, and stabbing pain. Quite dreadfully he wanted her. . . .

Chapter XI

I

ONCE a year Albion Harlow, the brother of Joseph, was wont to appear unexpectedly and to call at the house on Wedgewater Road. He never announced his intention beforehand, preferring that the visit should seem of slight note in his life of affairs. As a matter of fact it was as deliberate as anything else he did. Like all his other moves in life the yearly visit to his improvident brother was for a purpose, even if only a moral one. It did him good to look upon David rotting away in his rut and to compare what the two of them had made of their chances. Albion was a heavy-breathing man of cumbersome importance; he had Ebenezer Harlow's high coloring, but he had not the fine, beneficent face of his father. Older than David, his hair was yet no more than grizzled gray, his back broad and powerful, his voice a boom, while David's head had caught the whitest frost, his shoulders stooped and when he spoke his voice was so soft that sometimes you had to listen closely in order to catch what he was saying. Mr. Albion Harlow was the owner of a thread mill and a fine country estate in the adjacent village, but his family was not a provincial one—far from it. His wife was ambitious to a degree. The children were smartly educated and in the way of becoming social arbiters.

Muffet disliked all the Albion Harlows, but particularly she disliked her uncle. It always set her in a cold fury when he came lumbering up the path with large philanthropic composure, his bright weather eye intelligent of the ravages of the house. He rang and was admitted, filling the hallway with his condescension and his overcoat.

On this particular occasion it was Muffet who admitted him and was taken unaware. Her Uncle Albion kissed her on the cheek, and in loud-breathing, jocular fashion told her she was prettier than ever.

"You didn't expect to see me, m'dear! No? Well, I had business down here so I thought I'd drop in. . . . How's your father?"

"He's home with lumbago. . . . He's in the sitting room by the fire. Come in, won't you? Father, it's Uncle Albion. . . ."

Now nothing so depressed David as a call from his successful brother, and as Muffet had spent her entire morning tending and heartening him she sighed with justification. In years gone by David had wanted Albion to finance his various inventions and devices, for there had been several of them, but Albion's interest was not to be engaged. He knew nothing of machinery and he was no gambler. Better to give than to lend, he said. He had made that the maxim of his life. And, impressed with the iron utterance, he would repeat it inexorably as a dictum once invented by him, but now honorable with usage as the ten commandments. In any other way he would be glad to assist his brother. He would like to send Muffet away to school with his daughters and to pay for her education, or to make them a little yearly allowance of a neat sum. But nothing of the sort would David accept.

To-day a feeble smile played over David's face as Albion entered. He wanted to appear pleased at the visit and not so *hôrs de combat* that he could not rise and boom a bit himself. But his back had been troubling him severely; for the last hour Muffet had been applying the wet cloths that the doctor recommended, holding a hot flatiron as close to her father's back as was possible without burning, in order that the steam might penetrate his flesh. It was tedious and nerve-racking work, as David bore illness badly, and was exacting about treatment.

And here was the spruce Albion to add bitterness to his pessimism. They talked for an hour, then Albion, snapping his watch open and shut, declared that he must leave. The invention had been touched on and David had said, with a little color flushing the pain-white hollows of his cheeks, that everything was coming on very well. The manager of the factory had offered to do what he could with the directors of the company. Not of course that their willingness to buy was absolutely vital. David was giving the Ship and Engine people the first chance. But there were other engine builders, as Rolf himself had admitted. That was the way David had always talked, just in that high, visionary, elegant manner. But the mention of Sterling as a patron erased Albion's smile before it was born. He said he hoped the engine people would come round, he heartily hoped so. Then standing, and getting into his overcoat, he observed that he was sorry to find them in "this fix," David laid up and no one in the house to cheer or help them but "that nigger mammy." He said that he guessed he had better have Aunt Lu come down and help them out. As he dared the suggestion Muffet and her father exchanged the distress signals of inti-

mates. Aunt Lu was a near-octogenarian, a notorious busybody and a nomad in the bargain. Because of her unfortunate talent for creating trouble she had never been able to establish permanent contacts in any of the houses of her kinsmen. Yet with a certain hard avidity she made her rounds, secure in the knowledge that when one door closed she could always open another. She stepped off demurely, leaving sore hearts behind her, yet always with energy for the new field.

Among the Harlows there was a current opinion to the effect that she should have stayed at David's. There was no older woman in that household and Muffet comparatively a child. But how David felt about it was evidenced in his immediate reply to Albion.

"There's not the slightest need to send Aunt Lu!" Aunt Lu, it developed, was then living in Uncle Albion's own house in Threadville, so his motive was one of questionable altruism.

"We're quite used to doing for ourselves," seconded Muffet with desperate hate. "Father is better now and Vannie——"

She broke off, shivering beneath the intention in his eye. At the door he said,

"It's a pity you should be wasting your life here, a comely young woman like you. Well, well, when it gets a little warmer I'll have your Aunt Alice ask you up for a visit. Late in the spring, say, when the children are home for vacation.

She stood in the draughty passage, letting him out, the finely marked brows clenched over eyes that knew how to hate as well as to love. It was not until she turned back into the room where her father was waiting that she sought after and found some grace of humor

to sustain them both under the insults they had received. She grimaced and peeped out of the corner of her eye to see if her father was thereby restored to humor. But, sunken forlornly on his pillow, in the historic attitude of Napoleon during his last days at St. Helena, he had apparently not noticed. His lowering eye was fixed moodily on the fire, his hands lay palms uppermost in his lap like hands that confess themselves beaten, and seeing him so an intolerable rush of sadness filled her heart. Kneeling on the hearth-rug she lifted her arms and strained them about him. The fire of her intense, protective passion went threading through him like a transfusion.

"You silly," she half sobbed, "you absurd, only father. Why, oh, why can't they leave us alone?"

Her kisses warmed his cold flesh, her hot, young spirit beat into his with a rousing vehemence.

"It's only," he breathed regretfully, "that he can do so much more for his children than I can do for you, Muffy; sends the girls abroad in summer and in winter to schools and cities and—and what-not."

And he continued abstractedly,

"Buys them pretty things—bonnets and dresses—and gewgaws. . . ."

She kissed his hand anxiously.

"Do you suppose I care for pretty things so long as I have you?" and, adroitly, "But I do hope he'll spare us Aunt Lu and her snooping. She's too old to be traveling in winter—I ought to have told him that. She might catch pneumonia and die."

"Oh, no," declared her father decisively, with a wan gleam. "That kind never die, my dear. They are all shot at the Day of Judgment!"

II

Aunt Lu was dispatched to them, notwithstanding, and they had no choice but to house her. As Muffet saw almost at once, age had rendered her innocuous, had all but drawn her fangs and now one must pity the old woman, whose eyes were cheated of their acumen by a growing veil of blindness, and whose rheumatic hands could not close upon mischief.

David's eyes would rest upon her with a pained aversion, trying to recall the way she had looked in his boyhood, wearing a frizzled front and a bustle, and remembering almost respectfully the active trouble she had created in her time.

He knew that his chief claim to interest in her eyes had always been the mystery of his wife. Her probings had extended over a period of many years and once he had shrunk from them. But now, as he told himself, they were become fumbling and obvious.

After the little morning sessions which he abode with her, Muffet would come home from market, deposit her basket on the kitchen table and zephyr in, all innocent and racy gossip of the outside world. She had the art of magnifying or turning any incident to account, a true sense of high lights.

They did not mind Aunt Lu then. They held her indulgently in trust between them. The simple but engrossing business of being together sufficed and was a never ceasing source of wonder to the aged spinster whose small dividends from life had turned her bitter. She crocheted by sense of feel and delivered herself of the inference,

"In my day hands were never idle."

"And oh," flared Muffet, "how dull hands must have been!"

But mostly she was very gentle with Aunt Lu, regarding her from some pitying and scientific viewpoint of the young. Aunt Lu's mind was failing and lapsing into the state of semi-indifference where the events vital in the lives of her associates moved her little.

"Rhoda," she would ask, using Muffet's tabooed baptismal name with perverse deliberation, "Timothy Harlow is dead, is he not?"

"My name is Muffet, Aunt Lu. No, it was Timothy's wife who died. Timothy is still living."

"Ah, I forget," in a colorless voice. "And Angelina Pierce, she's gone too."

"Oh, dear, no, Aunt Lu, Angelina's husband."

Till the lugubrious dialogue verged on comedy. And Muffet thought, "Really, it does not matter to her any longer and that is why she confuses the living and the dead."

During David's illness Elijah Moore came faithfully each evening, the fidgety, solicitous friend. And one evening there was Aunt Lu, manifesting the social instinct and waiting up for him, a crinkled, creaking figure with blonde lace at her throat and her toupee of terrible, gray hair a little awry.

"How do you do, Elijah Moore?" she greeted him with the shrill voice of senility. "I trust I find you well."

Elijah took the rudderless hand.

"Well to middlin', thank you kindly, Mis' Harlow."

"And Sarah," quavered Aunt Lu conversationally, "is she well?"

An expression of childish dismay passed over his face.

"Why, why, Sarah," he floundered, "you know I lost her twenty years ago."

"Ah," said Aunt Lu imperturbably, "I hadn't heard."

III

To walk in a wind with Muffet Harlow! Rolf had not known how that would be. But he had met her late one afternoon in February entering a book-shop, a combination coffee shop and circulating library, and had followed irresistibly. Muffet wore her usual winter costume, the coat of seal, the chinchilla cap and the long, flame-bright scarf. Between the rim of her cap and the red of her scarf escaped a fringe of short, stocky curls, of young, innocent-looking hair, like a baby's. Her face was all a delicious pink from walking, her eyes dark and brilliant, and Rolf thought that she was glad to see him. He thought too of the prize he had discovered, tucked away obscurely out Wedgewater Road, how his friends would exclaim, "Sly dog!" when he produced her, when he presented her as his wife, wearing the title of Mrs. Rolf Sterling as tangibly as she would wear the expensive clothes he would buy for her. Yes, he would be envied without a doubt. And from such pleasant cogitations he returned with a start to Muffet, buying coffee for her father. The coffee had to be ground and the whole warm, webby place was heavy with the dark golden smell of it. Rolf breathed it lingeringly into his lungs and it was as though he inhaled the tang of his own rich pleasure.

"This is where I come for my reading," the girl said in an undertone which barely escaped the note of confidence, and she led him deeper into the shadowy re-

cess of the store where shelves upon shelves of brown-wrapped books kept their niches like monks in cubicles. "They are very dusty," she laughed. . . .

And Rolf, frantic to please her,

"Find me something to read, undertake my education, do!"

"But how can I know where your tastes lie? . . . I'm always on the higher shelves myself. That is where the standard English writers are. My Anglo-Saxon blood cries out for its own."

A short ladder was for the convenience of foraging bookworms, and, as though it were the most ordinary proceeding in the world, she suddenly said,

"Steady me, won't you?" and took several steps up into the shadows above the nimbus of the swinging kerosene lamp.

Rolf, surprised and protesting, could only do as he was told. He gripped the ladder obediently and stood with his eyes uplifted as for celestial miracles to be performed. For some unknown reason his heart was beating with violence.

"Here's all of Hardy," she sang down airily. "Of course you've read 'Tess,'" and though he had not done so, he answered like a chant, "Of course I've read 'Tess,'" hearing the echo of her voice in the air long after his should have crowded it out. She played among the books and in the front of the shop Rolf knew that the coffee grinding was accomplished and that the mellow little man who was busied serving them would see him when he lifted Muffet down. For he must lift her down. He felt it in his bones. He recognized it as an immense preordination. She looked so light as she stood above him, so almost elfin, like one who is sweeping the cobwebs from the moon.

"Ah," she suddenly informed him, and this time her voice vibrated distinctly. "Here is Butler's 'The Way of All Flesh.' If you've never read a novel," the roguery of her voice took away the indictment, "you couldn't do better. Now, I warn you, stand clear. I am about to descend."

It was the moment. Rolf looked to the front of the shop and saw the old man and a ball of pink twine. He looked back and saw Muffet's small foot and ankle in a gaiter feeling for the round below. And he knew he must lift her down, knew he must lift her down. . . . There, ineffable moment! He had her in his arms. And having her made him feel a giant. It was but a moment that he held her, but during that time all the forces which make for evolution were at work. Something had taken place that could not be gone back upon, some burning thing was accomplished and set to cool among the stars.

Rolf set her down and she looked at him with swift questioning. She was not one to condone a liberty taken. But then he was smart enough to laugh instantly, to turn away as to say that the affair was of no account, or that if she would climb ladders she must be treated like a child. Almost visibly she made up her mind and her decision was to take no offense. But she had misgivings about the librarian.

Then they were out in the sweeping night, seeking Wedgewater Road under a fretful sky and bending, filigreed trees.

Somewhere there was a moon,

“. . . Like a dying lady, lean and pale,
Who totters forth, wrapt in a gauzy veil,
Out of her chamber led by the insane
And feeble wanderings of her fading brain . . .”

The wind blew and the two figures cut through it valiantly. Muffet was walking very fast, whether in some sense perturbed by what had taken place in the coffee shop or merely from force of habit. And Rolf enjoyed her walking, enjoyed that she should seem to be a half foot ahead of him, like a winged victory fleeing that he might pursue. A scrap of poetry he had not known he remembered came back to him from his high school days, "Swift and tameless and proud." At last he could apply it. The scarf flung over her shoulder rode on the wind and was swift enough to elude him. To-night he did not want to catch up; he wanted to follow, to be conscious of the chase, to know that when he was ready he could overtake her. Ah, well that she could not know the huge laughter in his soul!

Chapter XII

I

WHEN David returned to the factory there was no longer any excuse for Aunt Lu to linger. Besides, she was almost, if not quite, ready for pastures new. The visit had proved a disappointment from whichever angle she viewed it. In that household were no meaty morsels for the nourishment of a deprecious spirit. David and his daughter subsisted on what seemed to Aunt Lu peculiarly savorless fare. What amused them was certainly not productive of mirth to the old lady, and as they refused to indulge in the mild dissipation of discussing their neighbors she was left quite without social resource. She revenged herself by the secret knowledge of scandal.

It had been a long time since the name of Rhoda Harlow was pronounced with lively speculation. Its utterance had long since ended in a yawn, for even in very small and aware communities gossip must have food on which to thrive. And there had been none. Not for over ten years. But facts never died in Aunt Lu. They continued, active as ants, and ever on the watch to inflate themselves. It was extraordinary how well David had succeeded in covering his wife's tracks, the snowfall of silence that obliterated her. But Aunt Lu remembered and a curiosity born of dangerous idleness gave color to her boredom. So, during those last

days which she spent in the house on Wedgewater Road, days when David was absent at the factory and Muffet had gone to town, she sleuthed shamelessly. It was only reasonable to believe that somewhere in that careless house lay a clew to her. And once she could hit upon it Aunt Lu's social success was assured for a year to come. She could return to the Albion Harlows or she could go on to the Joseph Harlows in Boston and could pay her way in the coin of keenest gossip. A delectable tidbit for jaded palates! "You've thought Rhoda Harlow must be dead?" she would say with a smacking of withered lips. "No, no, my dears, she's very much alive." And then, with maddening deliberation and innuendo she would unfold a tale. . . .

A search of the house proving fruitless, she was one day inspired. In David's workshop was an old desk, an ugly Victorian monument comprising a bookcase and *escritoire*, and stuffed like a Christmas turkey with a heterogeneous collection of papers. Sawdust and shaving choked the cubby-holes and dust rose in smothering clouds whenever a resident paper was disturbed. Aunt Lu began to suspect the *escritoire* and to promise herself that it should have a complete overhauling. And as fortune favors alike the wise and the indiscreet her opportunity presented itself, clicked heels together and murmured, "Madame, at your service!"

The place was beautifully deserted; even Vannie had absented herself on a visit to a dark household now glamorous with a visitation of twins. Aunt Lu watched Vannie's broad back retreating down the road and donned her cape tremblingly. Her lips were fumbling and working at a covert smile that would wander out and in, out and in. There was still ice on the ground and she hoped she would not slip; she labored against

fracture and frustration. She was meanly careful all the way and arrived at the workshop with her limbs intact. She tossed aside her wrap at once, and, finding her two pairs of spectacles, worried them onto her nose. Thus equipped, she went straight to her task. She was obliged to work very carefully so as not to leave tell-tale finger-prints on the desk, and, Lord-a-mercy! what a litter was before her! Nearly everything in that desk cried out against its owner, the crisp or yellowing accounts bearing trenchant reminders of settlements long overdue. Alone, they would have proved sufficiently interesting to have stayed the prying fingers of Aunt Lu had she not been stalking bigger game. Now and then she would forget and go off at a tangent, say over some little personal communication which was deliciously none of her business. But in the main she worked with direction. The rusty hands of the wall clock moved with humor, but she heeded them not.

She had found a key and the key in turn unlocked a warped and difficult little drawer under the shelf of books, and in the drawer, when she had argued it out, were letters of a more intimate character. A woman's handwriting undeniably, and, as she told herself with a nodding brilliance, the handwriting of *an extravagant woman*. The arrogant Rhoda, even in those first days of matrimonial ingratiating, had never favored David's relatives with her correspondence, but Aunt Lu was instinctively tremulous over the careless "y's" that forgot to pick up their tails and the spirited "t's" that listened to no laws. Her lips fumbled and she fought with her spectacles.

But before she could apply herself to the content of the letter an interruption occurred in the nature of a warning. There was a slight explosion in the stove

but of sufficient magnitude to frighten the old lady nearly out of her wits. She darted to the window, only to see what completely demoralized her, the figure of Muffet coming slowly along the path from the rear of the house. Frantically she closed and locked the drawer which she had pillaged, only to remember when it was too late that she still held the letter in her hand. And Muffet was approaching the workshop with her sure, skimming step. In another minute she would open the door and demand an explanation. What was her aunt doing in David's sanctum? Aunt Lu looked about her like a great ruffled bird and her hand shot out at random. Behind David's model engine a sheet of aluminum had been tacked to the wall, an indifferent piece of work with a slight bulge from fitting. Into this opening Aunt Lu deftly slipped the letter, right-about-faced, and was busied scooping up a handful of shavings when Muffet opened the door.

"Why, Aunt Lu, I thought you were lost."

There was a pause, thick with heart-beats and hurried thinking, while Aunt Lu ostentatiously gathered her shavings. Then she had found her answer and mouthed it with acerbity,

"Don't know what call you got to be thinking that. I'm going to pack that tea-pot that was my mother's and I don't want it should break."

"Oh," said Muffet between two doubts. Then, dismissing them both from a mind that was, after all, blue water with a sandy bottom, she observed pleasantly, "It's like Greenland out here. Better come in and let me make you a cup of tea."

"Later," thought Aunt Lu, little hectic spots of color in her dry parchment cheeks, "later I'll slip out again and get it. . . ."

But the same officious fate that had put temptation in her way had as deliberately withdrawn, carrying all its opportunities in a bundle. It seemed that she literally could not shake off Muffet that day or the next, and at four o'clock the following afternoon the Albion Harlows sent their motor to carry her back to Threadville. There was nothing for her to do but go, which she did, with a haunted backward look in the direction of the workshop.

"When I come again . . ." she promised herself condolingly.

But that spring, before the first violet showed in the meadows, Aunt Lu had left her petty concerns and curiosities behind her and had passed on into the great, solvent state of simplicity. . . .

II

The Wedgewater Ship and Engine Company held its directors' meetings on the first Monday of the month, the hour appointed being eleven in the morning. It was young March and the weather outside as dirty as the washings of a gutter. Nevertheless the handsome directors' room of the new executive office building shone with pristine splendor. The walls were tinted that recognized "new shade" of heavy cream that will whip with the first half-dozen turns of the beater, and apportioned into panels as crisp and clean as the tricks that a knife will do on new frosting. In the center of each panel grew mushroom clusters of lights in the form of fat candles with frosted flames. But as though the side lighting were a mere whim, *en passant*, overhead a pendant bowl of imitation alabaster informed

the ceiling and vicariously illumined the room. The windows were curtained and lamburkined in handsome, wholesale brown velvet with linings of copper-colored metal cloth, the floor was deep in moss of the same dye, the preposterous long table and congress of chairs shone like the complexion of negroes in summer.

Into this fashionable chamber of finance sifted the ten particular men who comprised the officers of the company, and its stockholders of influence and large holdings. For the greater part they were middle-aged and undistinguished in appearance, mere dark-clothed, animate males, moving about sootily in the luscious daintiness of that interior like flies in a bowl of milk. They talked and gesticulated in groups, dispersed or coagulated informally till the meeting should begin, immersed and mighty in their absorption but to an on-looker no whit more imposing than the leggy insects striking out in the cream jug.

At length the chairman hammers for order; all move to their seats with solemn obligation, become orderly flies about a huge lake of molasses. Thus arranged and immobile, they offer themselves as a typical enough exhibit of modern men, big business brains, nimble-witted Americans. Innately, they are furnished with capabilities, potentialities developed to the *n*th power, precocious courage of a financial kind. They have reached a plane of absolute surety; like tortoises they carry their tough shells of business reputation smug on their backs—once they have acquired these shells nothing can hurt them. An inspiring sight, surely, to the shell-less and vulnerable.

But, observing each man coolly, something of worship falls off. To look like a business man is not, after all, to look like a Greek god. The process of succeeding

has its own forms of physical registry,—one may become elephant-creased with a thousand little lines, become, as it were, a map of his own complicated system of success. Another succumbs to paunchiness of too much office occupation and is anchored by his abdomen. Yet another swells uniformly all over like an amazed balloon; every pocket baggy with dividends. Others are merely dull with smartness, ordinary, square-headed men, platitudinous and gray outside business, men working for families and innocent, ambitious wives that they take south once a year.

These are the ones who marched at home all during the Great War, the munition workers whose dark factories struck a flash from midnight, the capitalists of all kinds, making accoutrements for soldiers and themselves clinking with cash at every step. Beyond the shadow of a doubt Rolf Sterling, secretary and treasurer of the company, is the only beautiful one among them. Even seated he is a tower among squat buildings; he is straight as a meridian—his tailor has had something to inspire him. And in addition to this spectacular build of his he has the fierce, frowning good looks of an allegorical figure in a painting. With that look he might lead crusades; he might wander “naked among trysted swords.”

But no—ironically—he fights only the battles that are won, cohorts before and behind him, made up of the paunched, the seared, and the merely rotund, strange civilian soldiers who march without vision but who keep amazing step. . . . Rolf believes in the integrity of getting rich as devoutly as he believes that his mother was a virtuous woman. His interests, as he is fond of saying, are identical with those of the company, always have been, always will be, and when he says the company

he means the ten particular men whose funds it is his privilege to handle. Already his popularity with the laborers has begun to wane, already they turn from that bright, evangelical look with crying disappointment.

To-day, the current affairs of the concern having been discussed, the loans, notes, and general business of the meeting having been efficiently disposed of, Rolf rises to speak on another matter, one which has engaged his interest and seems worthy of the consideration of the stockholders. Here in the year Nineteen Twenty-one, while nations convene about camp-fires, passing the pipe and making great talk of amalgamated peace, great gestures of scrapping navies and disbanding their armies as they would sweep clean a table of toy soldiers—behind all this posturing and palavering the inventors are busy. Experimentation goes steadily on.

And it is Rolf's purpose to lay before them to-day the matter of just such an invention, the hooded work of a man in their own employ, David Harlow, perhaps the oldest and most experienced of their draftsmen. This Harlow, spending practically his life in close association with the company's engine, has become most sensitive to its needs. And after years of endeavor he has at last expressed his ideas concretely in an improved valve and valve gear for the Deisel engine. Rolf has inspected the model many times—he has, in fact, given quite the entire winter to a mature reflection on its merits, and to an exhaustive study of what its adoption would mean to the company, in probable expense and profit. . . . And, having roused an attentive interest in the ten particular men, Rolf launches into a long and complicated description of David Harlow's work. Rolf's judgment has been proven sound; in all probabilities he will one day evolve into a turtle as hard-shelled as the rest. They

respect his conservative thrift—they give his proposition the grave consideration that any suggestion from him must deserve. And the outcome of it all is that, the time being limited to-day, a special meeting is set for the end of the week—a meeting for the sole and flattering purpose of weighing the matter. There will be David's drawings to show and perhaps David himself as the god of the machine. A glamor is stealing down Wedgewater Road; the dirty day is picking up. And exactly as the meeting ends Muffet Harlow ceases mending the carpet.

She has felt the sun emerge by a merriment along her veins, and getting into her reefer, goes dashing out into the freshets of melted snow, forgetting quite her galoshes.

Chapter XIII

I

ROLF, enduring until spring, was fated to avowal the last night of May. For a matter of eight months he had suffered the rigors of love in dark, dumb acquiescence. He had reached the stage where all his inhibitions of pride or caution were cast to the winds. Right well he knew that no fruit in Muffet's heart hung ripe for him, yet like a rash and greedy, plundering child he was all for despoiling her, for seizing the May-green fruitage of her fancy, scarce out of bud. Later he would wonder why these same tart, wild apples had not nourished him.

Muffet, it had come to him at odd hours, was the product of her life of isolation, her sedentary and introspective habits, her bleak refinements of thought, her Harlow blood. He doubted if even to herself she spelled reality, if she bore any relationship to the world at large. And this was the fault of her father. He had given her no schooling in human intercourse by which to develop. He had sedulously kept her from association with all that was young and merry, or grim and enlightening. . . . He granted her indulgence for books and foolishly believed that in so doing he was vicariously providing her with a recipe for life, that one learned at home without danger or suffering. All her

defenses were false, reasoned Rolf, because founded on fiction, yet though he railed at them he could not lift a hand against the paper partitions. She was formidably guarded by her innocence. How was he to lead her to the knowledge and recognition of love, as a natural, desirable consummation when she was, to use a scholastic term, "behind in everything?"

He had sometimes thought that she feared exploitation. Surely that awareness, that sharp battle was what he had seen in her eyes the day he lifted her from the ladder. Did she believe in a conspiracy against her, one tacitly agreed upon between her father and himself? He wondered. He had waited with what was for him a singular patience, giving his whole concentrated energy to her winning, that very smartness which served him so well in business warning him not to strike till the propitious moment came. But this travail of May-blossoming, and the terribly normal tide of his increasing passion—how was he to resist them?

In the Harlow meadows the green was interrupted by long drifts of forget-me-not, each flower a pale tree in the midget world. The brook ran free after its bondage, singing differently than at any other time of the year, staining its banks emerald and deeper than that, staining its banks blue. Little, shaky shadows were under the alders and birches, everywhere small and comic leaves, pale yellow or pink, that thought themselves green. The robin swelled into obesity; busy nest-builders came into Muffet's window and filched a strand of yellow silk from her work-basket. Behind the closed blind of the living room the Jenny Wrens were back, fussy and preoccupied. And then, slowly, farther along in this scheme of rejuvenation and re-decoration the wistaria on the side of the old house

quicken; against the silver clapboards lavender was born. Muffet saw the miracle and saw it miraculously. For all her ascetic slumber it sent a little pain to her heart. The pain was uncredentialed, but she welcomed it and let it build like the birds. She talked a great deal about the wistaria, and showed it to every one who came.

Rolf found her on the broken bench before it one afternoon when he called. It was a working day and her father immured at the factory. But Rolf was a truant on Wedgewater Road, a fact that seemed to Muffet unethical. Nevertheless she saw him looking at the wistaria and because she thought he admired it she was caught off-guard. The smile that was suddenly sweet along her lips and warm in her eyes almost blinded him.

It was exactly what her face needed. In repose its tremendous gravity, its childish inaccessibility had always disheartened him. She did not remark of the wistaria, "It's beautiful, isn't it?" as another might obviously have done, but her eyes joined his in tribute and for a moment each was content and in concord till Rolf blundered unconscionably.

"That vine's a tree and mostly dead. It ought to be cut out."

Then her lip trembled into a very different kind of a smile and she remembered that he was Rolf Sterling. He probably made every mistake which was consistent with his character. Only one instinct held true with him, the sound instinct of passion, accumulated and headlong. All that he recognized in the dazzling, delicious day was a force impelling his declaration. . . . Muffet, now aloof and controlled, devoted to her eternal sock-mending there on the shaggy bench, yet en rapport

with the slow magic of May, was wholly unprepared for the revelation of the new Sterling.

Her silver needle glinting, she glanced up, too ironical for friendliness, yet too friendly for quarrels on such a day. And there she saw not the obtuse man of the remark about the wistaria vine, but an enkindled Rolf, looking, if the truth must be told, miserable, but miserable on a large and compelling scale, urgent with some new kind of roughness that made him very handsome.

"Let's go out there," he said with a wave of his hand toward the forget-me-not field. "I want to talk."

"Talk?" Her facile contempt vanished for some more respectful attitude of the soul.

He nodded. "But not here. I feel as if that old colored woman of yours was somewhere listening to every word I say."

"She's not. She's gone to town." Immediately she had reassured him Muffet was sorry. She put away her needle, trembling, troubled.

"I want to go into that field," the man said doggedly and looked away from her at the cool stretches of blue and green and violet. His eyes were hot in color, the whites suffused as though with helpless tears. "That field—" But the emotion which it had stirred in him would not go into phrases. Rolf was not the man to escape in words.

"That field—" he began again and finished disappointingly, "that's where I want to walk."

She was sufficiently moved to obey him and rose, like one who, in hypnosis, is the chattel of another's will. Rolf remembered what her father had told him about her nocturnal peregrinations and fancied that in slumber she must look this way, her face white like a flower

closed against the cold. Only once at the brook her smile made an effort at lightness and she quoted under her breath,

“‘By brooks too broad for leaping . . .’”

He saw the smile and was jealous of some allusion that she shared with herself.

“What are you saying?”

“That is from a poem, ‘A Shropshire Lad,’

“‘By brooks too broad for leaping
The lightfoot boys are laid;
The rose-lipt girls are sleeping
In fields where roses fade. . . .’”

She gave the verse apologetically but whether her apologies were to Sterling or the author was not clear. The former surprised her by commenting,

“Yes, that’s true poetry, I guess, but why would you rather live in a thing like that than—than the real thing?” He was vehement so that she laughed, but indulgently, and with no attempt to explain.

The field was immense for their pilgrimage, dizzying with these mazes of forget-me-nots, deep sapphire cranies, little islands in the lowland where the soil was dry and may-flower and Indian tobacco flourished. Rolf lifted his head and the taint of civilization slid easily from him. It was symbolic of his love for Muffet Harlow that he had longed to be with her here; another girl he would most probably have wooed sitting beside her on a drawing-room divan, in an atmosphere of cigarette smoke and hot-house roses.

“This is,” he said, “this is . . .” and not caring now whether or not he finished the sentence he left it untidy.

"This is the most magic meadow in the world," she completed it for him, orderly with words and apt, because of her reading.

He looked his admiration for her accomplishment.

"I like walking with you," he sighed with a tremendous naïveté, as their shoes sank into the spongy ground. He had no picturesque phrases with which to impress her and all the way through because his speech was undistinguished she made the mistake of suspecting him of coarseness.

They had forded a second brook and were about to climb the long slope beyond when abruptly his hand found and closed about hers.

"Muffet, I am going to marry you," he announced. Not, "Muffet, will you marry me?"

The voice was harsh, and the pressure of his hand startled her as much as the words. She stood there in the quickened grass, frightened, quite simply *hors de combat*. Her intuition in regard to him had not been at fault, it seemed. A coarse conqueror, he had not even offered her the delicacy of a declaration of love. Only the statement that he would marry her, stiff, like a stick. Muffet's book-bred sensibilities revolted. Tears of swift shame, vexation, filled her eyes. The cold left her. She could speak.

"You have no right to say such a thing." She wrenched her hand from him and nursed it in the other. Her eyes widened. "Why, I don't know you. I don't know you at all. I've never thought of you in that way. I've never thought——"

She saw the hot color mounting to his head.

"Oh," he said, flinging out an impatient gesture, and his desperation was very real. "What shall I do with you, what shall I do with a girl like you? You've

known me nearly a year. You're intelligent—you must have seen how it was with me—" And going off at a tangent he cried, "I'll tell you what is wrong—you don't know anything about life—your ignorance is appalling, it's—it's almost a crime. You think you know, you're nourished on books and nonsense and pretty lies, but you don't know anything. You're morally ten years old. You're an iceberg. And besides all that you have the will of a little bantam. It needs breaking—you need breaking, and I'm ready for the job."

"Oh," she cried in a bitter wail, "you're disgusting. You're—you're simply a beast. I hate everything about you."

The ferocity of her disdain goaded his anger. She had never seemed so formidable an aristocrat, and because his words could not prevail against her he lost his head completely. There on the gentle bank he had her in his arms and was kissing her with a raging brutality. It was an unfair advantage but the inevitable outcome of long suppression and a will as perilous as her own. She suffered his kisses and her mind was one black, flying hatred. But immediately he had released her and the air was thick with the pitiful stinging epithets that she found for him. So they stood till Rolf reeled away from her and heavily, inexplicably flung himself on the ground. Appalling sounds came from him, sobs and labored breathing. Oh, but she was sick and sore, sick and sore. For a time she thought only of that. . . . Still, it was strange to hear a man give way. She had heard her father cry once. She peeped covertly at Rolf, her anger against him tempered by a superior scorn for his weakness. She subsided on the bank to get her ideas into order.

A cloud passed over the hill and all at once it was cold with a fickle drop in temperature of a late spring day. Muffet's eyes were sad, sad for herself and, yes, for the one who had blundered so unforgivably. Because he now seemed to her so completely undeserving of her thought she could afford to be a little kind. This kindness was cooler than hatred but more deadly. She rose and straightening her jersey and flinging the hair out of her eyes she went over and stood beside him, looking down upon him as at some stupid, erring Titan, ignominiously brought to defeat. This was the fiasco of the philosophy by which he lived. There was the light patronage of her fingers on his shoulder.

"I suppose you know," she said, "that my father would kill you for kissing me like that! Are you sorry for what you have done?"

But at the touch a strange thing happened. His sobs turned to laughter. He sat up laughing and with a great laugh clasped her knees.

"Sorry? Sorry? Only for myself," he cried incorrigibly, "for what I've suffered waiting for you," and in the monstrous stress of his joy he went on laughing against her knees and saying, "You're going to marry me, Muffet, and you're going to be the happiest woman in the world!"

II

David had left the factory at three o'clock that day in order to call at Dr. Dutton's during office hours. This was a long-deferred visit.

"When you get well come in to see me," the doctor had said during his siege of illness in the early spring. "I should like to go over you thoroughly."

But, possibly because he knew that the doctor attached importance to the request, David had let it go. Now an increasing disability made the visit imperative. He had come to be told the worst. The words formed themselves into a stupid chant; they buzzed like the first vocal flies that were swarming toward the ceiling of the waiting-room. This place of congregation was light with a dusty cheer. It had paper the color of a tramp's overcoat and on the walls lithographs of once popular subjects. There was the grimly appropriate interpretation of "All is vanity," a young woman at her dressing table, a priestess before scent bottles and powder jars, the composition of mirror and shadows forming a perfect and gleeful skull. Also was offered the one of the country doctor lashing his horse in a lively race with the stork, holding in its bill the imminent and naked stranger. The waiting patients would glance at the vanity picture with the gleamless whisper of "Dreadful" behind their dark-gloved hands, but the stork picture called for a certain kind of intercommunicative smile.

David identified himself with the shabby assembly, no flicker of pretense about him to being any different, but withdrawn into his corner by the open window, many remarked the care-worn, delicate face, the benignant gray head that the sunlight chose to honor. David had not told Muffet of the proposed visit. It would have worried her to know that certain sinister symptoms had moved him to this precautionary measure. He wetted his lips. He was never of strong morale where health was concerned. He had a downright dejected horror of illness and its ravages, a lonely, superstitious dread of the unknown, and all of these weaknesses he scorned in himself as unbecoming a gentleman.

The interminable hush of the place—the impersonal reek of antiseptic on the floor, the expressionless, accidental faces—all combined to dishearten him. At last he saw the doctor, a good man, a contemporary. They called one another “Alf” and “Dave.” “Alf” knew that “Dave” was frightened, knew that he must have had cause to be, knew by his banter, his rueful, shaken smile.

. . . The doctor lived in a great ambush of grizzled whiskers, brusqueries and harsh cheer. His “can o’ calomel” was famous, and his bedside harangues, but he was exceptionally endowed despite his old-fashioned office and his blunt methods; in a great city he might have attained the recognition to which his gifts entitled him. As it was he gave his days to service and his nights to study, and was seldom known to form an incorrect diagnosis.

Tenderness and truth fought hard in him this day when he was called upon to deal professionally with his lifelong friend, David Harlow. They had both resorted to banter during the examination, but both ended with candid eyes.

“You’re thinking about Muffet,” said Dr. Dutton, having made all his notes in a great black book.

“And so are you,” retorted David, still with the straining smile on a face that twitched.

“It’s just this,” said the doctor, swallowing hard, his hand on the other man’s sleeve. “Better to face facts, Dave, and have the comfort of knowing ’em settled, settled right. I can’t find it in me to deceive you, old friend. That heart of yours may last you a couple of years. With kind treatment it may last even longer.

. . . It’s hard to say, but frankly, I doubt it. Now the thing for you to do, Dave, is to rest. . . . I

know that's easier said than done, but if Muffet was settled in life there'd be one weight off your mind."

"A couple of years." David had gotten no farther than that in his comprehension of the doctor's findings. But the doctor was going on into the matter of how things might be fixed for Muffet. It was as though the doctor, in his wholesale dealing with these matters of life and death, expected David to accept the fact of his own impending demise with relative calm. But no, the doctor was moved. The doctor was distressed and that was why he talked fast, reasonably. David made a tremendous effort. He rose and shook his kind friend's hand, angry with the tears that continually obscured his vision. He hung to his smile.

"Now, don't you go get worked up over this." The voice of Alf. "Half the world's got a leaky heart. Try to save yourself as much as possible, Dave. Try to save yourself as much as possible. I'll keep track of you all the time. I only thought for the sake of your girl it was fairer to warn you. . . ."

Then the passage outside his consulting room, smelling of the steam radiator and the doctor's umbrella, the ineffable May afternoon and friendly Main Street leading out to Wedgewater Road, all a jumble of grocers' carts and shoddy traffic. He walked along it in a curious, unrelated state of consciousness, as a ghost might have walked. In some mighty wrapping he was enclosed with his super-intelligence, he was once removed from the sphere in which he had lived and breathed and had his being. He was a man apart, in confidence with destiny, because he was going to die, not to-day or to-morrow, perhaps, but quite definitely soon, as people measure time.

His first reaction was one of powerful and pitiful

fear. He had a mind to lay hands upon the first passer-by, cling to any normal individual he met and wail abjectly, "See here, you won't let me go, will you?" His elemental terror caused the perspiration to break out on his forehead though the day was not warm. . . . He asked himself painfully, "Is this the part of a man?" "Is this all I am worth?" He clutched for philosophy, religion. Each exploded in his hand like a pricked balloon. Decay, that was the chimera he could not stand for—the fate from which he shrank fastidiously. He was a Harlow and the Harlows, when they bred true to type, were highstrung men and women, with minds almost abnormally sensitive. They were not irreligious but they were people of fundamental pride and resource and seldom went outside themselves for spiritual support. They did not take their troubles to church or into the houses of neighbors. When they had not strength to abide them they died. Neither would David go outside himself. It was only in the first dripping agony that he had tasted the temptation—that he had dreamed of human consolation. . . .

Presently on his benumbed way he became aware of a funeral cortege. It meandered by him with self-conscious solemnity, black glitter of carriages, slow nosing of limousines, a hearse of preposterous ornamentation. He caught up with it at the Catholic cathedral, and the fact pierced his shuttered brain that it was Michael O'Connor's funeral. Michael O'Connor had been a rich contractor and a man David had always known, though never intimately nor cordially. Nevertheless he warmed to Michael O'Connor, dead. He immediately felt less lonely and pioneering. It seemed a gracious, intrepid thing for Michael to have gone first.

There was kinship between them now since they were so close, one at either side of the Great Experience. . . . David felt impelled to enter the church and to take part in the ceremony. It might facilitate matters later on should he and O'Connor meet in some vast freemasonry, and being Wedgewater men exchange a civil word. "I saw you at my funeral," the Irishman could pass the remark. Yes, it would prevent embarrassment.

David climbed the brick steps, entered the vestibule, thronged with frock coats, was swept decorously into the rich kernel of the cathedral. His esthetic sense had always recognized that in Catholicism was a poetic appeal, a mysterious, drugging charm. It was the only show that had survived out of the Middle Ages, barbarous and beautiful for credulous imaginations. Today he saw great columns like titanic trees sweeping upward in a blue haze of smoke, he saw candles, ethereal daffodils growing before the wounded feet of a Christ on a crucifix, whose blood glowed in intolerable crimson. He saw the gorgeous gold garments of the priests, continually growing lighter or dimmer in the mystic haze before the altar, and he felt the tremendous volume of the organ filling the nave, pushing against the heart, against the very walls like a force that would be set free. Oh, it was spectacular and splendid, this service to the soul of Michael O'Connor whose indifferent body now lay in the black coffin, ironically made to assist at an affair in which it had no interest. Grimly David reflected upon these things. But gradually the music worked upon him, the *Andante Cantabile* of Tchaikowsky, the divine motive bearing him into some pure region of exaltation, of almost intolerable selflessness. For the first time he thought of Muffet as the supreme sufferer in connection with

his death. He loathed the craven fear that had hitherto kept him crouching in his own ego. The music could mean only Muffet, Muffet, perilously abandoned and unparented, his poor, pretty, adored darling. It had been his whim to make her wholly dependent. In Muffet his monstrous vanity had placated and reinforced itself; had thriven and become restored. Oh, unspeakable. Other girls were armored for calamity. Not so his daughter. He remembered the doctor's words. "If you could see Muffet settled." That meant, his love retrograded bitterly, if he could see Muffet as the possession of a husband, gone out of his parental arms and into the arms of love, man-love which is self-seeking. The stubborn tears wetted his cheeks. But had not his love been as self-seeking as any? Yes, yes, a thousand times yes. That was Tchaikowsky again. And there was Rolf who loved her. True, she had shown no sign of response but perhaps that was because David had never taught her to appreciate the congenital worth of the man.

Having wrought its will the music changed. The organist was giving the third of Liszt's "Consolations," thought by many to be of too palpable sentimentality. But it held in solution for David a message of resignation and simplicity. He left the church, forgetting Michael O'Connor, lying obligingly in his casket before the whole congregation while over him surged and palpitated the divine music of a great composer, now as dead and indifferent as himself.

III

It was still light when David reached home, but the vicissitudes of his day had been such that he suffered

the impression of a long absence. What he had learned during that absence had changed him materially; he had journeyed to "a far country" and back again, and he was become old with incredible knowledge. No wonder that his step lagged, that the hand which lifted the latch of his own door was heavy as his perceptions. A man was like a dog; from each buffeting he returned to his kennel. But the night would come when his spirit, unhoused of the flesh, would yearn bleakly to this door, and, finding itself severed from human contacts, turn away into the miasmatic regions of doubtful redemption.

He was in the hallway now—He moved grayly to that recess under the stairs where, on a peg, he habitually hung his hat. From the sunny sitting room came the fragrance of many spring flowers. On the window sill was a cluster of small bowls and these had been crushed full of cozy, kitten-faced pansies, pale dog-tooth violets, the bloodroot blossoms and other wild flowers of obscure habit. Muffet had a passion for them and her acquisitive fancy took her long pilgrimages through the dimpled valley and up ledgy heights beyond.

The stillness and the perfume smote upon his senses intolerably.

"Muffet," he called, "Muffet, where are you? Come and behold your father loafing on the factory's time."

Then there was a stir from a corner of the sitting-room and a queer, controlled voice answered,

"Yes, Father. . . ."

And she came to greet him with a step as dragging as his own. She had been weeping. Immediately he was apprehensive, challenging to the cause of her tears.

"What does this mean, I should like to know? Do

my eyes deceive me, or have you been—are you crying?”

He held out his arms as if to say that he extended them to the veriest child. But to his surprise she threw herself desperately into them and cried as though her heart would break. Then, indeed, was his alarm genuine.

“Tell me,” he commanded, stern and trembling, and her confession came like a freshet.

“Oh, Father, a dreadful thing has happened. That Mr. Sterling has been annoying me. He wants me to marry him,” and innocently, with terrible implication, “He kissed me . . . against my will. Have you ever heard of such a thing in your life?”

Her face was hot with the fever of resentment which burned there.

“You’ll tell him never to come again, won’t you, Father? You’ll tell him how I can’t possibly marry him or any one, because I’ve never thought of loving any one but you.”

Silence. Was this happening providential, wondered David.

“I told him you’d never hear of such a thing,” she choked, a haphazard laugh breaking through her tears.

Still no words from David whose tongue stayed frozen, whose mind was hard-gripped by conflicting forces. Suddenly her arms tightened in a convulsive frenzy, fear stalked naked in her eyes. She beat upon him with hard, tight fists.

“Father, why don’t you say something?”

Chapter XIV

MRS. EMMELINE HAWKINS had come to the Harlows to sew. Mrs. Hawkins was wont to appear seasonally but this time she came, without precedent, in the month of June, and she seemed completely demoralized by the innovation. The spring quota had been accomplished several weeks previous, the simple muslins and severe gingham already hung in a lavender-scented closet on the third floor. But now Mrs. Hawkins was summoned for further addenda to the wardrobe. Muffet Harlow was betrothed. Already an announcement had been made in the local paper and there on Muffet's pale and trembling hand was a band of platinum set with a magnificent, white stone.

"So that's the ring he gave ye!" exclaimed Mrs. Hawkins, catching the ambitious lights of it almost before she was done puffing up the stairs, and Muffet nodded her head several times, her serious mouth, her sad dark eyes hardly the reflection of a girl's unalloyed rapture. But then, Muffet Harlow was "odd," reasoned Mrs. Hawkins. None of the Harlows thought or felt like other folks and it might just be that Muffet paid marriage the old-fashioned tribute of entire respect. However, it was not Muffet who had summoned Mrs. Hawkins. Muffet had made no mention of a trousseau.

"Why should I," she had argued, "be any different from ordinary?"

But David, tender and lamely spirited, had replied, "Young ladies have trousseaus just as children in grammar school have the measles. I assure you when I was married—your mother—" but he never finished the sentence and Muffet, anxious to smooth the ruffled moment, had said quickly that she supposed she might as well have a few more dresses. She had acceded quietly just as she had acceded all along the line. She never thought of really disputing her father. It broke his heart to know how perfect was the power he wielded, even to the greatest ruling of all. He was not likely to forget that day, several weeks previous, when she had flung herself into his arms with her first vital confession. A man loved her and she did not love this man. Hence his lips were an insult. And she looked for corroboration to her father who had inculcated this monstrously simple code. What was he going to do about it? . . .

Then the sickening slow discovery, the unfamiliar wonder. He was going to refute his own doctrine, he was going to do nothing. Instead of the characteristic, searching analysis of the situation she had expected of him, he was going to say something trite and glossy, something that sounded hatefully like the platitudes of conventional, slow-minded people. Even the way he had gathered her into his arms in a great chair of happier councils was unfamiliar, because, instead of looking her candidly in the face, he had closed his eyes, withdrawn his vision, and she was made to feel strange and lonely and curiously baffled, like one waiting for a long time outside a door. Then, still without opening his eyes, he began to speak in Rolf's intercession, words that were hirelings. Muffet was wounded. She had always known that her father *respected* Rolf, but, as

the two terms are hardly synonymous, she had not known that he *liked* him. She had suspected sometimes that he was innocently vain of the young man's attentions. But that Rolf would be permitted to be rough with impunity, permitted, in short, to make unwelcome love to her—had never entered her head.

Yet she listened and she heard her father say, always in a conventional, conciliating voice, such things as these,—that her knowledge of men and life was a very limited knowledge, that her ability to judge was, after all, nearly nil. This after years of making her believe that the only true perceptions are the God-given ones.

"But he kissed me," said Muffet again, this time rather shrilly, "he kept on kissing me after he knew—after——"

"No general rule can apply to a man in love," said David and went on to enlighten her that a man in love might have kissed her against her will and intended no insult. It would have been better if Rolf had waited, but he felt, no doubt, that, having served an eight months' apprenticeship of silence, he might be allowed an impetuous declaration. Rolf was not a man made for indefinite postponements; he demanded dividends, dividends. "Dividends?" interrupted Muffet in a twisty tone of ridicule. The word had a commercial flavor, yet she perceived with irony that her father had used it unconsciously; one thought of Rolf Sterling in terms of such phrases. Rolf was virile, amended David hastily, his love hurt him. Muffet must be gentle to that love. "But why does he love me?" she persisted with the obstinacy of a querulous and rather tiresome child. "Love you—well, God knows why these things happen to the people that they do. It would not be strange if he had seen that you are of all women the most

delicious and adorable." It was tenderly spoken, but she was in no mood for the merely saccharine. "No," she protested, and almost in despair, "I mean, why does he love me when we've no—no point of contact?"

"But you might have," argued David, thinking of death and compelling his words with a sick determination. "It's because you've never tried, my darling, it's altogether in your point of view. Has it occurred to you ever that we've peopled our world with but two human beings, yourself and myself? An insolent performance, and I'm sure an unparalleled one. Now then, I can't expect that every woman in the world will be the counterpart of my daughter, can I?"

She shook her head.

"And neither is it reasonable for you to suppose that all men contain the same formula for thinking as the one owned by your particular parent."

She agreed that it wasn't. But whenever he opened his eyes he saw the acute, listening look of her eyes, the strained expression of her unusually white face and his argument broke down. Then all he could do was to stroke her hands and to resist the wild impulse to bend his head and to cry into them. But by dint of marshaling all his forces, and the lowering shadow of twilight that seemed mercifully to veil his travail of spirit, he managed to paint a picture of Rolf pleasant to the last degree. He was an inspiring figure with his trained business brain and his splendid clean body—one would feel safe in trusting such a man with what he held precious; one would feel sure he would carry his obligations nobly to the last. He was midway in this laudatory speech when Muffet, with her senses groping this way and that, touched the truth, recoiled from it and touched it again, intrepid to under-

stand its contours. Her father wanted her to marry Rolf Sterling. Why? She could have sworn that the idea was not one he had seriously entertained heretofore. Did it have to do with the invention? A thousand times "no." David was never the man to count material advantages, his whole life bore witness to that. Unless it was that his inventor's conscience demanded he should discharge the sacred obligation of that chef d'œuvre, unless the inexorable law of science caused him to put it above even her, his daughter, Muffet. But after staring at the blue-veined eyelids, so tender and so tired that they seemed an expression of all he had ever been to her, she thrust the thought away. What was it stood between them, what lay hidden behind the secretive eyelids? She wanted to shake him by the shoulders and cry out,

"Oh father, wake up. Open your eyes and stay with me. Don't go back *there*."

But the psychic feeling that, whatever effort he made at dissembling was being made for her sake imposed certain obligations on her own behavior, her bravery. So she made only a child's fumbling at his coat lapel, she distilled pitiful cheer in a voice that said,

"You sly old father, are you trying to tell me that you would like to see me his wife?"

Suddenly David had eyes again. He took her cinnamon-sweet head between his hands and kissed the top of it. He found a smile for her undoing.

"I'm only saying, Little Miss Muffet, that if you could find it in your heart to care for him it would make me very happy. I'm an old man now. Not so old in years, perhaps, but—well—tuckered in spirit. We need new vitality in our house, my child, a different sort of vigor from the kind that either of us possesses.

Young people who love and marry skim the cream of life. It's the natural, sweet order of existence and in no way an abnormal or strained experience. I ought to have told you before—I ought——”

She studied his face for motives, studied it unhappily for treason, fought against the thought that he was betraying her. Ah, that was the moment when he must be ruthless, when he must out-Judas Judas. He seemed to have drifted very far away when he heard Muffet whisper,

“It shall be as you wish. I will tell him I have changed my mind.” Then she had kissed her father again to show him that she made the sacrifice cheerfully and without malice, that she had not and never could suspect him of guile. It was this last kiss that came near to unmanning him, that made him rise abruptly, casting her aside, and lurch upstairs to his room. Closing and locking the door, he took his own trouble to himself like the best of the Harlows, and when he came down he had himself well in hand. Likewise Muffet. She wore a white dress for supper and the harmonious manner of a Harlow. She poured her father's tea and served his salad with the patient goodness of a little girl.

Through the open windows came the exquisite, chill scent of lilacs. Birds were making late abbreviated sounds of settling down for the night. Before them on the old mahogany table Vannie had spread a tempting repast. But neither could eat. David's smile was too sick for banter. And not a word of Muffet's conversation rang true. After dinner he saw her go to the beautiful, battered desk in the sitting-room, draw some stationery to her and start a letter. Her head made a little pool of dusky wine in the still, light room. He

sensed her intention and her instant submission seemed more than he could bear. Now his resolve was twitching. Once he rose from his chair but sat down again. He yearned to draw her away from that sterile missive, to laugh a great, reassuring comrade's laugh into her betrayed eyes, her pitiful, obedient child's face, and to cry,

"No, my darling, no. I shall never call upon you to marry without love. Come, tear up the letter, and let us go on as we were and hang the consequences."

But immediately rose before him the picture of Muffet alone and desolated, a waif to suffer the charity of her obnoxious relations, or worse, to buffet her way in an unscrupulous world, where her innocence would be fair game for the predatory. Alf had warned him. So the impulse was slain and Muffet wrote her letter. In it she said starkly,

DEAR MR. STERLING:—

I have been thinking over what you said to-day and I have changed my mind. If you like, I will marry you.

MUFFET HARLOW.

P. S. I could not live apart from my father.

II

Rolf, reading that poignant letter in his office next morning, failed to give it the interpretation that another might have done as a letter written under pressure. All the drums and cymbals of his passion grew strident within him. It was remarked from that day how the usually taciturn man became prolific of words and

laughter; gesture too helped relieve the joyful congestion of his soul. Meeting Muffet he was neither surprised nor disquieted to find her guarded in reserve. She had said that she would marry him and that declaration sufficed for a little. He refused deliberately to question the state of her feelings. He glossed over her lack of affection by the broad statement that she knew nothing of life. Nevertheless his instinct was wary in one respect,—he never tried to force his caresses upon her as he had done that day in the field; he exercised a certain hard control of himself. He kept upon her the vigilant eye of one who watches a seedling mature in a cold frame.

But Muffet, in her acute sensitiveness, resented even the deferred intention of his eyes, sensed the clamor in his control, the tempest in his patience. She became too apprehensive for tolerance. She found no pathos in the thought that the betrothal which to her was a travesty was invested by Sterling with splendid significance, that the ring, the bracelet, the ostentation of announcement, all were symbols of a golden, authorized passion for which an orchestration sounded in heaven.

He had journeyed to New York to a Fifth Avenue jeweler for the ring and he had been fussy and finicking as besuited a prospective bridegroom handsomely determined to do the handsome thing.

Looking at his purchase on the train going back he reflected naïvely that people would see the superb diamond and think, "How he must love her," then, noting the workmanship of the setting would add with awe, "This is the refinement of regard!"

The ring went onto Muffet's finger where all day she wore it like an obligation, watching the sun strike

prismatic colors from its savage heart of crystal. But at night she took it carefully from her finger, that was tired of the responsibility, and laid it on her dressing table.

A reciprocal relationship should certainly have been established between Rolf and herself, intimacy taking its cue from the moment that she wrote her honest statement of acceptance. But this had not happened and now she played at a fabulous game with a stranger. This stranger called twice a day, once in the afternoon when he had finished his day at the office and a second time in the evening. And Muffet met him with her incredible, dazed politeness, politely planning with a stranger an improbable thing called "a wedding trip." Rolf had reminded her archly that such a custom was honorable with usage, just as her father had reminded her of the personal trifles she would be expected to have. Rolf had brought maps. . . . He had said that a motor trip into the mountains would please him best. . . .

"But it is for you to say," he deferred tenderly, and Muffet answered with mechanical mouth, with some perspective on the grim irony of the situation,

"No, it really does not matter in the least."

Then a great rattling of the starchy map. A very good map, Rolf remarked with satisfaction and called her attention to the fact that it was mounted on canvas. Muffet murmured approval. Dimly she heard him. It seemed hours that his voice made an excursion of talk as intricate as the one it described. "If we go by the Montreal route," he would dally deliciously, "or if we choose an even better way. . . ."

It was not until a week before their marriage that her silence communicated itself.

"Muffet, I sometimes think, I sometimes think you don't want to take a trip at all!"

That his tremendous obtuseness should at last give way seemed to her nothing short of a miracle. Her smile was a sunbeam, a moonbeam. She put her hand gratefully on his arm.

"Rolf, of course I don't."

"Don't?" He tried to get his mind around the idea. "Don't want a trip? That's queer. That's—well, not like a girl at all."

She felt genuinely sorry for him then; it was in her to be almost fond of him when disappointed. The trouble lay in the fact that he so seldom was.

"You see," she began, very anxious to allay his disappointment by a gentle explanation, "I've always thought that anything in the nature of advertisement is both vulgar and stupid, and that 'honeymoons' come under that head. For every one to know we are just married and starting on one is like exhibiting our private affairs, becoming a target. I should much prefer to stay quietly here with you and Father."

"Hm, your father and I. Well, that is original, I must say."

She blushed painfully.

"It's just as we'll be later on, Rolf——"

"All right, never mind that——" His voice grated in exasperation. "Don't misunderstand me, dear. I'm willing to have it the way it will make you happy. It's been quite a concession, this plan for living on in the old house. You know that I'd prefer to be in town and build, but your wishes come first. Still, it does seem that just at first——"

But the problem was solved by David's decision. When he heard that Muffet was averse to going away

he said that he and Elijah would take their two weeks' vacation together a little earlier than usual and jaunt up to Elijah's farm in the western part of the state.

So the brief month passed and Muffet knew that the diminishing time made her father sad. And now her pity was for him.

"We'll always be together, you know," she told him, "and it isn't as though I were going away."

But all at once she climbed into his lap and kissed him interrogatively.

"Nothing can change us, promise me that, neither marriage nor——"

"Death?" suggested David awfully, yet it was not David who spoke but a voice sounding through him. He was back in the fear-sweat of the unknown, the twilight between two states of consciousness. But Muffet had not understood or appraised the word as having more than its sentimental meaning.

"Death least of all," she said securely, and relaxing in a tired way let her cheek rest contentfully against his.

III

Mrs. Hawkins was a person physically contrived for the profession of seamstress. Though rather short from the waist to the neck she was rather long from the hips to the knees and could hold a lap-board without the danger of it slipping. Her teeth were prominent and incisive for the biting of threads. She habitually held her mouth as though it were full of pins. Her eyes were bright and protruding; in the zeal of dress-making they had emerged a little way from her head and remained permanently perspicacious. She had the

bosom and the great hips of a Juno and gave the effect of being sewed into her clothes as tightly as was the sawdust in the cushion which she wore below her chest, a dingy half moon, bristling with pins. At her waist hung a pair of scissors on red tape, scissors that went "snip-snap" smartly, showing that she kept them ground.

Mrs. Hawkins was perhaps the one person in all Wedgewater granted access to the presence of Muffet Harlow and privileged to discuss the engagement on terms of intimacy. She felt it an obligation, almost a sacred duty, to take away with her whatever information she could for the nourishment of starving public curiosity. For the betrothal, as she intimated to Muffet, was "town talk."

"Dear me," said Muffet dryly, "not really?"

"If you could hear them," the woman assured her, rocking with her lap-board, and added that every one knew about Rolf Sterling, of course, but no one seemed to know much about "Miss Harlow." "Time was," she explained, not wishing to be indelicate, "when the Harlows were considered pillars of society, but they kind of died off and edged away and now I figure the newcomers all think Mr. Sterling's marryin' into some unknown tribe. You got to admit Wedgewater Road ain't fashionable any more."

Muffet admitted that it wasn't.

"Then, too, being he was the best catch in town there was bound to be feelin'," mused Mrs. Hawkins with windy relish. "They do say the Warren girl's gone to Atlantic City. . . ."

"Do they say so?" Muffet wondered if she was supposed to scent a shattered romance.

She sat these days in daffodil sunshine, scantily clad for the tryings-on. The work-room, heaped with the

pale colors of materials, was not unlike the riotous spring garden outside, and Muffet in her complete immobility a sculptor's dream of its adornment. The sun glowed in the marble of her shoulders; her arms were unexpectedly round and polished cleanly down to the facile wrists and hands. Rid of her obscuring clothes, she emerged with the shining physical perfection that we are taught to think of as Greek.

"Wedgewater," effused Mrs. Hawkins, her New England voice with its nasal edges breaking out on the stillness—"Wedgewater's goin' to git its eyes open when your husband begins takin' you out and showin' you round!" Letting her hands fall idle, she permitted her look to dwell upon the symmetry of the girl's bare shoulders, stooped beneath the torrent of light. It was as though she saw her suddenly with new significance and was not unmoved by her discovery.

"My soul, you're a pretty thing, Muffet Harlow," she sighed. "Dunno's I ever realized before quite how sweet-pretty you've grown to be. They say it takes a man to see beauty in a woman and if that be so I figure your Mr. Sterling's going right down on his knees——"

"Oh," protested Muffet, stirring self-consciously, "I think I'll dress now."

But still Mrs. Hawkins did not pick up her work. She leaned back in her chair, the lap-board slanting idly on her great Junoesque knees, an expression at once gentle and clairvoyant on her homely face.

"Marriage is a strange institution," she delivered herself of the cryptic remark. "It's like dying—the dead can never return to tell the living what it's like. So the married can never tell the unmarried. . . . You've got to try it and make all your own mistakes. I knew a fisherman once who sailed the Sound and he

told me he'd learned where all the rocks was by runnin' on 'em. That's like marriage. . . ."

Muffet had turned her face in awe upon the speaker; she listened with fearful fascination.

"Marriage," spoke Mrs. Hawkins in a dull, fateful voice, "is the large slice o' life. If you don't marry I don't care what you've had it's been the lesser portion. But I'll tell you a mistake folks make. They think they're immediately goin' to fit together like the pieces in a puzzle picture. 'Tain't true. After marriage the jig-saw has to be used considerable before the pattern comes right."

The old wives' look was on her face and for the first time Muffet sensed solemnly what it would mean to be admitted to the free masonry of married women, the great, heroic, infinitely wise, wisely-indulgent army, the priestesses of birth and pain, the handmaidens of tedium and domesticity. Muffet saw her now not as the colorless sewing woman but as an omniscient being strong in her martyrdom, as one who knew all about

"The laws that are the wonder of the wise,
And why they smile so strangely who are dead."

Driven by the urgency of her doubts, she rose and went over to Mrs. Hawkins.

"Mrs. Hawkins," she asked touchingly, "can two people be happy if in the beginning only one of them loves? Granted, of course," she added shamefacedly, "that the other is willing and anxious to be kind?"

Mrs. Hawkins seemed to emerge from her trance with a swift transition to the realm of common sense.

"Duty," she snapped, "makes a mighty cold diet. But even so you might get along if it wasn't for the

matter of children. A woman only willingly bears children for the man she loves."

Muffet's thought seemed to widen. In the warm recesses of her eyes woke a shy bewilderment. Children. Would Rolf want her to have children? "In every way Rolf is the normal man," her father had once said. And normal men become fathers. Then children, too, children of healthy assertiveness and agility. Her imagination worked, appalled. Oh, Muffet loved children. But would she love Rolf's children? She did not know.

IV

It was late afternoon and Mrs. Hawkins had gone home. Muffet, having dressed for supper, had returned to the sewing room to fold up the work and set all in readiness for the morning. There, the association of ideas drawing her back to the seat by the window, she had subsided in it once more, the sheer ruffles of her wash dress catching the late sun in frail gildings. Outside the process of evening-fall was beginning—a time of day she loved best. But to-night she was aware of it only with a detached consciousness. She was not thinking, as usual, of her father, nor even of Rolf, but of herself. She was thinking that she must get to know herself better when the door opened and Rolf walked in. They were to be married in a week's time and she knew that he was thinking of that even before he greeted her. It was never far from his mind. But to-night, struck by the picture she made, he spoke quietly,

"Watching the sunset?"

"Yes," she said and would have risen, but he lifted his hand.

"Don't move. I'll watch it too," and he came over and stood beside her, putting one hand experimentally on her hair.

Fresh garden scents rose pungently when the breeze condescended and they seemed to be in a bower of leaves, a myriad of them, whispering. His hand still on her hair he bent to detect the velvet roving of her eyes, her brooding girl's eyes that were seeking an answer to all the esoteric puzzle of life. A powerful emotion was evoked in him. He wanted to know what she was pondering and without alarming that still process of thought to identify himself with it. At last her silence seemed more than he could bear.

"Muffet," he breathed oddly, "do you know that sometimes you seem not real at all. You're like a creature from another world, closer to angels than you are to us. How can I hope to understand you?"

She did not answer and suddenly, kneeling, he put both arms about her with a gesture at once fearful and abandoned.

"You're like a young boy," he marveled, struggling to express in words the virginity of her spirit, "you're like a beautiful boy."

Then with his arms tightening about her he lifted a face that was ravaged.

"Let yourself love me," he begged passionately, "let yourself love me. . . ."

Chapter XV

I

MUFFET STERLING'S first impression of marriage was almost a nonsensical one,—it seemed to her that marriage meant noise, thunderous beginnings, a whirling tumult of the air as exciting as Wagner's music of the "Walküre," which she had once heard with her father. David and Elijah, according to plan, had gone to the upstate farm, leaving the young people in possession of the house on Wedgewater Road. Rolf, too, was having his vacation and was free to enjoy his Arcadia and the piquant charm of his young wife. Because the old house, an outlaw in isolation, was safe from intrusion, because the hot July days were luxuriantly still, the very air swooning of field flowers, because of the picture-book panorama seen from any window, the tangible presence of sleepy-hearted summer, Rolf believed in his halcyon holiday. Out-of-doors he could feel the genial sun to the core of his being; within he was cooled by the restfulness of leaf-shaded walls and bare floors. In truth the Dutchman pipe vine, tenacious where it could cling, swung untidily over half the windows on the ground floor; trumpet vine and Virginia creeper adhered lovingly to the dark silver of the clapboards.

Only Vannie, indigenous to the kitchen, was cooking for them as sentimentally as though they had been

invalids. Save for the miracle sorrowfully missing in all but the catch-moments of life, Rolf was happy. What he lacked was the perfect response that is an open sesame to the realm beyond reason where true lovers dwell. But always he was patient and of brave cheer. At any rate he knew the intoxication of great hope, not to mention the joy of monopoly, poignantly sweet in view of the fact that he had never before had Muffet to himself. Always there had been her father and their absorption in one another. Not that Rolf was jealous. He told himself insistently that the relationship was very beautiful. At the same time it seemed little enough that Harlow should leave them a brief two weeks together. Rolf thought of it each morning when he wakened and saw her loved head on the pillow beside him in the colossal bed which had been Jasmine Harlow's.

What Muffet felt throughout the entire two weeks was probably exactly the opposite of what Rolf felt. It seemed to her that her father was very long away. She thought of the house as hollow and full of reverberations. She had never before had experience of a housemate so virile. Rolf towered, both literally and figuratively speaking; he had often to mind about the lintel in passing through a door. He whistled like a blackbird when he shaved. It amused him to vault up the frail stairs two at a time and laugh when the ceiling shivered. He was so elate, so plotty and planny, he lived so hard even when he fancied that he was resting. And upstairs in the great front chamber where they had elected to sleep his cheerful belongings were everywhere. Muffet seemed to have been precipitated suddenly into a life where feminine occupation was lost in the large order of masculinity. Her girlish-

ness was engulfed . . . before it could catch its breath. . . . All the words of her mouth were stopped by kisses, all her doubts still-born. . . .

She returned to her childhood's room to sit among the familiar trifles and to reason out the transition, and he came and found her and killed all her fluttering phrases with the vehemence of his love-making. Muffet wanted to talk about love and to clarify it. Rolf saw no use in such analysis; he didn't want to talk about love—he wanted to enjoy it. Or if he did want to talk about it, if he longed to sing the saga of her beauty he was incompetent. With the whole rich soil of the English language in which to grow something beautiful he could only make mud pies. Frightened by the maturity of his passion for her, which seemed to have sprung into life full-panoplied, Muffet strove to match it with her own. She wanted to love Rolf in some beautiful and adequate fashion but she needed to know all of the delicate steps by which such a love had been built up. It seemed to her now that the forces of life had come upon her suddenly, had taken her unaware, the music of the "Walküre," irresistibly conquering and wild with the din of disaster—it seemed to her that, like Brunnhilde, she was doomed to be put to sleep in a circle of fire. She knew the impossibility of ever making Rolf understand her need to be won progressively. Already she had wakened to find her pillow wet with the tears she had shed in her sleep and had asked her heart,

"Red rebel, is it you
That lifted this wild dew?"

Incredible that yesterday she and Rolf were the most constrained of friends and now she knew the pressure of his cheek against hers, she knew the mod-

eling of her own face, kissed on all its contours. She knew the breadth and firmness of his knit shoulder where he took her head to rest, her head that was all a ferment of thoughts. There was a desperate actuality in existence as though what had hitherto been compounded of air and water were a new draught of blood and fire. The house that had dozed in the sun would never sleep again. It was infused with a fierce energy of direction even this early in the new régime.

Rolf had dominion over it, just as he had dominion over Muffet. It need not expect him to condone its defective water-pipes and rotting roof; nothing escaped his investigating eye. In his idleness he was ingenious to do little things with a hammer and yard stick, to sound the ceilings, to calculate the cant of the floor. And while he was thus engaged the tension relaxed for Muffet. She saw him normally occupied and herself drifted back to the illusion of lost times when she had been her father's housekeeper with no more vital demand upon her than the ordering of his meals. Likewise when they recreated, though Rolf brought to their outings a point of view of purpose in direct contrast to Muffet's lawless love of the holiday for itself. Rolf contended that it was useless to invade the country and bring back nothing, an irrefutable argument when seen in that light.

"Oh," said Muffet, "but Father and I—" and broke off with the phrase whose constant repetition during the days of David's absence had begun to pall.

Rolf winced.

"Say 'you and I,' Sweetheart, just this once!"

Muffet smiled apologetically.

"Forgive me, Rolf. I've been saying the other all my life."

Rolf had a true penchant for fishing and foraging and now he remembered with delight the peculiar savor of the sport known as "frogging." It was years since he had caught frogs, since he had indulged himself in the leisure for such pastimes. He lifted Muffet off her feet and kissed her before he set her once more on the ground.

"We will go frogging," he announced inspiredly.

"Frogging?" she queried, ruffling her brow but half converted to the picture of boating among lily-pads, and she inquired innocently into the technique of the procedure.

Rolf replied that it was done with a bit of red flannel on a hook and Muffet murmured demurely that Vannie might be persuaded to cut up her petticoat, a typical Harlow remark of the kind that Rolf had learned to expect. Recognizing it as whimsy he continued with his dissertation on frogs. They constituted a dish for an epicure. They had to be salted as soon as they were skinned and it was uncanny the way the muscles would contract and twitch under the action of the salt. But fried in cracker crumbs—Muffet's face was in eclipse; somehow she was less intrigued by the idea of the lily-pads. But she went rather than disappoint him and floated about all day in a leaky boat on a sultry mud-pond, her gingham frock making on the water a bright reflection as of a submerged pink lily. Beneath a tattered straw hat the olive tones of her face were golden, her hair curled damply about her forehead and formed tiny ringlets at the nape of her neck. The day was very warm. She played patience in the bow of the boat while Rolf, burning and blistering in an outing shirt open at the throat, angled with avidity.

"The thing for you to do," he threw at Muffet as an

aspersion on her idleness, "is to watch sharp for frogs and tell me when you see one."

"But they're everywhere," she cried almost in hysteria over the queer, inquisitive-eyed creatures squatting on rocks and great, flat lily leaves. Their grotesque intelligence seen at close quarters took her back to the frog in fairy lore, always a prince who by some turn of black magic had been transformed into his present state. She could not help feeling that the souls of the condemned peered from those mournful eyes.

Rolf, standing and maintaining a precarious balance, contrived to bring the gaudy scrap of flannel before the frog's vision whereupon the luckless creature would spring for it, get the hook sickeningly embedded in its belly, and fight humanly with, what seemed to Muffet, its hands to extricate itself. Then a low "Ah!" from Rolf and "Did you see?" needing her praise for his prowess. A man married in order that he might have this suave flattery forever in his ears. He was conscious that he frogged as he did everything else—expertly. But women were incalculable. There was his woman, who should have been admiring and attentive, dangling her hands in the water and looking squeamishly away each time he made a capture.

The truth was that the wholesale slaughter made her ill. The bottom of the boat was soon covered with sprawling, mutilated bodies, the heat sent a raw smell of frogs and mud and blistering paint to add to her distaste. She yearned toward the shade of an Elysian bank where she might lie on fragrant pine needles and think cool thoughts. That was the sort of thing she and her father would have done. In retrospect their old innocuous ways seemed sadly sweet to her as ways forever lost. And that day she missed him acutely

and the circumstance of marriage seemed doubly strange.

"Are you having a good time?" inquired Rolf negligently, outrageous contentment in the tone. His hat was off in defiance of the sun, his forehead brightly bedewed.

"Yes," answered Muffet constrainedly. "Have you caught nearly enough?"

He turned upon her censoriously.

"Looka here, how shall I ever do anything in life if you're always blocking me?"

"But you don't expect to go through life frogging, do you, Rolf?"

"I expect to go through life doing things that take a deal more enterprise. You've got to be ruthless if you get what you want."

Inwardly she was disputatious but what was the use of arguing with the sun a bursting cannon-ball overhead? So she said limply,

"I'd like to sit in the shade," and added in the cajoling tone of a small child, "You could smoke."

He laughed then. He had to. He said,

"You funny little girl," sobriquet which she suffered in silence; she did not feel like a little girl at all but immeasurably older than Rolf at that moment with a kind of pitying superiority.

When they were home once more and his mission accomplished Rolf wondered if he had been inconsiderate. When, after cleaning his catch, he went to look for Muffet he found her in their room lying on the bed, the blind drawn against the ferocious glare outside. Instantly he was all solicitude.

"You should have told me that the sun was giving you a headache."

She quivered silently.

"Shall I just go away and let you sleep?"

"Yes, Rolf, please."

He kissed her and tiptoed toward the door. Half way across the room he turned and tiptoed back. The child-like things men do!

"They're all on a platter and salted," he confided complacently. "Would you like to see them?" whereupon she turned and buried her face in the pillow with a storm of hysterical tears.

"No—no—no," came her voice in muffled sobs and laughter.

No? Rolf's face was a study. What the devil did it all mean? His face grew hotter than its sun-burn; it took on a look of righteous resentment.

"Very well," he said loudly, with the accent on the "very." Then he mumbled with absurd dignity, "I only thought—it's such a sight—I only thought you might like to see them twitch."

II

Evening in the grape arbor a week later. Muffet a white blur against the rustic seat, Rolf, with his cigarette, completely, comfortably silent as men are when they withdraw into the resource of themselves and ponder their excellences. Indoors Vannie, clearing away the dinner dishes, could be heard in her old lament,

"A great long freight train and a red ca-boose,
Brought sorer to mah do' . . ."

The voice was as mellow as the moonshine without, as sad as the history of sorrow. Muffet thought,

"What loneliness have they in their souls that makes them sing like that?"

Sterling said: "Beats all how niggers whine!" and laughed. Then again he was silent, going back to himself, his industry and good fortune and the woman who had promised to help him build his home.

The horse chestnut tree, rearing itself in a soft pyramid against the stars trembled in its cone-shaped blossoms and diffused a troubling perfume. As the moon rose the shadows on the ground designated themselves as heart-shaped leaves, immature frettings of grapes and the cross-stitch of lattice. Muffet and Rolf could see the fireflies in intermittent flashes across the silver garden, a low, luminous mist of them along the marshes.

Rolf, finding his thoughts in reminiscence, broke out to share them with Muffet and talked of his boyhood, the humble but happy days in the ship chandler's shop, or at home in his mother's tiny kitchen where two windows opened on the bay and were like picture frames with the composition continually changing. He spoke of the bitterness that it was to him to have lost his mother before his success was assured. He said that there had been but two women in his life, his mother and his wife. Oh, there had been others, of course, but inconsiderable in the largest sense. His mother's influence had survived all these years, and now he asked only that Muffet should be interested in his career, and not stand aside from it. He said that he believed in confidence without reservation and with a fumbling awkwardness he asked her if there was not just one confidence she had withheld from him. Not unreasonably, it seemed to Rolf that having married into the family he was entitled to some explanation in regard to her mother. He had naturally expected that, prior

to their marriage, David would open the subject of his own accord, would clarify himself as a divorced or a legally bound man and intimate what attitude Rolf would be called upon to take toward the woman of mystery. But public opinion could have told him that the Harlows were odd, sealed in pride, inaccessible. They would be capable of carrying their reserve to the utmost lengths. And that was what they were doing. Muffet started.

"My childhood, Rolf?" He sensed a tautening of her body, a coördination of her forces. "Can't you imagine? I've always lived in this old house—or nearly always. First there was my grandmother Harlow, then my father and mother, then my father and I. . . ."

The rebuff had been made delicately yet was entirely effective. There sat Rolf, rather warm beneath his collar, *hors de combat*. He was hurt in the most vulnerable quarter—he was hurt in his pride. But to have admitted, even to himself, that a slight had been put upon him would have amounted to ignominy. Instead, like a child that nurses its finger in its mouth, he sought the distraction of other thoughts, other satisfactions. What did it matter if they preferred to keep the family skeleton in its closet and remain eternally custodians of the key? Undeniably he had Muffet and the dizzying privilege of loving her.

He touched her now, the electric current of longing creeping down his arms and into his finger-tips. The contour of her shoulder, slender yet round, felt warm through her frock—she was all thinly starched and naïvely sweet like a child at a party.

"Muffet," he asked urgently, "what are you thinking of?"

She laughed apologetically.

"I was thinking of the good times we shall have when Father comes home."

His lips thinned and straightened stressfully.

"Don't think of them, Darling, think of now when we are alone together." The plea turned to a command. "Think of now," he reiterated almost angrily.

"Yes, Rolf, I'm thinking of it."

"Say you belong to me, Muffet."

"Why, Rolf, I suppose I do."

"And that you love me—Say it!" Her face was uplifted piteously, in panic before his pursuing and relentless passion.

"How could I help it," she countered in a thin voice of distress, "you've been so kind——"

"Are you sure, sure?" and he shook her by the shoulders.

"Oh, Rolf, when you say it like that—" She was almost in tears.

"Well, I want to know," said he grimly and taking her face between his hands he stifled the long sigh that was on her lips. "Does it make you happy to be kissed like that? Tell me, does it make you happy?"

"Yes, Rolf, no, Rolf . . . oh," with despairing candor, "it's too soon to know, too soon to know. Please won't you wait?"

Suddenly he released her, dropped her coldly, almost pushed her from him. He laughed at his own humiliation, rose shakenly and lit a cigarette.

"I suppose I must give you time."

The next morning when he wakened Muffet was already out of bed. In her light silk kimono, like a flower gone pale in the rains, she was stooping to pick up something that had been slipped under the door.

She read and the very shadows of sleep crept clear of her eyes; she read and was restored. Rolf, through the surviving partitions of slumber, witnessed the performance with a jealousy that stung him wide awake. Scratch came his voice like a needle across a piece of linen:

“May I ask who’s sending you letters this hour of the morning?”

Without a word she handed him the letter, an informal communication written on the back of a grocer’s slip.

Beloved:—(it said) I came at midnight and met our Nick just crawling under the hedge. He asked me no questions and I told no lies. On the other hand I feel that where the cat calls is no concern of mine. So we entered the house like gentlemen, I through the door and Nicodemus through the pantry window. Elijah is back, too, with importance on his coat-tails, in anxiety to know if the factory is still running. How I’ve missed you, Little Miss Muffet, and how long it will seem till evening when I’m home from work. My regards to Rolf, good fellow, and endless love from
your FATHER.

Chapter XVI

I

ELIJAH'S farm, preserved as a monument to his boyhood, was perched precariously on a miniature mountain of the Berkshires, and was a sanctum to which the two men, at convenient intervals over a period of many years, had been wont to retire. At Elijah's farm they rested their toil-racked bodies with the simple recreations of men past the prime of life. They went to bed with the chickens and rose at the cannon of dawn. But this year David seemed, as Elijah expressed it, "un-get-at-able."

The truth was that David believed himself to be seeing the farm for the last time and the pressure of his loneliness made his remarks cryptic or inattentive. Also he was desolated by the thought that something more than the barrier of miles separated him from his child. The inexorable division had come a little ahead of the one which fate intended and this by his own decree. Now that she was married he was tormented by doubts of the validity of that marriage, and his own moral right to have arbitrated in its favor. Had it been a selfish or unselfish act on the part of the parent? Constantly the question was before him, demanding to be dealt with, when he was wandering through the emerald green pastures with his old friend in the morning, when he lay beneath a patch-work

quilt in his gabled room at night, listening to the summer rain thrumming the roof, or shrinking from the pale accusation of the moon. He had coerced Muffet into marriage in order that his mind might be at rest. Was such an act one of altruism? The truly unselfish thing would have been a stouter grapple with life, the compelling of an income that would have left the girl free to marry or not as she liked. No, he was not, by any means blameless. He was a man who had been too careless to insure for his daughter a safe future. He was one who had indulged himself in his hobby and ridden it to the exclusion of everything else. He had lived on his child's devotion and waxed smug because she called him a great man.

As he and Elijah were quite beautifully frank with one another Elijah felt constrained to tell him that he was become "a consarned kill-joy."

"And being as you *be*," the little man ended with a flourish, "dunno's there's anyone I'd less rather have round!"

His spirited indictment brought a sad smile to David's lips. They were doing their leisurely mile after supper along the trail of Elijah's Alpine holdings. A prospect of fair valley lay below them, a living bowl of green lined with a bewildering array of wild flowers. The opposite rim of the bowl was curved smoothly up and the sun was poised on the thin edge in the moment of bright panic before its departure. It seemed to David that it was always sunset, a sunset arranged with a certain deliberateness as a sermon to old or ailing men. Die beautifully, it preached, go out in a phantasmagoria of colors. But he could never hope to do that. The best that he could hope for was a simple ending, distinguished by the absence of a flaw of fear. He was grateful

that the craven cowardice which had quite unmanned him at the start had given place to a grim acceptance. He was glad that he had not yielded to the temptation of telling Elijah *then*. He could not have done it creditably. But now there seemed no reason why he should not share his secret. It would mean the comfort of a hand in the darkness, a contemporary understanding and respect. It would depress Elijah, yes, but it would not be a dastardly thing to do like telling Muffet. It would kill his treasure were she to know, wither the young flower of her heart. *Because her father was first with her!* Ah, he had said it and basely admitted that he was glad he was first. Yet he had the grace to acknowledge that in controlling her affection as he did he was thwarting the eternal plan of the universe. *Because now Rolf should be first.* He lost himself in the complexity of his reasoning. And there sat Elijah beside him on the boulder where they had tarried to rest, fuming like a neglected child.

"Elijah," said David, with imposing calm, "what would you say if I told you that next year or the year after you will be here alone?"

Elijah picked a straw and chewed it irascibly.

"Say you were a damn fool," was the laconic reply. "Any man's a damn fool who stays sweltering in Wedgewater when he's got this to come to."

"Ah," said David with tender playfulness, "what if I were to tell you that I shall not even be in Wedgewater at that time, nor the state nor the country nor anywhere else?" He was proud of the superb control he kept on his voice.

"Say you were a damn fool," reiterated Elijah, but this time nervously as one who resents cruel teasing.

"Nevertheless, it's true." The voice fell into gravity.

"Look here, young feller," protested Elijah, jerking upright, "don't you come no games on me, don't you come no games on me. What's this talk about bein' nowhere, no place? Rubbish and fiddlesticks!"

He was profoundly moved and he showed it by an access of ridicule.

"'Lije," said David softly, "you know Doc Dutton, don't you, and you know he's not a man to mince words, an' you know me and how several times of late I've been taken with those pesky spells o' dizziness?"

Elijah nodded, chewing.

"About a month ago Alf made a thorough examination. Then he told me, 'Dave, old boy, the days are numbered.' He told me just like that because he wanted to warn me fair and give me time to arrange matters for little Miss Muffet. He said it might be a year or it might be two."

"No," said Elijah shakenly, "no."

"Yes," nodded David.

"But you say he told you so you could arrange matters for Muffet."

David nodded again.

"I arranged 'em, 'Lije."

"Whatdye mean you arranged 'em, Dave?"

"I saw to it that she married young Sterling." Suddenly the tears tricked him. He made a fist of his hand and beat it wretchedly on his knee. "That's what I did, 'Lije, God help me, that's what I did, knowin' the child—knowin' the child—why, you must have seen yourself her heart wasn't in the bargain."

"You mean she don't love Sterling?" Elijah sat back, both hands knotted about the stout stick that he had cut for walking. "She *must* love him," he declared angrily. "Why, he's young, he's well-to-do, he's

handsome as a chromo. I thought that was what girls wanted."

"Oh, 'Lije, you don't know Muffet. She's different in every way from the ordinary girl. She's—well, she's rare. It's in her to suffer the tortures of the damned just supposin' he doesn't handle her right."

"Pshaw," said Elijah helplessly, "what's the good supposin' a thing like that? Why, he's head over heels in love with the girl, and even granted she wasn't clean gone on him in the beginning there's something about marriage, Dave, a consecration, that tends to draw a man and woman together."

"Hm, there have been exceptions to that rule. No, I tell you, 'Lije, it was too big a risk, too big a responsibility for me to have taken on my soul, and Muffet looking to me for guidance. One can't be so careless of human destiny. But I didn't see it at the time; all I saw at the time was she'd need a protector and need him soon, and I didn't dare let the thing run."

Elijah glowered into the valley. Then he spoke with difficulty.

"There's all kinds of fools, Dave, and sometimes I think the whole pa'cel of 'em's got together in you. Didn't you know, didn't you know I'd have looked out for Muffet? Why, God A'mighty, I always supposed she was our girl together, Dave; I'd always banked on takin' her under my wing if you was first to go. And now you gone on account o' your consarned pride an' pig-headedness an' married her off, willy-nilly, an' you got the audacity to tell me about it afterward!"

Elijah blew his nose. His watery eyes with the pale, stubby lashes blinked furiously like the eyes of a monkey in distress.

"Well, now it's done it's done, an' we got to hope

for the best. But see here," he turned upon David and clutched his arm fiercely, "you can't die. Why, you ain't put through your invention yet."

"No, I've not put through my invention."

"And we ain't done one quarter o' the things we planned to do together. Dave," pleaded Elijah, "it's an outlandish notion."

"It's—it's fantastic," murmured David. "But Old Alf never makes mistakes. We've got to face it."

And all the time Elijah knew it was the truth and the shadows sank deeper and deeper into his face.

"I suppose so, but I'll miss you, Dave." The simplicity of the acceptance touched David deeply.

He knew very well the loneliness that ached in Elijah, but Elijah did not know that he knew. He was afraid of womanishness, of giving way. At the same time he longed to express to David in some adequate action how profoundly the news had affected him. As they rose to go he thrust the rough-hewn walking stick into his hands.

"Here, Dave, you take this."

But it was really Elijah who needed it.

II

All about the house on Wedgewater Road the noise of carpentering. The property belongs to Rolf Sterling now and Rolf is wasting no time. He could not possibly, he had said, live under another man's roof, so, since Muffet would not hear of going elsewhere, it was decided that he should buy the house and that David should continue to live in it. In short, what Rolf himself was too proud to do was to become the portion

of David. The simplicity of his reasoning sent a smile into David's soul, but he was aware that youth demands right of way before age, that he was now supposed to carry his pride in a baggy pocket. Now all that Rolf's enterprising imagination had yearned to change was being altered with gusto and direction. Before it had expressed the fag-end of a line of Harlows, now it was bent on becoming as speedily as possible the habitat of one, Rolf Sterling, whose standard of living was a very different matter.

Hardly had the honeymoon ended than he was engaged with architect and contractors.

"Good Colonial line to begin with," the young architect had commented with clipped satisfaction, meaning that he would end by obliterating them. His "Colonial with modifications" as expressed in the blue prints certainly brought the house up to date, and set it to rank with Wedgewater's richest mediocrity. "Oh," exclaimed Muffet when shown the drawings, but whether the monosyllable was one of protest or admiration was never quite clear. Since there was nothing she could do about it without the risk of upsetting Rolf's pride and all his preconceived notions she adopted the wiser course of silence. Rolf, it proved, was inspired by a very frenzy for comfort and improvements. In the middle of the scorching summer the work was begun and all the cool silver and moss of the clapboards torn from the bleeding walls. Outside were heaps of new materials, in readiness, hot, honey-colored shingles, and baking bricks that tortured the eye whenever it fell upon them.

All day the woodpecker hammering, the rasp of tin being freed from its lodging, of workmen, the tread of titanic feet on the roof.

"We shall never," thought Muffet, "be able to hear ourselves think again."

At noon the workmen tumbled from the roofs and went to sprawl in the shade with dinner pails and water jugs, they lolled against the trees like dilapidated, disjointed dolls or lay face-downward in the grass as though they would never rise again. But before the noon heat had abated they were up, red-faced and animated in the torturing glare, like an army of woodpeckers on the roof.

One by one the vulnerable points of the house were attacked; with consternation Muffet saw the downfall of what had become indis severably a part of her life, the small, square-panes of the windows, the teary glass that she had loved because of its quaint quality, and the whimsical distortion of the scenes that it showed. Plate glass was the new order of the day and Rolf said, with its installation, "There, now we'll be able to see the world!" He smoothed away the arches above the gabled windows so that the moonlight shone in squarely and no longer made fantastic designs on the ceilings.

And in his and Muffet's joint bedchamber there were electrical fittings above the dressing table, hardwood floors and a lavish use of white paint. Vannie, tripping over the painters' canvases on one of her tours of inspection, thrust her head in at the door and was moved to the tribute,

"Fo' de Lawd, ain't it *pure*?"

And Rolf's innocent enthusiasm, his innocent composure made the exploitation of the loved place hard to decry. Lucky for Muffet that she had her father to share the wound of it. They bore up like thoroughbreds, with hardly an uncurbed word to cast the shadow on Rolf's pleasure. It was only, now and again, inad-

vertently, that they slipped, as in the instance of the south window which had remained blind for so many years.

Muffet, stumbling into an unwonted glare, gave a slight scream.

"Rolf, what have you done?"

With unconscious sacrilege the blind had been torn away, and with it the old tradition of sanctuary for the birds.

"Well, what have I done?" demanded Sterling, arrested, dumfounded by her look of accusation.

But without answering him Muffet turned, fumbling for her father.

"Oh, Father," she whispered, "the poor Jenny Wrens."

III

It was not so much the words that stabbed Rolf as what they implied, a common knowledge between her father and herself, an incidental secret which they shared in common, and from which he was excluded, as he was excluded from all the mysterious intimacy of their lives.

The three-cornered relationship was new to them; it needed adjustment; it needed time to make it mitre at the joinings. His common sense told him that. But his instinct, for the first time actively roused, was sorely contentious. The very simplicity of his dedication to Muffet, demanded a like response. And here she was continually going back to the fields of fancy where she had romped with her father, withholding from him some part of her mind, her imagination. As in this matter of the Jenny Wrens. They would never

embellish the tale of their folly about the blind, but it would be there between them, they would remember together and while they were remembering Rolf would be alone.

Chapter XVII

I

AS may be imagined, Elijah Moore was the recipient of but few letters. No friendly effusions in informal envelopes were wont to be slipped under his door. He subscribed to a weekly magazine known as *Progress in Science*, and to two monthly ones, *The Draftsman's Journal*, and *The Enterprising Farmer*: these three wore respectively blue, yellow and white wrappers about their cylindrical forms. The postman opened the door a crack and dropped them on the floor inside along with an occasional sparse bill, or a letter from the people who worked his farm. No personal interest was to be drawn from any of these, but having become used to his loneliness Elijah was not given to hankering for colorful episodes.

Great then was his surprise one morning in July to find among the sifting of anemic mail an envelope of highly individualized character. It was gray and it was large, the very handwriting a gesture of extravagance. Elijah did what he called "heft it" several times, then he took it to the light and, reading the superscription carefully, tasted a certain adroit flattery in the forming of the letters. It was as though he had never seen his own name conjoined with his address before, or as though in this special composition of them he became reincarnated as another sort of

man altogether. Still he did not open the envelope at once. He postponed the moment for doing so till he was in his house jacket of black alpaca and wearing his slippers of scuffed red morocco. He speculated on the sender with lively interest. He was slow in finding his glasses.

But when he finally began to read he read very fast. The handwriting was bold, despite its elegance, and accomplished no more than four or five lines to a page. The message was direct, exquisitely simple, to Elijah utterly staggering. When he finished he had to wipe the perspiration from his brow.

That he, Elijah Moore, respectable and respected, should find himself in communication with the woman whose sinfulness, whose glamor had come to make her seem after all these years, the creature of a myth, was incredible. Yet here was the letter, a tangible thing, and there was its message which ran clear as summer lightning. She had heard of her daughter's marriage but as no intimate details of it had been vouchsafed her she was asking Elijah, as the familiar of the family, to tell her what he could. He would hold her request in confidence she felt sure, and on her part she promised to respect the favor he conferred in writing her. He might do so with strict neutrality. Surely a mother had a right to know of the vital events in the life of her child. And in closing she told him ambiguously that she was not now called by the name of Harlow, and gave him another. The address was of a correct neighborhood of New York.

For nearly a week Elijah went about with this mis-sive burning a hole in his pocket, queerly in the grip of his conflicting emotions. She was an electric woman, this woman of mystery, and the mere fact that he had

heard from her seemed to link him up with a chain of events, preposterous and vivid. He wondered what his contemporaries would say, those who had not forgotten, were they to know him in communication with a scarlet woman. Inevitably for Elijah she was scored as the harlot; yet he was uneasily conscious that in her outlawry she remained fastidious and fascinating. In annoying mental medallions he had glimpses of her white, dripping fingers that had never done more than posture and look pretty, of her head created for attitudes,—the very cadences of her voice came back to him, Muffet's voice with insidious differences.

She had despised and patronized Elijah, been barely civil to him always. But now she conferred the favor of asking one of him. He was singled out by her thought. Elijah was a simple man who said his prayers. He feared contamination and communed with the Deity. He also feared an act of disloyalty to David. But she was potent, even at a distance and that sentence about a mother and her child was Elijah's undoing.

One night he sat down with his lined note-paper and a bottle of that sanguine ink which he kept for drawing purposes, and answered the letter. He was neutral and concise, guarded against the possibility of further correspondence. With tongue between his teeth, he achieved the small, shaded letters of his reply. He told her that Muffet had married a very promising and well-to-do man of Wedgewater, named Rolf Sterling, and that the two, with David, were living on in the old house. And he added primly in extenuation of his own leniency, "You're her mother. I figure you have a right to know."

But having decided all these questions in his conscience he was yet in a ferment of guilt when the letter

had been mailed. For days he lived in the dread of becoming involved in the machinations of her whose silken toil harked back to the Serpent of Old Nile. And this dread of her caused him to think of himself not as an atrophied fellow apprenticed to labor but as a virile man in delicious danger from such a woman.

II

In the early days of Muffet's engagement Vannie had expressed doubts as to whether she would be able to care for two "gemmans" at once. Having suffered long from the eccentricities of David, his habits of carelessness and procrastination, she had naturally come to believe that man was an animal owning but one collar button, no memory, and an eternal hole in his pocket. As she told Muffet, quite humorlessly, she was "ready" and she was "willin'" but when it came to supplying collar buttons and repairing the rips of two her courage failed her.

Conceive then of her agreeable surprise upon discovering that Rolf was a man with a supply of fine linen "done out," with a repertoire of suits kept meticulously in order by a tailor, that he remembered easily the hour for meals, and never called upon Vannie to go down on all fours and play the sleuth after a collar button that had possibly rolled under the bed! Rolf never remarked absently at the table that he had a frayed cuff. He never came dragging in from the workshop with oil on his boots and walked about the kitchen floor, conscious only of some fine dream in his head.

He had an appetite that was seldom coy. He was

keen and efficient, independent of the ministrations of his wife or the servant. One would scarcely have thought of reminding him as Muffet each morning reminded her father, "Have you a fresh handkerchief?" No, Rolf scorned to be served—he made a point of showing her how admirably well able he was to care for himself in such ways. Foolish Rolf—to advertise his competence, to put himself entirely outside the zone of his wife's concern, to believe that admiration and not indulgence is the seed of love, to believe that a woman ever feels tenderly inclined toward an automaton.

When he departed briskly for the factory in the morning, as well set up as it is possible for a man to be, he left no memory of a human shortcoming which she might lovingly deplore. But a hundred times a day Muffet's thoughts winged to her father. She thought he should really buy one of those Panama hats that rest so lightly on the head. She wondered if the evening meal would tempt him, after all. . . .

Rolf, as he advanced progressively in his knowledge of father and daughter, curbed a growing irritation. He sat with Muffet at the dinner table and witnessed the comedy of feminine patience that racked him to the point of anger. It happened not infrequently that during the soup course Vannie went to the workshop to call David in. When the meat course arrived Muffet bade her imperturbably to remind him again and with simple resignation the negress did as she was told. Rolf, checking any comment, waited with the unjaded interest of the spectator. The third summons brought the inventor, negligent and oblivious, and invariably testing what was set before him he

made the wry face of a child and complained, "But this seems to have been cooked a long time."

Rolf wondered how many years they had endured it.

III

The picture that gradually grew in Rolf's mind, the one that pleased him most was of two men, the one typifying failure, the other success. Just as Albion Harlow, that truculent financier, had been shamelessly wont to employ his brother's name, his brother's example, as the foil to his own, so Rolf came to think of his father-in-law as the shadow cast by his own place in the sun. He was fond of old David—he told himself that there was no question of the filial allegiance he might have been able to feel toward him had Muffet's admiration been more temperate, but she either blindly or deliberately upheld what she called his "genius," and failed to recognize those little vagaries of his character which were perfectly apparent to Rolf and which made him morally certain that David's career would end with a wide margin to greatness. There was, of course, his findings on the engine. No one could gainsay that he had been "a good and faithful servant" along the line of his own bent. Already he had stood before a director's meeting and with his deep-set eyes full of creative fire, had laid his drawings before them, and held his audience in the sustained hush of conversion. But having brought his brain-child thus far, it was as though he had left it on a doorstep. He did not stay to urge its adoption. He was without the gift of righteous aggression. He had given birth to the exquisite mechanism and was consecrated to the love of

it, but being a child himself, he did not know how to earn for it. Rolf wondered how the old man would behave if success were thrust upon him, since that was the only way it could come, and what Muffet's attitude would be in such an event. "I told you so," would no doubt be her dictum. And her rejoicing would be all of a different piece from her pride in her husband's status. She would hardly recognize that she had Rolf to thank for it. He went through his days laboriously trying to make her a part of himself. "Husband and wife should be one," he hammered away at the thought like a blacksmith.

It was Indian summer in the old whaling town and he had dragged Muffet to the altar of social sacrifice. After returning from their seashore cottages the directors of the Ship and Engine Company with their wives had come to call. That was at the period where the regarnished house was emerging from the hands of the workmen, smelling spicily of new flooring and of lacquer. The lawns had been regraded and smoothed and on the pate-like loam an incipient fringe of grass was appearing. The domicile of Rolf Sterling was left to accommodate itself to the landscape by difficult degrees.

The callers sat in Muffet's gray and daffodil living-room, still loyal to her despite its modern embellishments, and mouthing their platitudes, examined her with barely repressed curiosity. The way Sterling had produced her from the subterranean soil smacked of effrontery. She had been there always and they had taken no notice and all at once, presto, she was conjured into reality. There stood Sterling like a smiling prestidigitator, challenging them to pick a flaw in her. He was almost rollicking with the joke he had

coddled at their expense. He seemed to be saying, "Isn't she lovely?" And, "Where have you been, you Wedgewater women and men, to have let this slip by you—this flower of the Harlows, budding from the old stem!"

The ladies of Wedgewater might have forgiven him sooner could they have been given opportunity to exercise a courteous condescension, to teach and train the obscure country girl. But Muffet Sterling, notwithstanding her sedentary life, was so innately the child of breeding that she made them look with uneasiness to their own hard-won laurels. There was no one at the present time in Wedgewater exactly like her.

Plainly gowned and quiet between two middle-aged matrons whose sibilant silks and billowing scents made for pomposity, she achieved an effect of artlessness that was very near to art. Even Rolf, chatting healthily with the husbands, was aware of her easy grace. He was proud of his Harlow wife, taking her first hurdles like a thoroughbred. With a new perspective on her youth he saw that she had the poise of simplicity, the independence and distinction of one who had lived much alone and furnished her mind freely. Yet her utter lack of sophistication in the matter of love often made him feel that he had married a child. Her face was an unscored page, while the faces of these mature wives and mothers betrayed markings of internal strife.

They charged her that she must join "The Thimble Club," the authentic breeding place, as she had already heard, of the winds of gossip which circulated through the town. One needed but an entrée and a thimble in order to join the rank and file of the arbiters of public opinion.

"Oh, but I don't sew," declared Muffet, demurely daring the base admission.

She sat with a negligent small foot propped on the rung of her chair, her hands upturned in her lap, all pink curling finger-tips. The husbands stole truant glances from Rolf and his topics, and felt that they understood him very well. . . .

But then there was the Wednesday Evening Bridge Club, intimated the elder of the ladies, adopting a smirk of conscious kindness. She would be charmed to propose the Sterlings' names as candidates.

"Now *don't* say you don't play bridge?"

Rolf, with his ambidextrous ear, accomplished the feat of hearing two conversations at once. His pride was perturbed since he, himself, was an astute hand at the game—it was, in fact, almost his sole social accomplishment.

"Oh, but I must say it if it is true," was Muffet's characteristic reply, her candor earning for her dark looks of disapproval.

"Dear, dear. You must have your husband teach you at once. It's—it's indispensable. You'll hardly be able to enjoy yourself in Wedgewater without." The first thrust.

Muffet's voice stayed velvet but under the heavy lashes there were gold flecks in her brown eyes, like dancing imps.

"But you see, though no one seems to know it, I've lived in Wedgewater all my life."

"Yes, fancy that now. My dear child, what *have* you *done*? What *do* you *do*?" An impulse of fierce fun shot through Muffet's head. Ready-made for her tongue to take the words, ran the jingle,

"I sometimes search the grassy knolls for wheels of hansom cabs."

But she suppressed the agony of her laughter because to have offended these people would have been flagrantly to offend Rolf. She did not wish to offend him, but she was conscious even as she made some conventional reply, that their choice of friends must always differ. No thought of hers went to press its check against a thought of Rolf's. As preposterous as the rest of marriage was the dictum that his friends should be her friends—wholesale. She concentrated upon him in his rôle of host, steady, sure, numbering her as one of his chattels. A hot sense of betrayal swept over her. Once she admitted her mental sickness and its symptoms appalled her. She made the physical gesture of rubbing her forehead, brushing away the ghostly cobwebs. She had offered no leverage to the wives but she warmed to the neutrality of the husbands, who were not constrained to determine her social status. Besides she saw by their polite mouths and incipient yawns that they were bored with stereotyped conversation and people, the tedious levels to which their efforts had brought them. They caught the smile in Muffet's eyes, the whimsical word she would not waste on their wives and they were exquisitely diverted.

Rolf proposed a tour of the house and the callers rose with avidity, trooping after him into the dining room, with cautious balance on the slippery floor. The wives adhered to Sterling and plied him with intelligent, housewifely questions. A pity that he had not married Susie Warren. She would have known how to open up the house!

"The ceiling in this room was only seven feet from the floor. . . ."

Muffet followed with Messrs. Alfeus Willoughby and John D. Haverhill, two gentlemen who found her more interesting than the woodwork. She had caught up the cat Nicodemus in her arms, all muscle and tiger stripings, and was retailing for them the story of his maraudings. She said that he had lost one ear in a battle that went on all night and that next day there was a warrant out for his arrest. Then, releasing him, she bade them admire the huge silver loving cup, the wedding gift of the factory hands, now enshrined on the mantel. Although Vannie, her servant, had figured out it would need fifty-two polishings to the year she was committed to its service. The light tone of her chatter was distinct and mellow beneath the heavy-treading voices of Rolf and the women. The person of Mr. Alfeus Willoughby who measured a yard and three quarters around his waist and tapered to the shoulders, was agitated in gelatinous mirth. Mr. John D. Haverhill, though slight, like a herring, found her humor entirely successful. Muffet's beauty was legendary and stirred their imaginations, grown solid with the substantiality of their wives. She seemed no more concerned with the practical schemes of housing which her husband unfolded than as though she lived in the grandfather clock. And perhaps this was well, perhaps this was well, they marveled, as their wives commended the butler's pantry and the really remarkable refrigerator lurking in the wall. Muffet winced when she perceived that it was Rolf's intention to take them upstairs, and foresaw as surely that the fetish of his pride being the house, the tour of inspection would not stand alone. Wedgewater people would come and

they would all be herded about into this room and that while the story of reconstruction, indecently threadbare, fell from his lips. Once she was able to take his arm.

"Rolf, must you—must you take them upstairs?" But the instant annoyance of his eyes flashed out at her. His expression was positively loud, alarming. Why would she set obstacles in the way of his ambition?

"Not take them up there? Why, it's better than downstairs."

Muffet was the last now, following all the others, while disinclination hung like chains on her feet. Rolf was showing their bedchamber in its pristine purity—and over the shoulders of the others Muffet was watching Rolf with a strange impersonal wonder. His mouth was a mumble of words, but she had no idea what he was saying. It was appalling how seldom she cared to listen. Her cold, fastidious gaze was at work on his face. She wondered how it had come about that she was precipitated into the closest relation of all with one whose psychology was so strange to her.

IV

"But she will live in Wedgewater and after a time no one will know she is here," said Mrs. Alfeus Willoughby, as she undressed that night. "She doesn't sew, she doesn't play bridge, she has evidently no sense of social obligation. She will end by ruining that admirable young man."

"Um, well, she isn't quite like our girls in the neighborhood, but no doubt Sterling's proud of her looks and her education."

"Her clothes are simply nothing."

"I can't say about that, only it struck me that her face——"

"Altogether too pale. She ought to use a little rouge."

"Her smile then." He toyed with a suspender. "You women are queer. It seemed to me she was a particularly attractive little thing, with a very pretty little figure——"

"Alfeus!"

"Yes, I know I ought to be ashamed. . . ." Sighing, he turned out the light.

And in the house on Wedgewater Road Rolf, in his triumphal peregrinations about his room, paused beside a little informal figure that was combing her hair, and said, persuasively,

"But I *do* think you might take up bridge."

Chapter XVIII

I

TWO months, eight weeks, sixty-odd days. But granted that one lives to a moderate middle-age, what are sixty days? Thus Muffet, toiling in her thoughts. Rolf's friends, Rolf's vanity, Rolf's position seemed heaped upon her and underneath them all she struggled sickly or lay quiet when some particularly oppressive timber tied her limbs. She would have liked to talk to her father but there were strong reasons in the way of it. It would make her position between the two untenable were she to solicit her father's sympathy. Instead she sought David's presence like an animal that knows unerringly the remedial herb, drooping in at the shop while he puttered at his experimental work or catching gratefully at the first overture of affection, but always silent, simulating happiness. How could she tell her father that differing as she and Rolf did on every subject love between them was the greatest incongruity? The spectacle of Rolf, crazed with disappointment, yet holding her literally to the letter of her bargain, was a terrible one. The grotesquerie of the effort turned her ill. If only he would show the least sign of a sensitive intelligence!

"If we disagree on everything else we'll still agree that we love each other," was his dogged statement after any passage-at-arms.

It was David who searched her eyes but whose fears stopped just short of a question. Muffet, acutely aware of what he would ask, stopped just short of an answer.

II

Rolf was showing Muffet his office. It was near closing time and already the staff of clerks and stenographers were filing papers for the day, showing signs of relaxation, putting their typewriters to bed. They had the more leisure for observing the new Mrs. Sterling, slight in a fall suit of tweed, with a hat soft as kitten fur and a scarf of silk knotted about her throat. Though she was used now to being one of "a pair", the dubious object of envy, her eyes were shy before the half-bold appraising looks of Rolf's young men, the irrepressibly curious glances of the girls. Rolf, square-shouldered and unimpeachable, breezed pleasure, and blew her like a healthy wind into his private sanctum, thereby cheating the interest of the office or giving it time to accumulate and sort its ideas.

"You see," he said, kissing her for satisfaction, "this is where I work. This is where your husband picks up the pennies to buy you pretty things," and he fingered the fine silk of her scarf significantly.

"Do you like it?" she asked with a narrow smile.

"Oh, I don't know. Dull things haven't much dash. You're too young to dress so modestly; wait till you're a dignified matron for that." Then giving her another conversational kiss, he went off at a tangent of exploitation, "This is my desk. Nice, isn't it? The best mahogany that can be bought. . . . And here is where my secretary sits . . . and those are my files.

Come and look out of the window and see what you see."

She came and he found it necessary to drop his hands on her shoulders, to turn her this way and that as though she were on a pivot.

"I have a view of practically the whole plant from this window, as well as the water front. And that's what I like, to see the whole thing spread out and to be responsible for it."

She interrupted tensely,

"Is that the building where my father is?"

"With the flat roof, yes."

She put her handkerchief to her mouth and her teeth worried the thin edge of it excitedly.

"Just think, I've never even seen it before . . . and that's where my father has been serving his prison term of life. It looks very hot and hemmed in and oh, grim!"

"He doesn't have to stay there," said Rolf wrathfully, "though you must realize he's at an age where it would be difficult for him to take up anything new. I've told him, I've told him repeatedly I'd be willing to make any change, but he's such a groover that I can't do anything for him."

She wheeled about, the same irrational excitement in her face, her eyes cold and brilliant.

"No, you couldn't do anything for him," she laughed ambiguously, and her laughter went over Rolf like prickles. "He's given his life for an idea—he's one of the martyrs of science, my father." Her voice went up the scale with thrilling timbre before it dropped a sheer octave back. "Let's go home."

Again they ran the gamut of eyes till presently Rolf was helping her into the car, a new enclosed one for

the coming winter. Now the early September day was fraying, the factory disgorged many workers. The human tide of them flowed down the road like a black river, no faces of importance or else all their faces had been obliterated by the dust of toil: they were but bodies animated by the one idea of getting home. And as the smart motor went honking through them, with a little shock, Muffet recognized her father, pressing along in his tired clothes, in no way distinguished from the others. And though she, of course, knew that he walked to and from the factory each day every nerve in her body was stung to rebellion.

"Rolf," she whispered, almost with a moan of pain, "Father. . . . We passed him. . . ."

"I'll stop," said Rolf, "I didn't see him." And then Muffet said an odd thing. She said,

"No, don't stop," feeling that the condescension of the act would kill her. "Don't stop," she reiterated wildly, "drive on, drive on!"

"But I don't understand you," floundered Rolf when they were out in the country, "surely you know I'd bring your father home every day only we never happen to get through at the same time. And in the morning——"

"Yes, I know, he leaves early——"

Muffet's hands were locked in pride and pain.

"Rolf," she wrenched out, "you've always said you'd like me to learn to drive. Would you—would you give me a little car of my own?"

He was flattered by the request; it was so seldom that his gifts had meaning for her.

"You just bet I would."

"Oh, Rolf," she said, shamefacedly in gratitude, "it

would make me very happy. Then I could take him back and forth myself."

"Hm, I suppose you could. But wouldn't people wonder why you weren't driving your husband?"

III

The wounds which Rolf, in his love, was slated to receive were the more malignant because unconsciously inflicted. An evening in September he attended a meeting of the local Chamber of Commerce and was late in getting home. As he came up the path, after locking his car in the garage, he saw Muffet keeping close vigil at an upstairs window. He had begrudged the time away from her but he had not really known how real was the deprivation till he saw her face against the pane and formed the savory conclusion that she was waiting up for him. On such infrequent crumbs was he wont to subsist. Immediately the door closed came her winged feet across the upper hall, the excitement of her slippers on the stair. Like an angel in exultation she plunged into the limbo of the darkness below and came face to face with Rolf, Rolf warm in the faith of his welcome. He held out his arms with the stereotyped gesture.

"Muffet," he exclaimed in the variegated tone of extreme pleasure, and Muffet obeyed the mandate of his arms in dazed discipline, but not before the hesitation of a second had betrayed her.

Rolf was apprised of her mistake and his pleasure crumbled cruelly.

"You thought it was your father all the time . . . you thought it was your father." He doubled the

statement, making it first an accusation, then an explanation, as made to himself. He knew now why her face had been at the window worrying the dark.

Muffet stood agonizing in guilt, tremulous with contrition. She offered the shy amends of a kiss on the cheek, she even replaced his arm that he had let slip from her, but it was all no good.

"Oh, Rolf," she pleaded hopefully, yet hopelessly, "it was just that father went to Elijah's and I'm always expecting he will get run over on the way home."

Rolf was rigid, his piping pride all out of tune. He revolved his grievances in his mind and reduced the remedy to terms of concerted action.

"See here," he burst out harshly, "this won't do at all. I tell you frankly we're beginning all wrong. Are we any different from any other man and woman? You've got to put me first and keep me first, do you understand?"

"How do you mean, Rolf?"

"You've got to show me the preference over every one." The naïveté of the command was pitiful. "I tell you I won't be slighted."

"Oh, Rolf," she said half weeping, "you're never that. You have everything your own way."

"All except my life with you," he said grimly. "But I'll have this the way it suits me too!"

The light from above, streaming down the stair, described his face as livid. To Muffet it was foreign in its crudeness—it wasn't the face of a man going about love. She felt sorry for the uncouth figure he cut in his wooing. At the same time it turned her cold and constricted.

"What would you like me to do?"

"I'd like you to count me first in your consideration,

to remember that you belong to me, waking or sleeping, waking or sleeping, do you hear?"

Something in the phrase struck her, set up a vibration in her cramped mind, a vista of escape. Her pale face took on a bright, almost an unearthly look.

"Ah, waking perhaps," she said with faint mockery, "but sleeping—it's too much to think you can have dominion over me there." Then, with rising tempest, "Love isn't to be commanded, no matter what any one says—love can only be coaxed. And mine for you has never been given a chance. Don't you think it's unreasonable for you to fly into a temper just because the seed you planted wrong refused to grow?"

"Stop talking," he interrupted, furious with the pain that she gave him, "I don't want your words!" And he set his kisses to obliterate them, darkly to stamp out her rebel thoughts that flared like stars.

He fought her with kisses while dark in the smother of his will she died and died and died. . . .

IV

Paradoxically, Rolf was capable of the humblest reverence when he saw his wife sleeping, when fatigue had taken her, inhibitions and all. His throat ached over the childishness of her face, the pathos of her relaxed limbs. He would draw the coverlet closely about her shoulders with hands the more tender for their clumsiness and would tell himself that sleeping she offered no slights to his sense of possession, they were truly at one.

Great then was his panic in the hour before dawn to waken and find that she was not beside him. The

pillow where her head had lain sustained its little hollow; he fancied the sheet yet warm from her body. But Muffet had fled. Scarcely free from the toils of sleep, he was desolated as in a nightmare. The thought stole sickly through his head that she had deserted him. But gradually as he lost his lassitude his usual common sense asserted itself. He rose in the chill room, scuffed into his slippers and donned a bath-robe. Telling himself that she could not have gone far, he went shuffling out into the hall and made a tour of the bedrooms. "Muffet," he made vocal his search in an enormous whisper, then, his trouble increasing, he lost regard for the other sleepers in the house. "Muffet, where are you, Sweetheart? Come back to bed." No answer.

David slept soundly after his exertions at the factory. Rolf thrust open the door and peered into the room. The moon had risen after midnight and now revealed every corner of it. He saw his father-in-law sleeping on his pillow and from his regular breathing it was apparent that he had not been disturbed. His uneasiness now took definite form. Vannie's quarters were in a wing of the house that had no access from the second storey and Muffet would scarcely have gone there. As he hesitated in his bewilderment his hand fell on the gate at the top of the stairs. Slowly his mind worked back to the incident with which he connected it. It was the occasion of his second visit to the house a year ago and Rolf's query anent the gate. "It was put there years ago when we discovered that she was walking in her sleep!" Harlow had said.

The gooseflesh climbed Rolf's arm. At the same instant he became aware of a draught blowing straight up the stairs,—the door below was open to the night! Though the hour was cold he was suddenly bathed in

perspiration. Swiftly he passed down the stairs and out into the blue autumnal mists that lay about the house like long ribbons spun on a ghost loom. The moon was phosphorescent in the tangle and ruin of the late garden. All the milky heavens seemed to have fallen in a leprous tryst with the earth. Silence prevailed, too profound to be natural, unbroken by the stir of a leaf or the tick of a bird. It was as though the isolated hour had been reserved for the benefit of some spirit host suppressed by day. Though he was not a fanciful man, he felt alien, a trespasser, as he moved through the liquid silver of the grass and parted the prowling mists. The cold dew fell on his bare feet, only partially encased in bath slippers. He did not know this garden of dew-frosted plants, stiff as stalactites. No one was awake in the world and his heart ached with fear and loneliness. No one was awake, not even Muffet. She was as freighted with sleep as the stiff silver flowers. . . . She was moving somewhere in the strangeness with her small, bare feet cold as wet marble. His terror found him impotent. What if she had wandered off down the road or toward the harbor a half mile away? He had heard tragic tales of somnambulists, and the dangerous haunts into which their drugged minds led them. Where should he begin to look for her in all the fantastically wreathed and garlanded world?

Adjoining the garden was an apple orchard of crotchety trees and there, ineffably wraith-like in the moonlight, he presently saw her. He almost cried out in his relief as he hurried through the plants and bushes which seemed to snarl and snap at him with a thousand little briars to catch at his ankles. Seeking the shortest way to her he scarcely heeded that he was

struggling in a snare of raspberry vines; already his flesh was bleeding. He knew only that Muffet, like mad Ophelia, was wandering in the orchard, her thick hair cloudy on her shoulders, her white night dress and her bare arms and shoulders shining as alabaster. When he was close enough he perceived to his consternation that her eyes were open, but wide with an unseeing vision. Her lips were blue and pinched in her distressing dream; she made short, irregular sounds of sobbing. And suddenly, in a vivid flash, Rolf remembered their conversation of the evening before, how he had said that waking or sleeping she belonged to him and she had answered, "Ah, waking perhaps but sleeping—you can have no dominion over me there. . . ." Had that thought, registered on her subconscious mind, led her in dreams to seek escape from him? The idea was intolerable but relentless in its plausibility.

Even while he pondered what course to take she moved swiftly and smoothly out of the orchard and into the garden. She moved with incredible lightness and rapidity, sobbing softly the while. He followed as closely as he dared and divined that she was making her way back to the house. He hoped, he longed to believe that the sleeping-walking was not necessarily symbolic, that she would return to their room and go to bed. But no. She entered the house as she had left it and glided smoothly up the stairs, her slender figure erect and animated by some sure purpose. Without a moment's hesitation she entered the accustomed room of her childhood, not the room that she had shared with Rolf. She went straight to the bed and climbing upon it lay supine, gently weeping and sobbing her veiled, mysterious grief. . . . He would have believed her to

be awake had he not known that those thin tears and faint sobs could be only the expression of a dream.

He sank exhaustedly into a chair beside the bed, steeled to meet a second visitation of the truth. It was because the room signified her lost girlhood that she had returned to it. Oh intolerable! He recalled how she had said, "You can't command love," and he had answered with brutality, "I don't want your words." Poor childish heart, rudely handled, lost among lonely, inanimate things. Though her action was but the license of a dream he never thought of doubting it. It was to him as though Providence had divorced them. . . .

Muffet was quiet now, lapsing into normal slumber. Rolf found a great comforter to spread over her and tucked it in about her as best he could. Then he went back to his own room and threw himself across the bed in the jeopardy of his shame.

"Oh, God, God Almighty. . . ."

Chapter XIX

I

AUTUMN and the "ghost boats whisper on the shore." The maples have cast their fallow leaves on the harbor waters and long drifts of the strange confetti will go out to sea. The little town lies windlessly still beneath the arched and fitted sky. Hundreds of white boats have come home from their straying like sheep, and huddle dumbly about the queer, stilted wharves. Gardens run back from the wharves, utilitarian or disbanded, now alike riotous in rust and gold, and above the gardens the intricate mesh of clothes lines hang buoyantly bannered. The ground is covered in wispy shadows that change when the wind stirs. Out-of-door people are sensitive to the significance of the rust and gold. Indoor people think only that fires must be lighted earlier in the morning, and nursed through the day against the chilly evenings.

Elijah Moore, trudging his beaten dog-track to and from the factory, has little or nothing to do with the evolution of the seasons. He is fond of believing that he is a practical business man, though the word "dodderer," conceived the way a match is lighted behind a shielding had, has often been applied to him. Elijah's phlegmatic nature is occupied at present with but one acute concern. He is furiously hopeful that

his letter to the woman of mystery will not bring forth a reply. He has survived a month in safety and yet his anxiety still smolders to the extent that he casts a surreptitious eye over the daily letters on the floor before he stoops to pick them up. "It's reasonably certain that she won't write—now," he argues ticklishly. "A favor asked, a favor received . . . but to presume further. No, she could certainly not do that."

But that was exactly what the creature did. Elijah knew that envelope of sentimental gray, he knew that chirography damnably, and he told himself that by his dread he had no doubt invited the catastrophe. It lay among the ordinary missives in demure sobriety yet he touched it and his fingers burned; he felt the feverish chills racing up and down his spine. His heart was a misplaced organ beating in his throat. He told himself, even before he read, that he hadn't deserved to be implicated in this red, riotous affair of the Harlows. Dave was his friend, he championed Dave—and anyway the case was clearly enough against the woman who now called herself Mrs. Burchard. As far as Wedgewater was concerned she had been dead these many years. Why would she not stay decently interred and not parade her live handwriting to substantiate the fact of her existence. Elijah was resentful of his own guilt. He had done only what was civil and now from the facile act of writing him she implied complicity. In what crime? He did not exactly know. But he saw that the letter was long and set to the task of reading it, with eyes so dizzy they could scarcely focus on a word. Before she had addressed him as "Dear Mr. Moore." Now, for no reason at all she began:

“MY DEAR ELIJAH:—

“Your kindness in writing me a month ago touched me very deeply. (He grumbled that he had not intended to be kind.) And, though you may not believe it, that brief letter, telling me in formal terms of what I wished to know, has become a most precious link, a veritable human document, connecting me with my lost home.

“Yes, Elijah, since we are, I remember, approximately the same age (he knew her to be ten years his junior) we must have learned approximately the same lessons,—bromidic in a sense, but unalterably true—the old things stand—home, the security of goodness, the ties of love. But goodness to the transgressor exercises its prerogative—goodness to the transgressor is hard. It admits of no possibility of repentance, no discovery of a sense of values. Goodness houses itself securely, and locks the door in order to stay intact. I am not presuming to play the injured because I know (and my former friends would agree with enthusiasm) that I never deserved the husband I had nor to have been the mother of so angelic a child.

“I perceive, of course, that children come from angels, must live on angel cake and have their hands and faces and frocks kept clean. They must never eat coarse bread nor suffer contamination. My husband, according to his lights, was entirely right. In order that the name of Harlow might be protected I have adopted another.

“Nevertheless, Elijah, to a person of broad sympathies like yourself—[‘Come now,’ protested Elijah and weighed the phrase for flattery. Was she trying her feminine wiles on him? . . . Hm, well he hoped he was a man of sympathies: he’d always tried to be—

why could he not accept the tribute in fair faith?—to a person of broad sympathies like yourself it will be apparent that retribution must come to an end sometime. Sinners are not grilled forever. [‘No,’ thought Elijah, reasonably appealed to, ‘that’s right enough.’] It’s even possible (continued Mrs. Burchard) that they don’t deserve to be. I am alone in the world. [‘Heavens,’ he thought nervously, ‘does she know that I’m a widower?’] I am alone in the world. I have been alone now for many years. I live among strangers and fair-weather friends. I find my one justification for life in the occasional good that I am able to do. I could, of course, take up some line of work but it would not suit me. I believe in each person following his or her *métier*. What a pity that mine should be idle femininity! [Yes, she was feminine. Elijah put his head in a cloud and was guiltily refreshed by the fragrance of jasmine.]

“Since I am certain that not even you, his closest friend, enjoy the confidence of David, I feel that you can appreciate the more the difficulty of appealing to him. What I have pondered is a way of approaching him personally. It has seemed to me that if I might return to Wedgewater where I am no longer known and take a little house there, gradually by dint of patience——”

At this point in his reading Elijah was on his feet. “No,” he cried aloud fearfully. “It’s out of the question. You can’t come back into their lives. They’ve gone on without you. You can’t come back, I tell you.” His lower lip curled like that of a child about to cry. “You sinful woman!” and he went on repeating the epithet till he was arrested by the raw sound of it.

People no longer indulged in invective; it was considered archaic to do so; it was an age of tolerance.

But instead, working himself into argumentative frenzy, he dove for his pen and set down his reply fragmentarily, as it came to him. But most of the time he was walking the floor, combing his brains and flipping his coat-tails straight out behind him. His scant mustaches bristled like the antennæ of an insect. From the arbitrary assertion that the course she proposed would never do, he explored all the by-paths of reasons and found them too numerous to record. So his conclusion stood like that,—*it would not do because it would not do!* And if she thought for a minute that merely by spreading a net of flattery she could ensnare him for her purpose— He presently changed to, if any woman thought— He assumed an attitude—as though awaiting the onslaught of a world of wily women, cajoling and attitudinizing. He felt himself a redoubtable man of the world, on guard against all potential dangers, vanquishing them with an easy tip-tilted smile.

But the immense mood was transient and by supper-time Elijah had gone flabby again in the octopus toils of his many fears. His perturbation was remarked almost immediately by Hannah, his housekeeper, and efficient and unfeminine woman.

In his modicum of life Elijah had been associated with no creature of the opposite sex that might be termed "a petticoat"; he had never known the luxury of a soft, clinging nature twined about the support of his own; he had never known the delicious trial of trying to understand one. There had been Sarah, his wife, dead these many years, but Sarah was hardly different from a man, angular in form and able in nature,

faithful and unlovely. Their married life had extended over a period of twenty years and the paucity of the experience had left him little to remember. She had dominated the weaker will of Elijah and molded it assiduously in the way it should go. She had never permitted his mind to recreate in frivolous ways, nor his imagination to build. Always she had watched him with her cold black eyes that seemed to veil in their licorice depths suspicion and ridicule.

Before she died she sent for her eldest sister, a spinster, then living at home, and "Hannah will look after you, Elijah," she said.

Hannah had a limited income and a single bed which she promptly brought and set up in the room over the kitchen in her sister's impeccable house, and she was there in Wedgewater as the weather was there—for good. Elijah never thought of trying to dislodge her; he even saw in his soul the meanness of his dissatisfaction since Hannah was a perfect cook as Sarah had been and thrifty with the accounts and faithful. She was a large woman with a prominent bosom, and a dark, secretive face. Her hair was extraordinarily fine and wispy like an infant's hair and when she brushed it into a knot on her head it seemed that most of it escaped and hung down, giving her an untidy appearance. Yet she was not untidy; she would have died rather than deserve the reproach. Her face too was downy and dark and her mind lived behind it inscrutably, intent on formulæ for pleasure and toil which it never divulged.

She and Elijah were never on terms of intimacy; she was furiously inhibited by propriety! He thought that from the first she had made up her mind not to talk, and regretted that it should be so, since the evenings

were long and lonely and meals so nothing-at-all as far as their social side went.

Yet whereas Elijah knew nothing of Hannah, Hannah knew all about Elijah. She was accustomed to observe him, analyze his thoughts and to speculate on the probable reasons for his actions. And the night of the letter, she knew immediately that something was amiss.

He sat down to the table and instead of taking up his own napkin which was in a tortoise shell ring, marked "Ausable Chasm," he reached for hers, always in a circle of sweet grass woven with splints—unmistakable.

"Why," said Hannah, affronted, "you have mine," and,

"So I have," answered Elijah, and handed it back to her. No apologies. Nothing.

She shot him a glance of thorough curiosity but his small, mild face bore no mark of stress other than the pink color in his cheeks which might well be attributable to the afternoon wind. She was just settling down to relinquish her doubts when the second unordinary incident occurred.

"Beans?" she queried, serving him, but the question was merely perfunctory. The Saturday menu was an institution. But to-night he said in an abstract voice, "No beans."

The words were distinctly pronounced but Hannah strained at him across the table as though he had gone mad. She had shrillness in the back of her brain even before she took him up angrily.

"No beans?"

"No beans."

Clatter went the spoon. She'd leave it to any one if they ever heard of such a thing. Saturday night——

She curbed herself in order that he might reconsider. As he did not she informed him in a voice of ice,

"There's nothing else for supper. *You know there never is when we have beans!*"

"No?" He was gazing at his hands but he lifted one feverish eye. "Well, no matter, then. . . . You'll excuse me, Hannah."

And scraping his chair from the table he went back to the bottle of red ink and the scribbled sheets of his letter, like a composition in blood. Later, his ill-humor increasing, he was incensed by the sudden discovery that ever and anon Hannah would tiptoe into the adjoining parlor and spy upon him. He was suddenly awake to the cross of Hannah, imposed upon him by his dead wife and borne these many years without a murmur. He told himself that his wife had been within her province when she exercised censorship over him, but was it right that she should have left a substitute to continue the vigil?

He saw Hannah watching him with the eyes of Sarah. . . .

II

After Elijah's first panic had subsided and he had dispatched his letter he thought innocently,

"Heaven forgive me if I've crushed her!"

He wondered constantly if in defeating the Harlows from the reopening of an old wound his passionate zeal had not taken him too far. What right had he, after all, to issue any mandate or to frost-nip any intention that might possibly have its root in righteousness? The fact that the Harlows were not interested in the repentance of the one who had failed them was no reason

why she should not repent. Repentance for Rhoda Burchard was salutary. And Elijah, recalling his gesture of frantic denial, was a thought ashamed of it. At the very least he might believe that David Harlow's wife was weary of her world and the meagerness of its rewards, a bit terrified no doubt, at the oncreep of age and the bleak isolation which she foresaw in it. Proudly, with a desperate irony, she had confided in him. And what had he answered her? Stay, stay where you are; we will have none of you. He broke into a sweat of pity when he thought of it. Yet he knew that as far as David was concerned even the circumstances of his numbered years would be immaterial to move him. David had loved her greatly but that light had gone out years ago. Elijah would have liked to tell David, make a clean breast of the whole thing, but in that, at least, he was bound to consider Rhoda.

So he ruminated, and at last her answer came. She was not crushed; she was of the steel liveness of a rapier. She said that she was sorry to have alarmed him; she would certainly do nothing drastic without his sanction. She said charmingly that she could not take his message in bad part because it was a letter from home; by writing her he made her a person en rapport with security. She asked him if Wedgewater people still had their consciences served for breakfast. She asked him if his wife would object to their correspondence. She did not know that Sarah was dead. . . .

III

Elijah's heart, for very relief, quickened with warmth. Since he found her so tractable he was im-

pelled to generosity. It could do no harm, surely, to extend the goodfellowship of cheer to one who was obviously finding the way unfriended. He did not approve of her past conduct, and he was far from extenuating it, but he could not dismiss her from his consideration as he would have, say, a servant for misdemeanor. Rhoda was a lady by all delicate distinctions. Elijah knew that, nothing could affect her claim to the title though, had Sarah been alive, they would certainly have disputed the point. So he was melted into small, unaccustomed courtesies all of which appeared in his reply, like bashful children dressed for a party. And this time he had no occasion to rue his hardness. Rather he wondered if he had been too effusive. As he stumbled inadvertently into correspondence with her he blew hot and cold. He was never quite satisfied with the attitude he had taken as manifested in his letters. He never wholly exonerated himself of blame for the clandestine affair. When he was with David his secret burned intolerably yet he told himself that by his common sense handling of the danger he had really averted an appalling crisis. Mrs. Burchard was docile to his doctrine. If she had yearned toward a reconciliation with David she was delicately deferring to Elijah's judgment in the matter of taking any steps toward it. In their correspondence she showed all those feminine qualities most intoxicating, a sly sense of humor, a demure submission, a lovely recklessness.

Elijah was alarmed by what had happened to him, a dry old fellow, going his circumspect way and having put behind him for all time the savor of the thing called romance. The gray letters were slipped under his door and brought the illusion of a high-flavored con-

tact. He had begun to watch for them and, noting his tension, the woman, Hannah, nodded to herself suspiciously. Sometimes catching her at her deductions he rumbled with irritability like a volcano giving warning. Always Hannah watching him with the eyes of Sarah. . . .

Chapter XX

I

IT was December. Elijah Moore stood in company with a black-clothed woman in the garden of a small house in Wedgewater. The woman was Rhoda Harlow, and the house, an overseer's cottage of a large, disastrous estate, was being shown by an agent with a view to renting. This was Rhoda Harlow in the flesh, this tall, distinguished woman, shrouded in her abundance of veils and braced against the blustering day. And this was Elijah Moore, minute in an overcoat tattling of moth-balls, nipped blue with cold and rigid for terror and apprehension. He could not have told how it had happened, he could not remember the progression of their friendship to the prickly point out of which had grown her visit to Wedgewater. He had not been conscious of an influence at work. Rather he had prided himself mannishly on his neutrality, on the firmness with which he resisted her onslaughts. He had told himself throughout the course of their correspondence that he made or withheld concessions. He felt his own wiry muscles.

And then, presto, some change taking place in him, the pen, the red ink, protesting spasmodically, his stamina holding up its hands. *She could not come and he was permitting her to do so! She who had leaned like a lily was knocking him down!* He pretended that it was he who had granted her permission and clapped the poultice to his pride. But in truth he

was demoralized by what had happened like one who stands guard over dynamite, only to be blown up by it. This is not to affirm that his trouble was without the sly alloy of bliss.

Anticipating her presence he remembered in detail the fascinations which she had indubitably possessed. He remembered that early time when the truth was borne in upon him,—David Harlow's wife was beautiful, his own was plain! He remembered how the congenital virtues of Sarah had lost luster in his eyes as compared with the ornamental capriciousness of Rhoda Harlow. And Sarah suspecting, brooding over her grievance, ferreting out the frailties of the unstable Rhoda and keeping them on file. He remembered his own place in Rhoda's esteem as an inconsiderable digit. And the acceptance of her estimate, a writhing but submissive mortification—for years. Then Rhoda's overt act and Sarah's assuaged eyes across the breakfast table, quite terrible in their gloating.

“What did I tell you? . . .”

Rhoda had passed out of sight in the cloud of her own raising. She had died of her reputation and been buried and Elijah had been bound to condemn her as did all the others. His sympathies were entirely with David and his daughter. Coolly he knew that she deserved little at their hands. Yet her glamor remained. And to-day, a tremulous bundle of nerves, he had said to himself,

“A hat, a coat, a gown, a woman.” And in sheer lunacy had gone on repeating to himself, “Furs, and features, and a foot stepping forth, a handshake and a voice, strong as any one's—Rhoda Harlow, Rhoda Harlow, dead, gone, tumbled out of nowhere . . .”

till he was reduced to a state of weakness where he could scarcely make a sound.

Time had coördinated her talents, taught her the importance of graciousness which she now employed in a way to make Elijah forget her hard, bright facets at thirty, when airily she had snubbed him. Her voice was low and pervasive; he heard it first on the train steps in colloquy with the porter and thought of the individual advent of her voice. There was not another in Wedgewater like it. Out of the milling years she brought the white hand of a lady, the remnants of a beauty carefully attended, and a minor strain of melancholy. Her smile was a plea for mercy with which she slew him. The illusion of delicacy imposed by suffering was in the heavy lift of her lids; her gentle apathy appealed. She looked upon the mild man, Elijah, a spectacle in a thousand pieces, and, with inward amusement, she set about putting him together. By an adroit compliment he was given legs to stand on; she solicited his aid about the luggage and, lo, he was supplied with arms—she wooed him with speech till he became a man wearing an overcoat and hat and capable of commandeering a taxicab. Thence they had gone for luncheon to the Mohawk, and now in mid-afternoon they stood in the desolate garden of a little house while the real estate agent, a glib young man with a red nose, expounded on the merits of the place.

Mrs. Burchard, deep in her furs and veils, picked her way delicately over the uncouth ground and negligently permitted Elijah a glimpse of a neat-gaitered ankle. Long ends of chiffon exotically sweet on the cold air went whipping and soaring behind her and sometimes took him playfully across the face. He courted the ends of her veil and the stinging, fragrant

blackness when they clung to him. And from very far off he seemed to hear her voice talking in muffled tones to the young agent. He was numb with cold and wretched distrust of himself, the foreignness that lay between him and the woman now that they confronted one another in the flesh. The confidence which she had succeeded in establishing at the outset was oozing. His unusedness plagued and mocked him. How should he plead her cause fitly with David and with the world when he was all untutored for the part? What would David say of him? But greater even than his remorse for the sin against friendship was the fear that he could not go on with her as they had gone on in their letters, delightfully, with art. She would see that in person he was but a sere dullard and scorn to waste wit on him. For the first time in his life Elijah wished that he had been different, had gone in more for self-cultivation.

The real estate agent was fumbling with the key to the door. Rhoda mounted the shallow steps and Elijah stumbled after her. It was a bleak day and the unoccupied house was cold with the chill of a cellar. But it was completely, if casually, furnished and had been left with the ease of its personal trifles. Chintz prevailed and the charm of simplicity. At the low, latticed windows one stood on a par with the garden junipers, the roses that were thatched in straw for the winter. Drifts of crisp, curled leaves surged and eddied against the panes when the wind blew, and there was a long, vacant sound in the chimney, a sudden sifting of ashes upon the hearth. Mrs. Burchard moved about in her aura of personal comfort, appraising everything, commenting on the possibilities of each room.

"Why," said the young agent effusively, "take a person like yourself now—why, a person like yourself could do wonders with this here little house."

She smiled subtly. In any sun of favor she was lazy as a salamander.

"Do you think I could? Yes, I dare say. But, b-r-r, how chilly."

"Say, I tell you what I'll do—" Red Nose showed even greater zeal than mercenary interests required. "I'll make a fire so we can all get warm. It's a wicked day, I'll say that for it!" And he found kindlings and set to work, eventually overcoming the disinclination of the damp chimney. And in the midst of his activity he turned often with a bright, unashamed eye to envisage the charming woman who hovered near with encouragement or made pilgrimages into adjoining rooms. In his eyes she was ageless, richly endowed with femininity.

"Sit down," he bade the two when the fire was bravely performing, "you might just as well be warm while you're making up your minds, though I tell you frankly—" he rose and dusted off his hands— "I tell you frankly you won't find another little place like it. Unfurnished perhaps, but not a furnished one—there's the point."

"I might do very well here if I'm not *too* much alone," mused Mrs. Burchard, sitting between the two and consciously holding court, demure with the feminine talent which creates an occasion whenever one or more of the opposite sex is present

True they were specimens scarce worthy of her skill, the wizened-up Elijah in his rusty overcoat and the ordinary young man, but her favor seemed to lift and redeem them. They showed in their eyes that the idea

of her loneliness was one to be flouted; they savored their gallantry.

"As if that could happen," the young agent made bold to remark, and Elijah, clearing his throat, assured her,

"You may—ahem—count on me, Rhoda. You may definitely count on me to drop in very often."

Was there mischief in her eye, or was his morbid self-consciousness the inventor of that gleam? The agent, the young jackanapes, measured him, measured him continuously, as though to say,

"Dry rot. Now what in the devil would she want of him?"

Mrs. Burchard sat with her wrap thrown open, her slim hands clasped about a silk-shod knee, her amused gaze tossed to the fire. Her face was wonderful despite its lines. He knew her to be forty-eight years old and in his secret soul believed that it was immoral for her to appear so young.

"We're going to be neighbors," said Elijah with a jocular recklessness, "that's what we're going to be. And I promise you if you take this little house I'll do all I can to see that you are comfortable."

"Now, what," worried the young agent, "can their relationship be?"

At the hotel when they had driven back she conferred upon Elijah her two gloved hands.

"Elijah," she said in a mellifluous, moved voice, "my true, good friend."

Rhoda Harlow in Wedgewater and speaking to him like that . . . it was surely a dream. But he gathered himself into an appearance.

"You must consider," he proffered in stiff alarm, "that I'm always at your service."

"I too," dared the young man with a blush.
Even the real estate agent. . . .

II

The morning following Muffet's sleep-walking she and Rolf met at the breakfast table. Strangeness was upon them—they were strangers. Muffet's face appeared pale and troubled; she peeped furtively at Rolf in inquiry, but his eyes answered no questions. When she spoke it was in veiled apology for what had been a blameless act. She knew well enough what had happened, though fortunately she did not know that her dream had taken her into the garden and the ghostly apple orchard. She had found herself in her own room, lying on her own bed, and covered with the quilt which Rolf had brought to wrap round her.

That morning David shared their breakfast and the sense of the trouble between them. But no matter how constrained they might appear he shrank from questioning them, he glossed over their strangeness with a light and flexible touch. With the selfishness of long monopoly he was never so happy as when he felt that marriage had not altered her, when she came to him with bright, adoring eyes which said, "We are one another's." At the same time he wanted Rolf to be satisfied with his half-a-loaf so that the domestic sun might shine serene and no shadow fall upon his darling. When Rolf was not happy David's conscience warred; he became deliberately oblivious, as though in disclaiming knowledge of the rift he disclaimed responsibility for it.

Upon waking most of Rolf's pity for his wife was

discovered to be gone. He now felt himself aggrieved, probed the depth of his injury and found it abysmal. His measure of consideration would amount to a measure of punishment. His hurt, seeking to avenge itself, struck out savagely at any object. Vannie, singing in the kitchen, annoyed him. The lament,

“Ah ain't noboddy's darlin',
Ah ain't noboddy's love,”

proving peculiarly irritating.

He lifted his eyebrows to Muffet.

“Do we have that for breakfast?”

“I'll ask her to stop,” she answered, flushing, and cheated him of gymnastic argument.

But his mind was inventive and presently it produced further belligerence.

“We've got to find a name for the house. I've been thinking of it for a long time. Houses that haven't street numbers should have names, and anyway they make stationery look better.”

“But the house has a name,” put in David lucklessly. “My mother christened it ‘Birdwood’.”

“Yes,” said Muffet faintly, “‘Birdwood’,” and her mouth was tender to caress the word. Her eyes met David's and their wisdom embraced.

Rolf's color rose. He thought the name dinky and dribbling—it might do for a shooting box or a farm, but for imposing effect he commended “Elmhurst.” Elmhurst having popped into his mind at that moment, he immediately assumed an attitude of protection over it. He had considered it for a long time, he said. He had, in fact, about decided. . . . His high-handedness was a shock to the intimidated two. They

showed it in their faces. "Birdwood" was endeared by association and its touch of the intimate, but "Elmhurst"—a cemetery, a park, a private sanitarium, a home for inebriates. . . . No matter, thought Muffet, who bore in her soul the malady of remorse—let it be "Elmhurst," even if "Elmhurst" destroyed them.

As Rolf rose and brushed out into the hall, preparatory to leaving, she came after him and touched his arm. Having lingered for her apology, he at once pretended that he had not time to listen. His eyes were averted, his body rigid with unfriendliness.

"Rolf?"

His face was stony, but her voice brought the tears to his eyes, terrible tears of smarting vanity.

"Rolf, I'm so sorry. It meant nothing. Forgive me."

His silence was so hard that she trembled for acquittal. He heard the sobs rising in her slender throat before he vouchsafed any sign; then,

"You couldn't help it," he bit off. "It was your thoughts led you that way and, since that's the way you feel, much better we stay apart—live apart." Terrible words encouraged to be as terrible as possible.

"Oh, no, no, Rolf, you mustn't say that. You mustn't think that. It's dangerous for people to be parted. However I may have acted, I know that we mustn't do that. We must try to know one another intelligently . . . we must try to stay close."

The phrase infuriated him.

"It's only you," he choked and broke off. And again, "Do you suppose I require an effort to love you? Do you suppose I require an effort to know you?"

"But you *don't* know me, Rolf."

"Then better to stay away from you, remain apart entirely." The heavy ache of misery spread slowly over his body till he wondered how it was possible that a man should support the relentless pain. He looked this way and that in his mind and met only violence and bloodshed. He yearned to reprisal, some way to make her suffer sufficiently—as he was suffering. Her light breath was just below him, the solicitude of her slender throat uprearing that childlike head.

"It's the only way," he said with a flicker of pleasure. "Just to be like friends. To make no effort. Friends are not straining."

Her eyes opened wide.

"But we're not friends, don't you see?" she argued patiently. "Something more is required of us, Rolf. We're man and wife—" Her sensitive face was flushed to bravery. "We ought to be—lovers." The voice ended in a whisper.

"Perhaps," he laughed grimly. "But we're not. And so it is certainly indecent that we should pretend to be." She drew away from him, repelled by his roughness. To Rolf's surprise, he heard her say,

"Very well. Perhaps you are right," and again her eyes filled with tears, but this time they were not tears of begging, because she agreed with him. She was signing the compact which he did not want . . . and he knew that it was no punishment at all, but a relief. In a moment the world was changed. He could not bear to look at her and know her not for him and to see the tears which she shed in easy resignation, sniff-sniff. Those tears had nothing to do with a deep unhappiness. As for him, he felt that he could have broken out into tears that would have made a river, gone mad with the rains. Only of course men did not

cry. Their alternative was to do some colossally childish thing, get drunk, or kick the first dog they met in the street.

His sorrow took the normal turn of hatred and stumping down the path to his car he saw David and told himself with a deep, exultant satisfaction, "I know him now, the scamp!" and grimly to himself he added, "I have him to blame."

David was busy removing burlap from Muffet's chrysanthemum bed and had negligently permitted a crew of small boys to swarm over Rolf's car which was drawn up at the gate.

"Here, you young scamps, get out of there. Scat, before I give you each a walloping."

The bellowing voice of Rolf shook every adolescent nerve into frenzy. So the four obeyed with expedition and were still cringing when the owner, having taken possession, left them all the insult of his dust. There was no mistaking Rolf's mood, thought David, coming down to the gate, and incorrigibly he consoled with the culprits. He knew how, as a lad, he had felt about anything that went on wheels.

"Come over to the store and I'll stand treat," he was moved to suggest, one hand in a musical pocket.

Five minutes later the urchins were manning four stools of the Wedgewater Road pharmacy, while to an attentive clerk ran the ripple of their refrain,

"Ice-cream soda, ice-cream soda, ice-cream soda. . ."

Chapter XXI

I

ACCORDING to Hannah, the priestess of Elijah's household, he showed "strange symptoms." Bacilli were at work in him and it was apparent that he had established no immunity. It was Hannah's duty to guard him from all potential dangers. She had accepted her post as a sacred assignment from the dead and she had always tried to do, she was fond of saying, exactly what Sarah would have done in like circumstances. She now therefore devoted her detective talents to the daily observation of her brother-in-law, and dogged his very thoughts with a relentless, sleuth-like avidity. She was not far wrong in believing that his whole psychology had altered.

In the first place Elijah, always a careless dresser, had begun to manifest signs of concern as regarded his personal appearance. He bade Hannah throw away the frayed shirts with which she had been wrestling for the last five years and they were replaced by new ones. He also had himself a new suit of opulent gray. And the small kernel of his face was kept pink and beardless as an infant's. These were "symptoms." Another "symptom" was his absent-mindedness. Once Hannah caught him putting his cigars in the ice-box. By a mighty effort of will she said nothing at the time, but merely riveted Elijah with a dark, distrustful look

that sent him scuttling away in guilty embarrassment.

She observed that the letter-writing had ceased and she told herself that terrible as that phase had been it was a mere preliminary to the permanent and dreadful state of nerves in which he now lived and had his being. Hannah, lacking actual evidence, was content to wait in the enclosure of her suspicions, to wait and watch till the unstrung, luckless male should betray his madness. And she prophesied that it would not be long.

One evening at the supper table, having so far forgotten her prejudice as to make conversation, she said,

"They're having a sale on at Bettings' this week of a new patent egg beater. A dollar. I went to the demonstration and I'd a' bought one only I figured you might not want it." Her slow, lethargic voice releasing ideas was always a surprise to Elijah.

"Why, of course. We must keep up to date in our kitchen," and he dug with a prodigal gesture for his wallet. Out came not one dollar but its double and Elijah was no spendthrift. "Go down in the morning," he said, jovially, "and while you're about it *you may as well buy two!*"

Hannah stared with blanched face. You may as well buy two! Did she hear aright? Her amazement was borne in upon him slowly.

"I'll—I'll take one to Dave's house," he explained with a shaky carelessness.

But she did not believe him. It was not incumbent upon her to believe him, and rising to fetch the coffee she presently experienced such a shock to her notions of propriety that she could not at once return to the dining room. Palpitant on the air in letters a yard high stood the astonishing deduction, "DOUBLE LIFE! WHAT IF HE IS LEADING A DOUBLE LIFE?"

She knew by the evidence of her own ears that Elijah was making presents—and not to a man. Some shameless woman neither in the position of wife or fiancée was about to accept from this widower an egg beater. Hannah lifted her eyes to Heaven where, presumably her dead sister resided.

“Sarah,” she whispered, “this is dreadful——”

II

It was not until the pseudo Mrs. Burchard had settled herself comfortably in the house on John Street that, by common consent, their interview came about. Elijah shivering in his skin had blessed the conventional delay which postponed his complicity. He told himself it was but playing the part of a man to see that Rhoda Harlow had a winter's supply of coal, to find for her a servant, to keep her in morale. He told himself that he would have done as much for any person of the opposite sex, and in the imaginary conversations which he was already holding with David he argued righteously,

“If you condemn me for this all I can say is you are very hard-headed and very narrow.”

But in truth the contortions of his conscience gave him small peace from the time that Rhoda set foot in Wedgewater till the tightly wound situation had played itself out. He was in mortal terror lest her presence there should be discovered by David before the two had had time to figure out a plan of campaign, yet why it would have been worse now than later he could not have said. David was a recluse in the strictest sense of the word; Wedgewater people had ceased to exist for him

and in turn he had been all but forgotten by Wedgewater people. It was not likely that he would meet Mrs. Burchard on the street or that she would be reported to him by any canny acquaintance. Mrs. Burchard was discreet in her ramblings; she affected dark garments and the reserve of her beshrouded hats. Elijah placed his pitiful trust in her cleverness, and permitted her to lead him slowly toward that bridge ahead which both of them must cross.

Rhoda had schooled herself to tolerance of his puny person—she did not undervalue his importance as an ally, nor did the fact of his tentative infatuation displease her. His shy, insectous presence filled her with an exquisite mirth; her femininity functioning, applauded its own performance.

Now there was always a hearth-fire in the living-room of the little cottage, there were all sorts of telling touches to show that a discriminating woman had taken up her abode. And Elijah, calling on a Saturday afternoon, felt that he could no longer delay the business of a complete understanding. He wished to be very delicate, to approach the thing with consummate art, else Rhoda's feelings, always in a tender state, were likely to suffer collapse. That day he had brought her a canary bird in a vaulted cage of gold wire.

"It will sing for you," he promised feverishly, thrusting the bulky package into her hands. "I thought it would keep you from getting the fidgets when you're all alone."

"What a precious twitterer." She peeped into the cage, then expanded a tender eye for Elijah in a way that reminded him startlingly of Muffet Sterling, save that Muffet's archness was of humor rather than coquetry. "Ah, Elijah, that was divine of you. And

now I suppose I must have a cuttlefish for the dear thing to wipe its nose on."

Hating birds, she moved adorably to the brightest corner and found a hook on which to hang the cage while Elijah, behind her, perspired with pleasure. Very often now he pranced out of his sixty years to find himself once more a fanciful young man. All the nipped romanticism of his youth awoke with troublous whispers, all the soft absurdities that his wife had killed.

But Rhoda Harlow carried her aura of enchantment into middle-age, and gave the impression not of one who has lived on the branch but of a charming cosmopolitan, feminine and adaptable. There were objects in that room which exercised a strange power over Elijah, shabby lengths of brocade out of Italy, a strip of fine filet lace thrown across the divan, on the table many boxes of antique silver and a crystal ball on a carved standard. The maid brought them tea in Florentine cups and when the tea was half drained he saw a head of Beatrice or Lucrezia glimmering through the amber liquid. And always there was Rhoda's drawling voice, her slim lounging elegance and Elijah was taken out of himself, transported—a man of few contacts, and one conscious of his uncouthness, he was the more grateful for the hospitality which she accorded him. He felt that he had never known a woman before and he was extraordinarily averse to analyzing her spell. Good conservative that he was, he wished ardently that he might accept her without reference to her past. This he could not quite do since it was in reference to her past that he must arrange her future. But he confessed that the idea of her reunion with David was incongruous. He did not know how to put his old friend before her in terms of

the present. She had left him a handsome, clear-cut Harlow with all a Harlow's stinging pride and stature; she would find him a retiring laborer, broken in health and spirit. David, even less than Elijah, would be able to play at partners with her; David was sobered, disinclined, and had suffered too severely at her hands. Elijah, virgin so far as his heart was concerned, might better know "the wild and guilty joy of being a damn fool."

"I thought," said Elijah with hardy determination when the lowering tea in his cup had brought him face to face with Lucrezia Borgia, "I thought that to-day we—we might make a try at getting to the root of things. I suppose you realize that we've hardly touched at all on—on the subject closest to our thoughts."

Rhoda sat in a low chair by the tea-table, facing the fire, her long, slender foot in a satin slipper resting on the fender. Outside the afternoon was dull and threatening; from where they sat they could see the white-caps on the bay livid against the steel-gray waters. Now and then a dizzy swirl of leaves flew obliquely across the panes. She replaced her cup on the tray with a little gesture of laying her cards on the table.

"Yes, my friend, the time has come to talk of many things, of shoes and ships and sealing wax—" She broke off whimsically. "Elijah, I am not a frivolous woman but it has been sweet to settle down in this absurd little house and pretend that life is just beginning, instead of meandering to its close."

"Oh," protested Elijah, flourishing his handkerchief and giving his nose a tweak, "don't say that——"

"Perhaps you'll give me the details of the last hundred years," she suggested dryly, "help me fill in the gaps. I've wondered so much how things went on in

Wedgewater, how one supported the immense fatigue of this little town without ending in coma. I once promised myself," she admitted with a rueful shake of the head, "never to come back. And here is what that promise amounted to!"

"Home is always—home," opined Elijah platitudinously. "I guess you are no different from the rest of us here, except that you've had opportunities for broadening. Dave and I we've stuck to the old path, Dave had Muffet and I—er—I had Sarah!"

Rhoda's face became instinct with malicious remembrance.

"Sarah," she mused, as one who is secretly diverted by some picture. She looked at Elijah, the product of his Presbyterian yesterdays and smiled.

"And now that Sarah is gone you live alone?"

"No," said Elijah innocently, "now I have her sister Hannah."

"Now you have Hannah," she repeated marveling, and would have liked to add, "Soon you will be old enough to do without a nurse."

But as Elijah talked she saw the meagerness of the life he had led.

She saw the Sunday nights on Wedgewater Road where, he told her, he had habitually dropped in for supper up to the time that Muffet was married. And when she asked him why he no longer dined there he had answered that it was different *now*. Didn't he like Mr. Sterling? Oh, Sterling was a capital fellow, but there was a certain restraint about the three of them, Muffet, her husband and David.

"Perhaps the young people are not happy together," surmised Muffet's mother with impersonal acumen, and took Elijah unaware.

He cleared his throat. He said oh, yes, that they were happy. Why, they hadn't been married six months. His eyes wavered childishly and found the canary cage as an objective. Her smile was safe.

"Tell me more," she bade him with a good deal of relish, "tell me more about my two!"

Her two! Elijah's look twitched back to her. Her two! The proprietary "my" troubled him; it was in distinctly bad taste and if used in sarcasm it became even worse. But his salvation lay in not doubting her sincerity. Consequently he spoke on of David and the girl during those years before her marriage when they had lived like babes in the woods.

"You sometimes see a girl who makes few friends," he told Rhoda, "but you don't often see one who fair idolizes her father. Why, the friendship between those two, the love between them made you feel kind of strange and sad-like. David got it all," and he wiped his eyes. "They never had much in the way of comforts, nothing but each other."

But Rhoda's expression had changed acutely. It did not please her that he should sentimentalize and snivel over the two pious ones who had labeled her a moral leper. She stood it long as she could, then loosed a laugh of hard irony.

"Would you mind not pitying them quite so thoroughly? Would you mind casting an eye upon me *déclassée* in Europe or living, friendless, in New York?"

Elijah grew purple with embarrassment. He had it in the back of his mind to argue that, having sowed a tempest, she was bound to reap a whirlwind. But the extraordinary thing about her was her look of extreme refinement, utter feminine dependence, that

won sympathy without ever asking for it. When he permitted himself surrender he was all in the hollows of those white flowering hands, more magical, he told himself, at fifty than they had been twenty years before. He saw the hard light in her eyes, the quiver of her lips and called himself a Pharisee.

"Forgive me," begged Elijah contritely, "I really did not mean to imply that they had the worst of it. I realize there's always your side."

But she sat stiff and tragic-eyed. If she wept he would have to do what he could to comfort her, pat her hands, say, or just place a protecting arm about her shoulder.

"I have been punished," she brought forth in a laboring voice.

"There, there."

"But I am not a bad woman. If I were it wouldn't have occurred to me to try to make reparation."

"There, there. Who says you're a bad woman?" Elijah thought how fantastic the words sounded.

At the same time there was the name "Burchard" by which she now went and which she had made not the slightest move toward explaining. It was incredible that David had never given Elijah, his closest friend, his confidence in regard to her. What Elijah naturally supposed now was that Rhoda returned to Wedgewater, either the widow or the divorced wife of a second experience. He was a long time working up his courage to the active point but it came at last in a rush.

"Rhoda, would you care to tell me how it has been with you all these years?" His cheeks burned crimson, his voice was hoarse with feeling.

She looked upon his ingenuousness and knew it easily exploited.

"Do you," she put it pitifully, "insist upon giving me all that pain?" and immediately there was Elijah helpless!

Women fought with strange weapons; they had a way of confusing issues in the masculine mind. Still he clung, with a certain tenacity to his original thought.

"But Burchard," he insisted dazedly, "what became of him?"

She wept a few hysterical tears.

"Burchard, there was never any Burchard really. It's an empty name—one—one I took to protect my own."

Elijah sat back, nonplussed. He was not accustomed to furnish his mind with scandal. At the same time he had filed certain facts in regard to her, perhaps not the name "Burchard" but a substitute. Rhoda was hidden in her tears, like a ship in a smoke-screen. He ached with interrogation and could not find her. Still, she could not stay forever. Numbly he bided his time, till with the first signs of her appearance the question could be put.

"Rhoda, are you still David's wife?"

She straightened slightly.

"My name is still Rhoda Harlow. When I wanted a divorce he wouldn't give it to me. He thought I would come home. Later when *he* wanted one I fought it—I had to have something to cling to then."

Elijah mopped his brow.

"Just one thing more, Rhoda. Has he supported you all these years?"

"It's been little enough."

But Elijah saw her hands, white from idleness, her

daintiness of the dilettante and he knew, God help him, that David had maintained her well, David dying a poor man! A fresh sorrow swept over him. Oh, he had done better to leave her alone, leave her alone. He bowed his head. She watched his inevitable reaction with hot, dry, narrow eyes. Little florid patches of color rose in her pale cheeks. She was bitterly annoyed by her own careless technique. During the interlude of his depression she busied herself with the preparation of a new pose, and when he was recovered it was in the last stages of perfection. Dignity was treading the boards.

"I am sorry," she said very softly, "sorry that I have imposed upon your time and sympathy. David fulfilled his obligation as regards—support. When I said that he was cruel I did not mean to imply in that particular sense. I meant that he denied me the right to redemption."

Elijah shook his head.

"But after all it was you who went away. And since all these years he has been maintaining you——"

She flew into a rage with him.

"Maintaining? What a horrible word. And what a literal nature you have!"

"Your letters touched me," continued Elijah, unheeding. "I thought that David had been hard on you, uncharitable, though, God help me, I should have known him better than to believe that—and so I presumed to meddle——"

"Ah, well," she stood erect nervously, her coldness regathered, "since the monetary part of it weighs so heavily with you, since you consider he has discharged his entire duty——" She made a proud gesture of finality, "forgive me and let me go back into exile——" The

words were chosen unerringly and struck Elijah where he was most vulnerable. Melodrama, but sufficiently well played to deceive him! And she went on, the mournful music of her voice speaking of the uneven chances of life, her melancholy singing down the objections of his reason, till he looked at her with dark, despairing eyes.

In her lived all the wiles of a world of women but he could not bear it if she went. He was sick in his own complexity.

"Don't go," he begged her feebly, "don't go."

Chapter XXII

I

IT was another day and Elijah Moore was standing with Mrs. Burchard at the gate after a walk with her along the bay. The sky was bright and boisterous, the air golden with a million stabbing particles. John Street lay at one end of the long crescent of the town. Directly across the harbor Wedgewater Road ran out to form the other. One saw the Ship and Engine Company, a huddle of buildings thrown together like stones in the Giant's Causeway, and, half obliterating it in the foreground, passive submarines and hound-gray destroyers. Mrs. Burchard had chosen to put the length of the half moon between her family and herself and so far had maintained her incognito. But to-day, just as she and Elijah Moore would have shaken hands across the low gate of her garden, Elijah glanced up the street and saw something to make his mind congeal,—Elijah saw the smart enclosed car of Rolf Sterling coming toward them at an unhurried speed. He saw Sterling himself at the wheel, bearing down upon him with a smile of recognition, and turned in panic toward his companion.

"That's Sterling coming," he told her in an agitated whisper, "you know—*Rolf Sterling* who married Muffet!" But to his intense surprise she remained imperturbable, cool and in countenance, a replica of

the smile of Mona Lisa just rippling her mouth.

"So this is Sterling," she remarked with keen interest, and instead of going quickly into the cottage as Elijah prayed that she would do she took her time at the gate, in no wise discomfited. "Does he know about me?" she had time to ask, and the miserable Elijah was bound to admit that he did not.

"Ah," she murmured dryly, "they could hardly risk telling him."

But as deeply as he felt her irony Elijah nevertheless pressed upon her the tableau of leave-taking for the benefit of the young man now about to proffer him a lift. Rolf, opening the door for Elijah, was obviously impressed by the company in which he found him. It was rare enough, certainly, to surprise the bashful little man in conversation with one of the opposite sex, but that he should be discovered *en tête-à-tête* with a woman of manifest charm appealed to Rolf as incredible. Rolf applied the foot-brake, lifted his hat. Across the intervening sidewalk his eyes met those of Elijah's companion and both colored slightly. She was a woman slender, ageless, with fair hair showing under the coil of a little hat whose veil hung just below her eyes. She wore a long gray wrap with a collar of silver fox out of which her face emerged with a certain diablerie. Yet she was a woman of no common lure. There was in Sterling's eyes the unmistakable masculine tribute which Rhoda invariably commanded and had learned to expect.

"Can I give you a lift, Mr. Moore?" It was Rolf's voice calling out to Elijah, but Elijah was in thrall to Rhoda's detaining hand.

"Come to-morrow, then," she said audibly, and in a tense aside, "Introduce him!"

At the unwarranted request Elijah gave her one supplicating look and went off into a fit of elaborate coughing; he coughed to gain time. But the situation had him in its teeth and was shaking him like a terrier.

"Oh, Mr. Sterling," he spluttered, very red in the face, "thank you so much. I'm on my way to town. But won't you step out and meet an old friend of mine who has come to Wedgewater to live? Mrs. Burchard, let me introduce Mr. Sterling, one of our most important townsmen."

Sterling came and bulked big above Mrs. Burchard, who thrilled to the magnificence of him and the incorrigible joke that he was her son-in-law. He had an old-fashioned handshake and an infrequent but engaging smile. He said conventionally that Wedgewater would welcome Mrs. Burchard with enthusiasm, that she would be a great acquisition to their town, and wondered when she spoke why the cadences of her voice were faintly familiar. Mrs. Burchard thanked him graciously, but announced her intention of playing the hermit to a great extent, as she was far from strong and had come to winter in Wedgewater for the express purpose of living a sedentary life. It seemed to Rolf that she bloomed with a healthy pallor. . . .

"And you have taken the Wellington cottage," he observed heavily, still of a notion that he had seen her somewhere before, or had, at least, heard her voice. "It seems to be a comfortable house," and he added involuntarily, "from the outside——"

"Oh," she said with a gleam, "perhaps you will stop some time and let me show you *the inside!*"

He betrayed surprise, recovered himself and promised over-zestfully that he would. Then he and Elijah

took leave of her and Mrs. Burchard moved lightly up her path in the sharp, winter sunlight.

"Well," observed Rolf when he and Elijah were seated in the car and Elijah was drawing in the afterthought of his foot, "you seem to have done yourself very well."

He looked at Elijah with an expansive, teasing grin.

"Ha-hum," Elijah knew that he was in for it. "I've known her a long time, a very long time. She was—er—a friend of Sarah's."

"Ho, ho, so that's how smug you've been. And now she's come to Wedgewater and you are going to be her guide, philosopher and friend. David will be highly diverted to hear of it."

"David?" gasped Elijah, and there was no mistaking the seriousness of the tone. "Now I beg of you most earnestly, Rolf, not to mention Mrs. Burchard to Dave. I have my own special reasons for asking you."

"Ho, ho," jeered Rolf again, and again the hateful, knowing smile. "I see. And you may depend upon me to keep your little secret, Moore. But don't be surprised if we collide some fine day at the lady's door. You know she invited me to call."

But Elijah had not heart for his jokes. He was leaning back against the upholstered seat in a state of nervous exhaustion.

II

The snow fell early that winter; the winds came down from the north and brought bitter weather, but Rolf Sterling's house, with its new shingles and clapboards, its new, self-sufficient little furnace, was warm within as a heart enkindled. Vannie no longer needed

to paste paper strips in fantastic designs across the unattended windows, nor to worry o' nights lest the kitchen fire, falling too low in its convalescence, should go out.

"Dis de fust winter," she marveled to Muffet, "dat Ah 'scape havin' dat misery in mah bones!"

Muffet was content in her household régime and her few outside pleasures. Rolf had given her a car of her own to drive that fall, and when the roads were not too slippery she delighted to take her father to the factory each morning. She would return punctiliously at a still early hour to have breakfast with Rolf, and showed no resentment when, after a perfunctory kiss, he devoted himself to his grapefruit and his morning paper. Since the estrangement which had fallen between them was a matter of very vital pain with him, since he was denied the ardors of a happy lover, he scorned her overtures of friendliness. He thought the phase through which they were passing a ridiculous and unnecessary one. Hating the rift between them, he yet abode it stubbornly, determined that it should endure till she too suffered and awakened to a sense of the shallow ideal she had brought to marriage. But Muffet did not suffer and did not awaken, and presently came the strike at the factory to take precedence for the time being over his personal affairs.

It was the mechanics who were asking for, not shorter hours, but more pay, "a living wage" they called it when they sent their representatives to call on Rolf in his office. Prices were high and the winter had begun cruelly. Their families suffered for lack of fuel and warm clothing. Mechanics engaged in a similar industry had been granted a raise. They would give him a certain number of days to consider their demands, at

the end of which time they would walk out. And walk out they did. For Rolf was not prepared to meet them halfway. It was not as in the great, prosperous days of the war. . . .

Rolf rode home darkly and darkly divined that Harlow had been talking to his daughter, had covertly laid the situation before her and pleaded that the men were justified. The two ceased talking when he came into the room, but the subject uppermost in all their minds was bound to come to an open head, and spasmodically they warred. The striking workmen were to be seen now all along Wedgewater Road, eager in conclave wherever two or three were gotten together. Their faces were hopeful, brighter and cleaner; they got the factory grime from their cheeks, the smoke out of their eyes. They talked about what they owed their families and the price of coal and groceries. Thus they held out for three weeks. At the beginning of the fourth the thermometer dropped to fourteen degrees below zero and held the same night and morning. The men looked worn and anxious. A low sound was beginning to make itself heard in the tenement district, the sound of suffering, hunger and cold.

When Sterling left in the morning mysterious baskets were packed in Muffet's kitchen. Later she made flannel petticoats for children, nightgowns and hoods; she had Emmeline Hawkins in to help her. Word of it leaked out and came to Sterling. He contended that his wife had made a fool of him. They quarreled unhappily, and Muffet stopped sewing. The fifth week the men went back to work at the old wage. The despair, the futility of it! Rolf came home, triumphant, and Muffet turned from him sickly to her father. Another cause for resentment was the way that Rolf had

thrust David into a negligible position in the household. She became iron to uphold him, and her intimate, dark head, bent over the interminable basket of her father's mending, was one of the sights which made Rolf ache.

His mind, let down from its problems at the factory, became angry with frustration. He was now more observant of his wife than ever before, more truly and deeply in love with her. Yet his supreme mortification caused him to be churlish and reserved. In what way did he fail to qualify as a man, he asked himself a thousand times a day. Hungrily he drank the plaudits of the directors of the company, loud in their praise of the way he had managed the strike. He existed on the machine-like response of his office staff, thinking, "Here there is no question of divided loyalty. Here at least I stand first." He fostered his pride by going among men, bringing them to his house that they might platform him in Muffet's eyes.

All to no avail. He was in the ill-health of his own festering doubts, daily more unhappy. The surroundings of his home lost significance for him. And the worst blow to his manhood was the thought that Muffet had never seemed more normal. What was to him a false way of living was the restoration of her poise. Useless for her to pretend that the break, the cessation of any real union between them, caused her unhappiness. It was rather her marriage with Rolf that had been the anomaly, her marriage with any man. Thinking it all out coolly, he decided that the love which should have been his had long ago been diverted into the channel of filial affection. He faced the fact starkly—she did not love him. But he might have a

chance to make her love him if it were not for her father, tenacious, omnipresent.

Following Christmas there was a gay season in Wedgewater. Rolf and Muffet were in evidence as a lately married pair, important by many tokens. Rolf found himself the object of admiring envy. "You certainly bagged a prize, old boy," and, "How does it seem to be a married man?" till the travesty nauseated him.

Muffet bore the parties with tolerable humor. She made the *mot* that the Wedgewater people were charming hosts just so long as they could resist entertaining. She looked pretty and distinctive, but never lost herself in the aggregate, and all the way home, her little satin-bright slippers cocked up before her, she yawned prodigiously.

"Good night." she would say at the head of the stair, and, airily, "It has been such fun. I'll just tiptoe into dear Father's room to see if he's all right" . . . and she would tiptoe in and back and reach up to kiss Rolf with a child's decorum. And she would rest there a moment with a warm friendliness, smelling like a lovely tea-rose, while he abode the agony of his own, unspoken entreaties: "Oh, my darling, don't let our life be a failure. . . . See love real—see it beautiful. . . ." Could Muffet have heard the extremity of that longing expressed in words she might have looked upon Rolf very differently. But it was never actually spoken; a powerful shyness inhibited him; that, mixed with a clumsy, dogged pride, forbade him to beg. He was instinct with the danger of their divided ways which she had once pointed out to him, but which, in that crucial time, he had insisted upon ignoring in order that he might score one sullen vic-

tory. He courted sleep, in his desolation, as the one road to forgetfulness, but in the morning when he wakened he remembered immediately the breach between them; he remembered before his eyes were open and as often in the night as his dreams wore threadbare. The winter sunlight, curious at his lids, became each day a separate insult.

He and David had little to say to one another these days. Rolf, lacking justification for his rage, busied himself with small and hectoring implications. His father-in-law was a dodderer, dry-rot. By Jove he *was* a dodderer and so were his friends, Elijah as example. A pair of dodderers. But Rolf was now given to meditating upon Elijah with a shade of deference owing to his privilege of friendship with the charming, if mysterious, Mrs. Burchard. He condescended to respect Elijah and was as good as his word in guarding his secret, though the idea that he should have a secret to guard never ceased to amuse him. Elijah was a modest little old fellow who lived austere by himself, retaining all the reserve of a bachelor. He was nothing of a beau, nothing of a spendthrift. Each Sunday he went to church and put a dollar bill on the contribution plate, subscribing an additional dollar for the clothing of the naked Syrians whose improper plight he thought of with pain. His incompetence when thrown into a rôle requiring tact and *savoir faire*, was pitiable, and Rolf's thoughts went out to Mrs. Burchard solicitously.

It was a proof of his loneliness, the slipping of his strict standard, that he thought of any woman save his wife, that often the need for nourishment of spirit caused him to remember Mrs. Burchard as one likely to give him flattering fare. She was older than he and her face was an epic—she had lived. Muffet had “the

hard heart of a child." What harm could it do if he stopped some day to see her, putting his visit on a casual basis, if he said that he happened to be passing by? That would explain why he called without his wife. And Elijah need not know; he did not want Elijah to think he had infringed on his patent.

It came about one windy afternoon in January. Rolf, striding up to the Liliputian house, had the feeling that he was a giant going among pygmies. A maid answered the door and showed him into a merry little room, full of flowers and fire-glow, where, with his heart beating strangely, he waited for Mrs. Burchard to appear. All the time he was rehearsing to himself like a lesson the overture that he had planned, "I happened to be passing by. . . ."

Chapter XXIII

I

HITHERTO it might truthfully have been said of Rolf that his life was an "open book." Direct and unsophisticated as he was, the keynote to his character was candor. He had known but few strong passions,—his mother, his business career, his love for Muffet Harlow. In the old days he had formed friendships with several young society women of Wedgewater, who had found him peculiarly unsusceptible to sentiment. But Rolf, though seldom attracted, was himself attractive to women of all classes, and it had frequently happened that "the other kind," "the wrong kind," as he naïvely thought of them, had thrown themselves at his head. But from all youthful entanglements his wholesomeness had brought him clear. There had never been any dire struggle of opposing forces. By virtue of a native common sense as canny as that of a young animal he had learned what he wanted and what he did not want.

So, later on in life, it had required no particular effort of will for him to keep his record clear. When seven months before, he had married Muffet Harlow it was with every intention of being true to her in the strictest sense of the word. It was then that his friendships with the young Wedgewater women automatically ended. He would have despised himself for

the slightest relaxations from his code of faith. He would have been horrified at the idea of any covert act on his part which might reflect upon her. Yet here was Rolf in the month of February well advanced in a clandestine friendship with the lady on John Street. And instead of feeling remorse for the direction in which he was drifting he felt only a grim satisfaction. He had not, of course, the slightest sentimental interest in Mrs. Burchard, that he could truthfully say, but he found in her presence a peculiar balm. He could not, for instance, have formed the habit of going to any of the younger women he had known in the same way that he went to her. They would have scented his unhappiness and sympathized and the last thing in the world that he wanted was sympathy. Or they would have attributed his visits to a surviving personal interest in themselves which would have proven equally irksome. But Mrs. Burchard was rich in worldly wisdom, and asked no questions. Nor did she openly arrogate to herself such honors. Each told the other nothing of personal importance. It was tacitly accepted that Rolf's wife should be left out of it; and as tacitly agreed that Mrs. Burchard's private affairs need not be brought to figure in their curious companionship. The one thing that mattered was what they stood for to-day and the exchange of an essential benefit.

Mrs. Burchard liked men better than women. She said so with refreshing frankness. She liked the masculine mind, which was able to deal with other minds largely. She could not have enjoyed the same sort of camaraderie with one of her own sex that she enjoyed with Sterling. A woman would have first wanted to know all the circumstances of her life and have computed her worth accordingly, whereas Sterling was

interested only in what she could mean to him. Rhoda thought Rolf handsome and Vikingsque and admired his positive character. But she took great care to feed him flattery in small disguised doses. She exercised more freely her talent for keeping him amused and comfortable.

As for Rolf he was badly in need of the schooling that she gave him. He told himself that his strict adherence to all the old and narrow prejudices had brought him where he was. He was not a man at all but a schoolboy. It was time he broke away from his brooding beside the hearthstone and proved to himself that he was not without value in the eyes of the fair sex, that a woman of Mrs. Burchard's superior years and training found him acceptable, was proud of his attentions.

When she spoke of Elijah it was kindly and indulgently but with a gleam of mischief in her eye. She and Rolf came to understand one another very well.

II

In the meantime Elijah was working up his courage to the point where he could make his great confession to David. He was, he told himself naïvely, "breaking it gently." But how gently may only be imagined when it is known that his hints were of so careful a character the obtuse David had not the slightest suspicion that he was being wrought upon at all. They met each day in the factory on the old footing save that Elijah's nervousness had perceptibly increased.

"'Lige," David would tease him drolly, "you're gettin' more like St. Vitus every day, with your arms

swingin' like windmills, and your fingers all the time digging at your ribs like you've got bee-stings."

"Not bee-stings, Dave," mourned poor Elijah, and would have liked to add, "but stings of conscience a darned sight worse. Seems like I'm peppered with 'em."

He had promised Rhoda to pave the way for her but the stones that he set down were minute. Charity and forgiveness, he preached to David, were the cardinal virtues, to which David smiled unsuspectingly and asked him if he was figuring on going into the ministry.

"It's just this, Dave," pleaded Elijah swallowing, "you got to die some time and it behooves you to set your house in order. You don't want to go harboring no ill-feeling toward any livin' soul——"

"Oh, shucks," said David in mild irritation, "just because I went, like a fool, and told you that nonsense last summer——"

"Don't you go gettin' hoity-toity," recommended Elijah hotly, "even if you are holdin' your own!"

"Oh, all right then, I'm goin' to die, but don't for Heaven's sake keep twittin' me of it, an' don't go pullin' any long faces around me."

"Is it pullin' a long face to remind you that——"

"Remind your granny! No man can say I haven't lived a good life," contended David, and added scrupulously, with a grin, "*according to my lights!*"

"Then you're pop sure that in your heart o' hearts you harbor no grudge, you've forgiven all whoever trespassed against you—even—even your wife, Dave!"

David started and frowned, quick to resent the intrusion of what had always been a closed subject between them. Elijah anticipated that at last they had come to a show-down, and his heart quickened its pace. He

thought excitedly, "As well now as any time—as well have it over once and for all—" But to his surprise and chagrin David was in a mood of stubborn cheer that day where he refused to be ruffled.

"Oh, as for that I forgave her long ago," he said with an air of terminating the talk, but he added grimly, "we only withhold forgiveness where we still love."

And there was Elijah, jolted, handed this pithy conclusion to digest at leisure. "We only withhold forgiveness where we still love." David's serene disposal of the subject filled him with foreboding. It was difficult to beg quarter for one so far relegated to the past as Rhoda had been. Elijah, all these years tacitly sympathizing with his friend's trouble, had not known to what extent he had won clear of it. All his preconceived *modus operandi* would have to be revised before it became practical.

He would need to rekindle in David the old sore resentment before he could plead with him to take her back into his heart. He would need to approach it from that angle. But when a man makes the gesture of healthy magnanimity as David had done, how is one to drag him back into the sick welter of bondage? Elijah did not know, and his confusion was great.

It was in the temperature of his low spirits that he went to report to Rhoda that evening, having stopped on the way to buy her a peace offering. Now, Elijah, in his impulse of giving had exercised what he believed to be discretion. His conviction was that certain gifts more than others were imbued with personal significance. He had remembered hearing Sarah once say that a young lady of her acquaintance had compromised herself by accepting an umbrella from a man that she did not marry. Though it was continually

snowing, he had given Mrs. Burchard no umbrella. But he had made her other donations. And now in the candy shop he bent over pink and yellow bonbons in fluted papers and as wisely rejected them. They suggested young love. But there was peanut brittle, a sturdy confection for middle age. He purchased two pounds of peanut brittle.

He took his package under his arm, and walking thriftily to save car-fare, he made his way to the cottage on John Street. Great indeed would have been his perturbation could he have known that his faithful Hannah, now swept clean from her moorings by the fierce gale of her suspicion, was following him. All during supper that night had he betrayed "symptoms," and when he took up his hat to leave, Hannah had decided desperately that she must know his destination. She had gotten into her coat, had donned it over a white kitchen apron, had pinned on her hat, back side to, and with monstrous audacity had followed him. Once he had entered a shop and she had waited till he emerged carrying a bundle. The walk was interminable and Hannah was troubled with chilblains and swollen ankles; it seemed like fate that he should strike out at that smart pace and never vary it the entire way. But she bore her fatigue with the fortitude of a woman where there are great issues at stake. And she saw with her two eyes, her own two eyes, where he turned in at the gate of the old Wellington Place. And she went home in that state of outraged mind that borders on ecstasy. She went home, mad in her license, and attacking the absent Elijah's desk, read everything it contained in the nature of a personal communication. But there Elijah had been wary of his Hannah and all the letters which he had received from Mrs. Burchard

were safely locked into his strong box. She found but one tell-tale document to confound him,—his daybook in which he was accustomed to make entries of all that he spent. There, on a special page, under no heading ran a neat column, which read cryptically as follows:

One patent egg-beater.
One canary plus cage.
One basket fruit.
One electrical foot-warmer.

There were no prices attached and she interpreted the items as memory notes— When Elijah returned late that evening he went straight to his desk as Hannah had anticipated and finding the day book made in it another entry. It was “peanut brittle.”

Chapter XXIV

I

THE second time that Rolf had called upon Mrs. Burchard he had said in semi-apology, "This is in the way of becoming a habit——"

But later he had ceased to apologize for the impulse which drew him there. Her naturalness was a snare into which he fell easily. He told himself that there was a big feeling between them; he was uncramped by the friendship. He suffered no exactions and was free to remain away from her when he would. True, the kettle was always boiling on her tea table when he called in the afternoon, but Mrs. Burchard never said that she had been expecting him. Rather she would look up from her loneliness while he was divesting himself of his coat in the hall and, without rising, hold out her hand to him with a surprised exclamation of pleasure, "Ah, Sterling!" in the continental way. The high gesture of her welcome meant that she was accustomed to having her hand kissed, an idea which Rolf assimilated slowly. But after he had learned the trick of it he kissed her hand each time, and enjoyed his own gallantry.

Had his mind been less preoccupied it might have occurred to him to wonder strenuously what had really brought a woman of her type to Wedgewater. Since she was careful to shun her neighbors, and avoided the

forming of any social ties, there seemed very little object in her settling down there for the winter. Her entirely frank manner disarmed his curiosity, so too did her habit, when infrequently the conversation became personal, of turning it upon Rolf.

"Your wife must be very proud of you?" she said once, and noted his start of discomfort.

"Proud? Well, I don't know. . . . Yes, I dare say," and he added involuntarily, "not that success means much to the Harlows——"

Mrs. Burchard's eyes were lowered. She was obliged to curb her excitement each time that he spoke of them.

"How do you mean?"

"They despise the material standard," said Rolf, not without bitterness.

She laughed with a tinge of ridicule.

"But from what Elijah has told me your father-in-law has never, you might say, made his mark."

Rolf hung over the fire, his face congested by heavy feeling.

"My father-in-law," he answered, "belongs to the old school. I'm afraid he's been something of a groover."

"Ah, there you have it," she exclaimed lightly. "Isn't it the habit of failure to disparage success?"

He looked at her dully, a numb look out of the subconscious.

"That's what I've sometimes thought. But my father-in-law is an inventor. He's evolved a valve and valve gear to be used on the engine we manufacture, given years to it. And now the company has about decided to take it over from him. That's the kind of success that counts with Muffet, my wife. Not so much the

financial end of it as what the struggle stands for. Her father has always stood in her eyes as a demigod."

"What about Mrs. Sterling's mother?"

Rhoda's breath came hard.

"Her mother? Still living, I believe, but separated from them years ago. Ridiculous as it seems, I know nothing about her. Only—what I deduce——"

"And what," she asked unevenly, "is that?"

"That she was thoroughly unworthy," said Rolf, shaking his head.

"Oh!" The faintest flush was in her face, high under the roots of her fair hair. "Mayn't I—mayn't I fill your cup?"

Rolf stared. He laughed with some embarrassment.

"If you will be so kind. I wonder how I got started on the family skeletons."

"We were speaking of you," she reminded him, biting her lip. "The things you have done and intend doing."

Hitherto men who talked only business had seemed to Rhoda bourgeois, but she derived a certain stimulation, a certain vicarious pleasure from Rolf's discussion of his business problems. She thrilled to the muscle of a mind at grapple with sinewy competition. Oh, he would be rich and a power in that town before he died. If she had married a man of his acquisitive type she could have afforded to overlook his little crudities. As it was, she still had the hope of gaining much from Rolf. It would have been a blow to Elijah's childlike obtuseness could he have known that the report of Sterling's progress was in the back of Rhoda's mind before ever she came to Wedgewater, the thought of benefits accruing were she to be reunited with the family. David she despised as possessing the snobbery of the weak—but she would go mildly back to David in

order that she might partake of the glamor of that household. Knowing Sterling as she now did, and secure in her power over him, she felt certain that he would champion her cause. Just at first perhaps he would resent the trick she had played—but later he would rally to her support. He would look to her to plead his cause with Muffet. Rhoda's divinations were acute; without his ever having confided in her the domestic situation, she knew it in detail. Rhoda had been ostracized by David—Muffet, the difficult minx, had flouted Rolf's affection. It was highly fitting that they should unite. . . .

II

One spacious moonlit evening Elijah presented himself at David's house for the great confession. He had walked out from Wedgewater in a curious, detached way, one pocket bulging with the bottle of dandelion wine which he was bringing to the old friend in whose personal affairs he had become so deeply involved. The sky was full of the wild shrapnel of stars. Snow lay underfoot, yellow in the arc lights of the street, but blue beyond where the electricity ended. Shadows were frequent and flowing, blue-black like ink spilled from a bottle. The voices of youngsters sliding down hill sounded hollow and musical on the cold air. The bay was cut clean from the land and that too was filled with ink. A jolly evening, no doubt, to some, but to Elijah—unspeakable. He trudged on guiltily, sweating with his thoughts, trying to get a wretched crowd of words to march like soldiers, drilling and drilling them. . . . No luck, no success, always

some of them out of step. . . . Raw recruits, a derelict army.

He came to the Harlow house, now known as "the Sterling place," posing in the appellation "Elmhurst" like a pretty woman in a dowdy hat, he came to the house, saw it spangled with lights, and remembered his long years of association with it. Secure friendship, mutually trusting. That was what had been between Dave and him. With trepidation he mounted the steps. He had not troubled to lift the knocker in the old times, but now there was a bell which might feel slighted if he ignored it. A new, regulation maid came to the door—no longer Vannie lumbering out from the kitchen and tying her apron as she did so. The old order had changed. The new, neat maid showed him into the familiar room which he accepted with an air of seeing for the first time. In deep depression he sat down and waited, and was only faintly restored when David, hatless, with his coat collar turned up high, came in from the workshop, a long scroll of whittlings over his shoulder. Elijah could see that the maid, an excellently trained one, gave old David a sniffy look as he passed her, noting the condition of his clothes and the track his boots were leaving across the floor.

Elijah grasped his friend's hand.

"I—I thought I would drop round to see you, Dave!"

"So I see," was the genial greeting, "so I see. Well, I'm at work, 'Lije, and as I—I don't feel so much at home now the house has been changed, suppose we step out to the shop. We can visit there."

"Just the thing," agreed Elijah nervously.

"And I'll go right on with what I'm doing," promised David informally. "It's some time since you've been over. I'm anxious to show you the model com-

plete. I'm giving a demonstration to the board of directors the end of the week. Yes sir, 'Lije, old boy, I've got the thing now about where I want it——"

But Elijah had no intention of letting him go off at a tangent. To David's dismay he proved but an indifferent audience; for once he was dull to the beauties of the smooth mechanism. The effort that it had cost him to come was too great.

"See here, Dave," he took him by the arm at last, "just you let go your hobby a little while an' tend strictly to me," and he led him toward one of the broken, splint-bottom chairs by the stove where they were wont to smoke their pipes winter evenings.

"Tend to you?" protested David jocularly. "Guess you think you're playing the prima donna this evening, eh?"

"Primy donny or nothin', Dave, I'm determined to thresh out with you a thing I've had in mind till it's fair driven me loony. Now draw up your chair and get comfortable and promise me you'll look on't with an open mind an' not go cuttin' up didoes like a nervy boy. Promise me you'll keep calm and collected."

David having stuffed tobacco into a calabash pipe, was drawing up the string of the bag with his teeth. His mouth was very merry, very sweet. Every line of his face was a genial and kindly and humorous one, and Elijah thought suddenly of how he loved his friend, his careless, eccentric, but always irresistible companion.

"You must be goin' to extract a tooth or something, 'Lije," chuckled David, "but whatever designs you may have on my innocence, I promise to be calm. Calm now and collected later—like Murphy was after the explosion."

He applied a match to his pipe, shook it out and tossed it into the fire.

"Well," he signaled, cocking an amused eye at Elijah and taking the first long pull, "fire away with it, but don't be long. I've always stood out for quick courtship, painless dentistry, and the kind of photographs that are finished while you wait."

"Dave," sighed Elijah, withering in his friend's humor, "darned if you don't make it hard——"

"Come, come," recommended David, "take a long breath, count three and——" He broke off, arrested by the haunted look in Elijah's eyes. A feeling of irritation was gradually growing in him; he began really to suspect that Elijah was a messenger of bad tidings. "See here," he burst out fretfully, "is it something to do with little Miss Muffet?"

Elijah shook his head.

"Or the engine?"

"No."

"Then I don't care," declared David with an assumption of ease, but he continued to gaze at Elijah suspiciously. "What's on your mind?"

"It's a long story, Dave," began Elijah, clearing his voice, which was raspy of edge like a buzz-saw. "It begins back, way back at the time Muffet was married. . . ."

"Well?"

"It begins with a letter I received at that time."

"You don't say." David was tense, leaning forward on his elbows. "And who could have written you about—her?"

"Dave," said Elijah solemnly, lowering his voice, "can't you guess?"

"No," jerked out David nervously, and almost thundered a second "No!"

He fixed Elijah with a tormented eye.

"Your wife," whispered Elijah, and went to pieces in his chair, a bundle of convulsive twitchings.

"You mean Rhoda Harlow," amended David deliberately. His voice was loud and firm, though his face had paled perceptibly.

"I mean Rhoda Harlow," repeated Elijah who had no mind to quibble over split hairs. And he laid before David the import of her letter.

"Hm," was the comment, "all for show."

"But she continued to write," hastened Elijah, flushing, "she continued to be interested!"

"You mean you continued to correspond."

The deadly directness of the accusation made Elijah cower. It would be difficult, difficult to explain that part of it. . . . It was difficult. . . . He sought to marshal his reserves, his trained army of words, and the cowardly recruits were hiding behind stone walls. He had to admit limply that he was drawn into correspondence with her.

"But for what purpose?" David harrowed him, "for what purpose? I take it there was a motive underlying her—homesickness?"

"The only motive that would underlie homesickness," Elijah was rather proud of his comeback, "*she wanted to return home!*"

"Hah!" The fierce ejaculation from those mild lips surprised Elijah more than profanity would have done. David was out of his chair and pacing the cramped room in leonine passion. Once he said, "She wanted to come home!" and opened his lips to laugh, but a thought struck him between the brows and his face

went dark again in anger. Elijah stayed cowering by the stove in his low chair, his hand drawn low between his shoulders like that of a hunch-back, his fingers crawling up and down the arms of his chair. Once he protested stoutly,

"If that's how you take it, Dave Harlow, you need expect to hear no more from me. You're the judge and jury and executioner in one. . . ."

"I'm the administrator of my own affairs," the other warned from his pacing, but when the two had come to a deadlock David returned to his chair and sat down wearily. "What now? What came of her wheedling?—for of course she wheedled. I could even tell you the angle she took. You see I know her so well."

"Ah, Dave," mourned his friend, "I had no idea you were so bitter. God forgive me if I've acted against you."

They sat forward in their chairs, a growing recognition of trouble showing in their eyes.

"You must remember," pleaded Elijah, "that I never had any of the facts of the quarrel between you, nothing authentic. I knew that at first you suffered, Dave, suffered hard, before Muffet was old enough to be of comfort. How could I guess that all your old feeling for Rhoda had died?"

"Did I act, did I look like a man mourning his wife?" demanded David harshly. "No, because it was borne in upon me gradually that in honesty of intention she had never been my wife, only an unscrupulous adventuress going from incident to incident. When I realized *that*; I was able to put her from me altogether. Then too I had Muffet. The laws of compensation are kind."

"Yes," agreed Elijah with a touch of cynicism, "it

has all turned out very well for you. But consider, if you please, what exile has done for Rhoda. After all, she is still legally your wife, the woman you vowed to protect——”

“Elijah,” said David gravely, “you are an orthodox churchman—I am not. I say ‘wife’ fiddlesticks! It so happens that by a technicality of law she still bears the name ‘Harlow,’ and I’ve seen to it all these years that she wanted for nothing in the way of material comforts. I’ve denied myself of every luxury, and worse than all, I’ve denied my child for her——” His voice rose trembling, “but I don’t pretend that it was for love. No, it was to keep her selfishness content, and away from us, away from Muffet. I couldn’t risk the contagion of her influence, ’Lije, I couldn’t risk that with my daughter. You must have seen how carefully at first I corrected the false standards that were her heritage from her mother. You must have seen how I taught her to despise luxury as effete, to abhor deception and show, never to be taken in by the glittering thing, never to become self-seeking.”

To Elijah’s mind appeared the picture of Rhoda Harlow, low-voiced and elegant, beside her tea-table, and in simple infatuation he dwelt upon her candid utterances, her wistful plea for reinstatement. This Rhoda whom David described was certainly another woman, the figure of a warped imagination. Elijah held up a protesting hand, light breaking in his eyes.

“Suppose I prove to you,” he proposed rashly, “that you’re unjust, that you’ve dwelt on her faults till she’s come to seem a monstrous woman in your eyes, even physically distorted.”

His earnestness wrung a laugh from David.

“Oh, Elijah, my innocent! As if I didn’t know all

about her fine, delicate pose of an aristocrat—
You'll have to show me something that goes deeper."

"Her real friendlessness then."

"The traitor is ever without friends——"

"Then that's the only reply you have for her. Then I can go to her to-night and tell her——"

"To-night?" David flew at the word and held it for verification. Great beads of perspiration bedewed his forehead as he got slowly out of his chair. His broad-shouldered, slouchy figure in its ill-fitting clothes seemed to sway and tower over that of his friend, diminutive in his seat by the stove. "Where," he asked "is Rhoda Harlow?" and hung above Elijah like a dark cloud.

The moment lengthened into an eternity; Elijah's eyes strained from his head, his mouth sagged open, beseeching time, but David was in no mood to yield quarter.

"Where," he demanded a second time, "is Rhoda Harlow?"

And the other, in mortal terror for his soul, pronounced the two words, "In Wedgewater." After a little he besought, like a child, "Please, please, will you listen, will you believe she insisted upon coming and I did no more than promise to speak to you, I did no more than that, and the whole thing's been a cross to me, Dave, a terrible cross. . . ."

But the miserable scuttling words had not even penetrated the other's consciousness, which had stopped assimilating with the shock of the first statement. Rhoda Harlow was in Wedgewater. After a time he got a little further in his comprehension,—Elijah had brought her there, been her tool. Elijah saw in his face the revelation of his horror, saw that he believed him-

self betrayed, and burst out again with hot tears stinging his eyes.

"I only thought if you could see her—you could afford to be generous. And you have told me yourself that your days are numbered——"

"Ay," said David dully, nodding his heavy head, his eyes bloodshot, "be that as it may, I'll die with no Jezebel in my home. I'll see that my daughter lives uncontaminated!"

In the intensity of his feeling he reached down and gripped Elijah by the shoulder.

"Do you know that in coming here she has broken her promise, violated the compact we made when I let her keep the name of Harlow, when she hadn't a shred of reputation? It was all that I asked of her in return for my name and my support—that she should stay away and leave Muffet to me. She was glad to take that oath, I can tell you." His face had gone old and ashen, and he was trembling all over like one in palsy.

"But she came under the name of Burchard," murmured Elijah wonderingly. "I was given to understand that——"

"She was careful to rouse no suspicion," interrupted Harlow. "That would be Rhoda, famous for her aliases. Well, I tell you they don't interest me." He took a fresh grip of Elijah's shoulder, his fingers penetrating fiercely into the flabby muscle till an expression of pain contorted the little man's face. "As for you," he said with grim amusement, "do you know what your fate will be when Rhoda's through with you, when she's had her will of you and wrung you dry?"

Elijah shook his head. His mouth opened wanly like that of a goldfish.

"No," he admitted miserably, "what?"

"She'll kick you daintily into Kingdom Come," David's laugh was terrible and uproarious, "as she did me, as she has all the men and women who ever lent themselves to her schemes of aggrandizement."

He released Elijah with one contemptuous shove which sent him, chair and all, careening.

"But to think she remembered *you*, the butt of jests, *you*, Elijah Moore, dirt under her feet—" He continued to laugh till his mirth took the turn of melancholy. "And to think that you, Elijah, my friend, my brother, all these years so close to my heart——"

He broke off laboring for breath.

"Well, it's finished to-day. Get out of here. Go and tell her—" He choked between tears and laughter, a drunken light in his eyes, "Go and tell her what I've said to you."

All at once he was obliged to lean against the wall.

"But, Dave," cried Elijah in heart-break, "you can't turn me out, like this, after all these years. You can't turn me out."

He crept closer, his eyes full of tears, one supplicating hand outheld. But David struck it down with a brilliant smile.

"I want none of your friendship, Elijah Moore, and none of you. Are you going to stay where you're not wanted?"

He leaned panting against the wall.

"But, Dave, I never meant to hurt you——"

"Leave this house," bellowed David, "get out of it. Do you hear? I never want to see you again so long as I live."

And there was moonlight on snow, and across its pitiless illumination Elijah went, brokenly, a little old man, sobbing. . . .

Chapter XXV

I

ON the eve of the day set for the final demonstration of David's patent Rolf returned from the factory to find father and daughter in a state of suppressed excitement. Muffet had spent the entire afternoon with her father in the shop, sharing his hopes and anxiety. When they came to the dinner table they had themselves well in hand, but it was this very look of immense reservation that smote upon Rolf powerfully. True, it was he who had put the inventor in the way of being successful but that had happened long ago, before the inception of his real grievance against the other. He had befriended David Harlow and in return what had David Harlow done for him? Continued to live coolly along beside them, demanding and receiving all the love that Muffet had to give, by sly ridicule often making it seem that Rolf, and his place in the community, were worthless according to his own exquisite standards.

If the invention, a major one of its kind, were taken over, and there was scarcely a doubt but that it would be, David might be made independent for the rest of his life. Rolf could no longer triumph by dint of accomplishment. Success is symbolic; if father and daughter had felt his condescension David's triumph would reinstate them with themselves, and Rolf thought, "The

old man will go then. Who knows but he planned it from the first, using my shoulders as a platform? Who knows but he'll take her from me?"

When the meal was ended David excused himself and returned to the shop. Muffet, with vagrant eyes, followed Rolf into the pretty living room whose light walls were pink with fire-glow like the inside of a shell. They moved to the two chairs before the fire and sat down in them, Muffet nervous and unnatural, Rolf, thinking irritably.

"She hopes I'll go out. Married less than a year. What a life!"

He turned hot, inquisitorial eyes upon her, noting for the first time that she had not dressed for evening as was her custom but still wore a boyish frock of serge narrowly belted in gray leather. At the neck it rolled back jauntily in gladness for just the kind of throat that was hers, strong, yet slender with a clear defined chin. Her hair was swept heroically from her brow as though she had brushed it back in a gesture of thought. She felt Rolf's look upon her and apologized hastily.

"I'm afraid you don't like this dress for evening. I should have changed but I stayed in the shop too late."

"The dress is well enough," he answered coldly, thinking how he adored her in it, thinking how he loved her hands out of the tight cuffs, hands that stayed brown all the year and suggested gardens and beaches, but never ballrooms, thinking how he wanted to put his head in her lap and kiss them.

"Well, to-morrow's the day," he observed idly for the pain of seeing her blush and brighten.

"The day our ship comes in. I shan't sleep a wink, I know."

"I daresay you'll be very anxious."

"But there isn't a doubt really—" she turned her radiant face upon him. "Say you don't think there's a doubt, Rolf!"

He appeared to ponder.

"After all, how can I say? I sometimes feel I can hardly comprehend what the whole thing means to you. . . ."

"Means?"

"Yes," he played with her cruelly, "what if it doesn't go through?"

"Oh," she moaned, clasping her hands in the extremity of the thought.

"We'd go on just the same," he urged smoothly. "We have everything we need, you and I, and we make a home for your father. After all he's an old man——"

She stared at him in pain, the fires of her vitality gone low.

"I suppose—we—would," she nodded almost lifelessly.

There was a silence while he gazed into the fire, his fears racing, his senses tingling to know the worst, to be hurt himself or to inflict hurt upon her, anything that would clarify the fog of their relationship.

"On the other hand," he rallied her with a loud suddenness, "you stand every chance to win, nine out of ten, I'll say, and if this is the dearest wish of your heart, then it's more than likely you'll walk crowned with it. I believe it means more to you than anything I ever have or ever shall be able to give you——"

"Oh, Rolf," she protested painfully, and arranging her words with care, "it's just that Father needs success to round out his life; he thinks he needs it in order to justify my faith in him. Can't you see? Then too

we won't feel such—such—” she searched for a word and culled an unfortunate one, “such dependents!”

His face burned excruciatingly.

“Is it natural, normal for a woman to resent her husband's support?” he burst out in passion, all his suspicions, his suppressed anger gaining headway over his control.

“Perhaps not,” she answered with a troubled look.

“But you *do* admit that's how you feel. At the bottom of all your anxiety about the engine is—is the hope of a way to end obligations,” and to himself he groaned, “Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God. Now, she'll say it isn't so—and I'll know it's a lie,” but as he waited sweat bathed his body. “What if she says it *is*?”

Muffet presented the picture of the finely wrought woman, to whom inharmonious crises spell deepest pain, but the kind of woman who fights the more valiantly for her disinclination. Alone amid principles, she is sexless and unafraid, she is a principle, and the man fears that formidable beauty in her eyes for that it is become her matchless weapon. They are unequal in the combat. The man's fight is passionately personal; the woman's, strangely enough, one of ethics.

“Rolf, I'm sorry that I put it crudely,” it was Muffet's voice, Muffet's mind making great decisions. “I hate hurting you, but since you insist on discussing our personal problems let's do it fairly. You have just said that it isn't normal for a woman to resent her husband's support, and I suppose the answer is that in normal marriages the woman never does. I don't know much about marriage in general but my intuition tells me that there is something quite wrong with ours.” She shook her head ruefully, “quite, quite wrong.”

"I'm not ready to agree to that." His protest was acute.

She gave him a measuring look.

"You're afraid to be honest. No, Rolf, each of us is in a false position. You have thought all along that, because I gave no sign, I was content with the muddle, or that I didn't understand how horribly we've failed. I have understood better than you think. I've known you were keenly disappointed. I've known I made you no adequate return as a wife. And it's not as though I haven't tried. In the beginning I'm sure that both of us did. Perhaps that was the mistake we made, trying so hard when we should have felt easy and effortless." She spoke in slow travail. "I don't know how to explain it, Rolf, without that wretched word 'incompatibility' they use in divorce proceedings——"

"Stop," he almost shouted.

She made a sad little mouth and broke into hysteria. "We don't think the same about anything, people or God or—or cats!"

Her laughter stung him to frenzy. Something told him that she would go on explaining and expounding a remedy—bitter medicine for him to drink. He dared not let her go on, nor would he permit her to see how it was with him. So he got out of his chair with a pitiable dignity, towered above her and spluttered in anger,

"I think I have heard you say enough for one evening! I think I prefer to go where a different sort of welcome awaits me. It never occurred to you, I suppose, that there may be other women to whom my society is not—distasteful?"

"Other women, Rolf?" The idea seemed strange to her. When their relationship had been most strained it had not occurred to her to think that she might find

solace in the companionship of another man. A delicate color crept painfully into her cheeks. At last she nodded, "I see. That is what would happen," and she brooded deeper in her chair, nodding like a child accustomed itself to a harsh fact. "That is what would happen," she repeated again.

"Of course," said Rolf, studying her, and laughed. "That is what *always* happens!" and he went into the hall and began getting briskly into his coat.

But Muffet did not follow him. She remained in her seat by the fire, turning over in her mind the difficult knowledge. "Rolf—other women." Her aversion to the idea was one unrelated to jealousy. It had to do with an immaculate pride and the humanitarian feeling that he needed to be saved from himself. Several times she made as though to rise but resisted the impulse. And presently he was gone. She heard the closing of the outer door and Rolf's car as it left the garage.

II

There was no mistake about it. The small scuttling figure which Rolf overtook at Mrs. Burchard's gate was Elijah Moore. Although the hour was early he had paid his call and was leaving. It was obvious that, recognizing Rolf, he had no mind to be detained by him. It seemed to Rolf also that his flying coat-tails and his windy pace indicated something more than his usual nervousness. But oddest of all was the thing he carried in his hand, some circular encumbrance shrouded in what appeared to be a dark shawl. As Rolf watched him skimming along like a witch on a broom stick it occurred to him for the first time to wonder about the

friendship between the worldly woman and the flimsy little man. Since they had no tastes in common there must exist a special motive for their meetings but one which, for the life of him, he could not imagine. Absorbed in his conjectures, he momentarily forgot the object of his own visit. Then his soreness returned and shrugging a mental shoulder he stepped recklessly to the sidewalk.

Still smarting with the memory of the scene at home, he was in desperate need of solace. He thought of Mrs. Burchard and her femininity hungrily and he came to her without reservation. As he waited on the windy step the gale of his grievances swept over him and he felt his face hot and angry, his eyes seared like eyes that have felt the sting of sand. The minutes seemed hours. Then Mrs. Burchard's maid opened the door.

"Please, she's not in," she said with palpable falsehood, then amended blandly, "at least she's not seeing any one else this evening."

Rolf's face fell.

"But she might make an exception of me, don't you think?" His innocent vanity reasserted itself. "Anyhow, if you don't mind, I'd like her to know I'm here."

The maid appeared uncertain.

"I'll tell her what you say, Sir," and she left him in the hall.

He waited, with a sense of desolation, thinking he could not bear it if he were turned away from the house where he had received always the securest welcome. But the maid returned with smiles.

"She says she will see you, Sir, if you will wait."

"Thanks." He took off his coat and lounged familiarly into the shallow, unpretentious room, all wicker

and chintz coverings. Although he could not have told in just what way, it bore marks of a recent interview. As he waited, identifying with pleasure each familiar object, he noticed that the canary cage, once conspicuous in the window, was gone. Perhaps the little honey-colored singer had died. Then he recalled the bulky object that Elijah Moore had been carrying down the street.

When Mrs. Burchard entered it was with her accustomed grace but a new and indefinable something in her manner kindred to his own high-keyed state of mind. He saw at once that something had happened to ruffle her, to strain that even tenor of breeding habitual with her. Also that, being unusually pale perhaps, she had used a little make-up on her cheeks and lips. She looked brilliant with a hard animation, she looked as Rolf might have looked that evening had he been a woman taking his humiliation in the same way. He thought that it was a curious coincidence finding her so; he was morbid to exaggerate the bond between them.

He took Mrs. Burchard's hand and kissed it and she sensed in his silent salute his great unhappiness, the more poignant in that his nature was inarticulate. But to-night he was fevered to talk—he must talk or go out of his senses through fear and self-pity.

"This is a surprise," she said with light irony when they were seated on the chintz-covered divan under the umbrella lamp. She indicated the low stand before them whereon was always a choice of foreign or domestic cigarettes, and to-night liqueur in a pair of lustrous gold decanters.

"This is a surprise," she repeated, at his nod, filling a little glass with Benedictine. "If I recall this is the first of your precious evenings vouchsafed to me.

‘What says the married man?’” It was proof of her lawless mood that she dared deal in sarcasm, proof of his that he showed no resentment.

He drank rather than sipped the liqueur.

“That he’s not so much married as he thought,” was the wry answer. He relinquished the frail glass and found a cigarette with fumbling fingers. She was whimsical to light it for him.

“No?” her lips curled in amusement. “To discover the exact extent to which one is married is always amusing, is it not? Have you come to tell me about it?”

“No,” said Sterling, but rested his harrassed eyes upon her, her grace and audacity assuaging him. “You—wouldn’t—understand—Oh the devil, I don’t mean that at all. I mean of course that you would understand better than any one in the world, but that I can’t tell you because I don’t know. Besides I’d feel a rotter.”

She looked at him almost with a wild gayety.

“Sterling,” she said, in the new, daring vein, “you are a dull dog and I adore you!” She threw back her head and laughed. “You are the stupidest man I know and the best looking. Is—is your wife so unintelligent?”

He looked at her with confused and beaten eyes. Her perceptions disconcerted him. At the same time he was pathetically anxious for her sympathy. Oh, she was a woman, omniscient, and his manhood had been so punished.

“My wife doesn’t love me,” he blurted, his flesh heavy with sorrow, his forehead, his brooding hands full of blood. And he added oddly, “What shall I do?”

Mrs. Burchard ceased laughing and appeared to ponder.

"Perhaps she comes of an unloving race," she hazarded the guess, taking a cigarette for counsel. "What are they like, these Harlows, *père et fille*, what is she like, this unintelligent wife of yours?" and settled herself for sleek enjoyment. "Do you know," she went into a drawl, "I doubt if I've even heard her name."

"Her name is Muffet."

"Very quaint, very pretty, but her real name, I mean," and as he stared at her without answering, "of course that's just a love-name, given her when she was a child, but she must have another."

Rolf was troubled.

"I've never heard it."

"But you dear, dull person—" She put her hand affectionately over his, and he found it a comfort, would not let it go.

"I've never heard any other," he repeated, mystified.

"Not by any chance the name 'Rhoda'?"

There was a welling humor in her eyes which he did not understand, did not understand at all.

"No," he said, "that name's new to me. Whose is it?"

She laughed carelessly.

"It happens to be mine. I was thinking what a great coincidence if it was also hers."

He looked at her befoggedly.

"I don't quite see how that could be. No, her name's Muffet."

Mrs. Burchard controlled the ineffable little joke she was having with herself. She turned it into whimsy. "Little Miss Muffet, she sat on a tuffet eating her curds and whey," and she repeated the old nursery rhyme, adding with a sigh, "My sympathies are entirely with the spider, my sympathies are with you, my

poor Sterling. I'm sure you've done nothing but try to be sociable."

Sterling winced.

"It's all very well to be facetious," he objected, "but in reality there's no comic element in it," and with entire innocence he told her of the Harlows, from the beginning to the present phase of his association with them. For the first time in his life he was emancipated from self-consciousness; a sluice gate had been lowered and the freshet was escaping. He dwelt upon the grief that his father-in-law had robbed him of his wife's affection by superimposing himself upon her vision as the greater man of the two.

"When this invention of his is taken over there'll be no question of who stands first in her eyes. Oh, don't you see?" he appealed urgently. "She'll be lost to me for good."

Mrs. Burchard nodded abstractedly.

The look in his eyes was so stricken that it emboldened her to any venture.

"My poor Sterling, I see what you mean. I see exactly what you mean. No, you must hold on to her, you must make yourself first!"

She sat upright with a vivid energy, her cheeks taking on color beneath their superficial rouge.

"You say this love you have for her is bigger than other considerations?"

He nodded, brooding into the fire, his hands corded about his knees.

"And when," asked Mrs. Burchard softly, "will the business of David Harlow be decided?"

"To-morrow. Oh, there's not a question that his work is valid. It fills a long-felt need. It will revolutionize the manufacture of our type of engine."

A fierce excitement lit her face; her slender hand in its fragile sleeve of chiffon stiffened in his.

"Sterling," she said unevenly, "something must be done about to-morrow."

"Done?"

"Something must be done."

"I'm afraid I don't understand you."

"It ought," she breathed, "to be simple enough. If you could effect a delay—bring about even a slight postponement by causing something to go wrong with the model——"

She was so close to him that he could feel her warm, conspiratorial breath on his cheek. She smelled of jasmine and her very words seemed disguised in fragrance. They affected him insidiously. For a moment he was conscious only of a slipping, an easy slipping into some realm of drugged security. Out of its toils he sprang in fictitious rage.

"Do you know what you are suggesting? Is it possible that you think me capable of such an act?"

He was on his feet before her, working himself into a suitable passion.

"Let me tell you that you make a grave mistake." He thrust his fingers into his collar as though seeking greater latitude for his indignation. He appeared to regard her severely. "I can't believe that this thought comes from you."

But Mrs. Burchard remained imperturbable. She leaned back against her cushions with a sleepy smile in her eyes and along her lips. Not once did she move or vary her expression the while he was raving. Nor did she allow herself to be stabbed by a word. Having planted her one little seed in the man's sick mind, she stayed content.

"That," wound up Sterling, "would be resorting to methods I scorn to use. I see that you entirely misunderstood me and as there is nothing further to be said I think I shall be going."

Sleepily she smiled. Her smile was a penetration. He rioted against it but could not make it go in. He betook himself to the hall and humped into his coat. He turned back for another look, still virtue manifest. Mrs. Burchard lolled serenely. And as he opened the outer door he heard her sardonic chant,

"The stupidest man I know and the best looking."

Chapter XXVI

I

THE house appeared somnolent when Rolf returned to it. No light showed save the one left burning for him in the downstairs hall. Muffet, her father and the servants had retired. He stood in the dampish night after putting his car in the garage, and looked up at the windows, saying to himself with a sneer, "Birdwood, Elmhurst . . . Elmhurst, *not* Birdwood. Well, what does either of them signify?" He felt stunned by his sense of being an alien. He circled the house like a thief, pretending to himself that he did not know where he was going. But his feet were astute all the same and so too the brain that directed them. The snow had gone and the ground was soggy from the recent rains, yet the matted turf was so heavy that he left no tracks.

The workshop was locked, but he was quick to find the key in its innocent hiding place behind a blind. The shop was equipped with electricity now. He switched on a light, then hastily began covering the windows with a steamer rug and a piece of canvas that he found in a corner. David, outside his prescribed area of work, was a tramp for disorder. But perfect with a pristine splendor stood the miniature engine in readiness for the morrow. The floor shied away from it in a respectful square like a prize-fight ring and this much of the shop was scoured and shining.

Rolf's heart beat hard. He told himself that he had come merely to examine it, but deep within him was the seed that Mrs. Burchard had planted. "The stupidest man I know, Sterling." He could hear her insinuating drawl . . . and he could see her smile that refused to believe in his honesty of purpose, a goading smile, merry to make of him a criminal. Once he thought he heard a step outside and a tremor of guilt passed through him. When a coal fell in the stove he started like a nervous woman. He had done nothing in reality, he kept assuring himself, and since he was guilty only of temptation he was not guilty at all. He feigned an entire candor of interest as he examined the model in all its exquisite parts. It appealed to him like a poem; in his scientific eyes it was a thing of smooth seduction and beauty, of calculated charm; he understood David's infatuation for it, David in the rôle of Pygmalion. And as he continued to study it he became more and more excited over its certain conquest. Then his whole tense adulation fell to pieces. He went over to the stove and collapsed in a rickety chair to brood. David would have all this and, linked to his success, he would have Muffet. Rolf was wrung by jealousy. He pictured the progressive stages by which she would be wooed away from him, the triumph of her father's success, the growing sense of parental support in her break with Rolf, all the talk about the immorality of a loveless marriage, the high Harlow attitude. If he could only see her as undesirable his suffering would have been lessened, but during the long estrangement she had grown steadily in his eyes as the prize unspeakable, the one woman who could give him the happiness he craved. Endearing memories of her paraded before him, Muffet at parties on leash as his possession, Muffet gardening and handi-

capped by her horror of angleworms, Muffet waking in the morning and lifting her bare arms in gestures of yawning, and the way she had of falling to sleep at night, curled spinelessly round her pillow like a kitten, Muffet in a thousand moods and attitudes. Tears came to his eyes and were shed bitterly. He discovered himself weeping there alone in the night, and roused to avenge his own injury.

"God, no, I won't be beaten at this thing. I won't be a spectacle and a laughing stock. . . ."

A crude anger swept his soul and made him sob outright. When he stood the whole shop was blurred and careening like the deck of a ship and his head ached intolerably. Things were going through his brain like red hot rivets, hammer, hammer, hammer, and at first he could hear only the pound of them. But presently they were clarified as thoughts, logical ideas in fierce reiteration. "Here's your chance, take it . . . here's your chance, take it. . . ." He was propelled to the model motor in its neatly cleared space at the other end of the room. He was simply led there and shown it, as one Jesus Christ was shown the world by Satan from a hill-top. Then the busy little hammers began another lively tattoo. "Change the timing, change the timing, change the timing," and "Tamper with the parts. . . . You know what you can do, you know what you can do." It was curious that, having never dealt in trickery or fraud, these hints were glibly presented. And suddenly, without previous study or consideration, he did know what he could do to throw the mechanism out of tune. He laughed excitedly in his sobbing and looked about him for tools. It required a certain cool calculation to effect the result and his mind calmed to meet the emergency. He saw that behind an aluminum sheet

against the wall, buried save for their handles, were thrust the readier of David's implements. He reached for a wrench, but the wrench resisted him. Too many tools tightly packed. He used his strength to dislodge it. Then suddenly his impatience had its result. The nails which held the aluminum sprang out, the litter of tools fell to the floor and with them, zigzagging like a great moth, a square envelope. In the midst of his disgust the envelope arrested him; somewhere he had seen that stationery before, blue gray with a hair fiber. He picked it up, and read the superscription. David Harlow, postmarked over a year ago. He stood holding it in his hand, momentarily forgetting the disrupted tools. His mind sought other associations, was rewarded. Several days previous, at the factory, he had received a note from Mrs. Burchard. It accompanied the loan of a book on the old seafaring towns of the state. The same type of handwriting, similar stationery. Still it might be a coincidence. For what reason would Mrs. Burchard be writing his father-in-law? The same outlaw curiosity which had long ago caused Aunt Lu to tamper with David's correspondence, and fearing detection to secrete the letter in the first available hiding-place, impelled Rolf. He drew forth the sheet, skimmed it with growing amazement, was in possession of its content, and even then incredulous. He needed to assimilate slowly. This letter was from David Harlow's wife—not a doubt of it. It began, "Dear David—" It asked curtly if her allowance might be increased, and it was signed, "Rhoda Harlow."

"Rhoda"—that fabulous, almost fictitious name . . . Mrs. Burchard's name. But if she was really Mrs. Harlow, what was she doing in Wedgewater, where she was certain to be *déclassée*? His mind caught at rem-

nants of substantiation. She wished to live a sedentary life. She knew Elijah Moore. She clung to a manifestly incongruous friendship with him. Elijah Moore had cautioned him to say nothing of the friendship to David, under the pretense that he feared chaffing. What was it all *about*? What *was* it all about? Was she in reality Rhoda Harlow, the mysterious wife and mother whose name had been erased from the honor roll of Harlows? With a shock he remembered her suggestion about the motor, her sleepy, sinuous suggestion that he had been on the way to negotiating when the letter slipped into his hand. What if she had some personal motive for wishing to injure David Harlow? Suddenly he remembered David as he had seen him that first day in his home, where, surprising him in a new and admiring light, Rolf's efficient determination to dismiss him from the factory had gone down in shame. In his inmost soul he knew him a man incapable of ungentleness. No, if either had been at fault it was the wife. Rolf saw him, abandoned by the unstable woman he had married, patiently following his bent, with the selflessness of the scientist, dedicated to his work. That gift which Rolf was so well able to understand he had very nearly injured. But it was Mrs. Burchard, whose tool he had inadvertently become.

His shame and remorse were stronger than his jealousy had been. His greater vision embraced more than his own personal happiness and pride. To the victor the spoils! Let this work ride on! The exultation of his sadness made of his face a dream for marble.

But he wanted the truth above everything and hastily securing a nail and hammer he made a clumsy job of replacing the aluminum, tools and all. He thrust the letter in his pocket, turned out the light and in the dark-

ness tore away the covers from the windows. Five minutes later he was in his car on his way back to Wedgewater.

II

It was an improbable hour for the inhabitants of Wedgewater to be awakened. Nevertheless Rolf rang Elijah's doorbell without compunction, and waited till the little man's head was thrust out of an upstairs window.

"What's wanted?" sang out Elijah in a suspicious, nocturnal voice. Rolf could see his chilly head emerging in disorder from the white collar of his night-shirt.

"It's Sterling," he answered roughly. "Come down. I want to talk to you."

"Sterling? What brings you at this hour? Anything wrong at home?"

"Let me in and I'll tell you." The voice was impatient.

Elijah closed the window. He was unconscionably slow, but at last there was a candle-glimmer on the stair and a scarecrow in a red flannel wrapper opening the door for him.

"Why couldn't you have come a little earlier?" he asked peevishly. Rolf saw that there were dark ravages under his eyes and that the hand which held the candle was unsteady. "I've had a hard day all around. A hard day. And I have a hard day's work to-morrow."

"Oh, shut up," said Rolf, hardly knowing how he spoke. "I want to talk to you, I tell you."

"What now?" asked Elijah, making a light in the stuffy parlor and sitting down so that the bathrobe covered his pitiful, bare ankles.

Rolf sat in his overcoat and leaned to Elijah across the dusty table. And it occurred to Elijah that Rolf too had passed through some strange psychological experience.

"I want to know," said Sterling shortly, "everything there is to know about Mrs. Burchard."

Elijah stared back at him, going several shades whiter. The room was cold and his teeth chattered like a pair of castanets.

"And why is it any business of yours?"

There was a pause. Then Sterling answered directly, "I've been seeing a great deal of her."

Elijah laughed, a dry cluck in his throat.

"You too, then."

"What do you mean by 'you too'?"

Elijah made a gesture with his bony hand.

"I mean you and I and every man, flies, flies in the web." He looked as if he might burst into tears at any moment.

Rolf said, "I know what you mean, but, see here, you're all wrong so far as I'm concerned. I love my wife, no other woman."

"Then why were you seeing a good deal of her?"

"Why?" An immense gloom settled upon the younger man. "For the life of me I don't know. She had a certain magnetism—I was lonely——"

Elijah nodded. His eyes dwelt in Rolf's with a resigned melancholy.

"I've been in love with her all my life." The words seemed to shock him as much as they did his listener. "But I love Dave, too, and I know he was right and she was wrong. Solve that, if you can."

"Then she is—you are——" Rolf would have

laughed at the comic picture he made, only the little man's sorrow and amazement claimed his sympathy.

"And now," continued Elijah, "since I brought her to Wedgewater and have interceded with David to take her back, I've lost both of them. Dave kicked me out of his house and to-night when I told her what he said she called me 'a prehistoric animal.' She'll be gone to-morrow."

His eyes watered; they wandered helplessly about the room.

"I'll never see Rhoda Harlow again." The wistful tone faded. Suddenly a gust of indignation shook him. "And what's more, I want you to look at this." He opened a drawer in the table and drew out a sheet of unfolded paper. "I want you to look at this," and he thrust the paper in the line of Rolf's vision. "This is what I found when I came home this evening."

Rolf discovered thereon chirography of a vehement character, and read:

"ELIJAH:

"Don't think you have deceived me. I know about your carryings-on with the woman in John Street. I will not stay under your roof another night, nor darken your door again. You can find someone else to keep house for you.

"HANNAH."

A tentative smile stirred Rolf's lips.

"This was your housekeeper?"

Elijah nodded bitterly. "My wife's sister. I haven't had any dinner. Was ever a man so misjudged?"

"She did lay it on thick," sympathized Rolf, "'darken your door' . . . 'stay under your roof' . . ."

Elijah's lip quivered.

"Me," he mourned ludicrously, "a deacon of the church, a vestryman."

"Never mind," suggested Rolf, "come dress yourself and let's go eat," but Elijah shook his head in negation.

"Let's go drink then."

A wan light was kindled in the blinking, lugubrious eyes.

"That's different," the old fellow admitted, "I just wish I could forget the whole awful mess—even for five minutes."

III

Once he had Elijah beside him in the car a strange sense of unreality came over Rolf. The temporary respite from his own worries returned to him and he felt giddily that he must get out of the rôle of Rolf Sterling for the space of the night. He must sidestep himself in some new salutary manner; the idea of returning home at all became increasingly abhorrent. But in his furious search for freedom he was hampered by the temperate habits he had formed. He was not a man who could easily abandon himself to irresponsibility—too long had he been responsible. Naturally of a reserved nature, the impulse of escape was one to which he would respond awkwardly. And he fumed and fretted against the armor of his own building. He paced the confines of his spirit, suffering to be let out.

It was past midnight and the bar of the Mohawk was closed, but there were other places of a questionable character which defied the midnight law by the simple expedient of presenting one darkened eye while

another one was always winking. Such was Jake's saloon on Wedgewater Road, and thither they betook themselves, creating whispers of amazement among the smoky, slouching habitués with which the room was filled. At any normal time Rolf's dislike of the wretched place must have been pronounced, his impatience for the working men who spent their earnings in the stale atmosphere of drink and futile discussion. He had often seen them late at night as he drove down Wedgewater Road, slouching out of these convivial hells with their faces brutalized, and thought sententiously, "Fools. There's no helping them."

But to-night he was as surprised in them as they in him. He welcomed the sour reek of the room and the smoke-gray, swimming air as an atmosphere in which his individualism became merged and lost. He liked the crowdedness of it, both actual and implied, the jumbled talk in which his own could scarcely find elbow-room. He even liked the curious and sullen faces that questioned his presence there, incredulous, ironical. . . . The superior Sterling come down to a par with them! Sterling did not mind their attitude in the least. It was rather Elijah who minded it. Elijah's love of a nip was a dainty vice; he was no frequenter of saloons, and to-night his Sabbath face all but drew tears of mirth from the onlookers. He drank beer, as most of the factory men were doing, but his hand lifting the enormous mug was small and whitish like a girl's. He underwent a spasm of anxiety when he saw Rolf drinking whisky. Rolf was abstemious as an athlete in training; he had no more business than a babe to be starting in like this. It did not occur to Elijah that Rolf, savage for a gesture of abandon, had determined to get himself drunk.

"Best be going," said Elijah and he plucked the other's arm. "I'm through, Sterling." But Sterling stood at the bar, for the benefit of the congregated patrons, hopefully and with a certain religiosity feeding himself liquor.

When Elijah had reiterated his squeamishness for the third time Sterling turned upon him an impersonal eye.

"Go and be gone," he said. "What the devil's keeping you?"

And Elijah obeyed. Then Rolf turned upon his companions a clear and friendly eye.

"'Llo, Harrigan," he said, "Steffanson, Kadotski. Have something on me, you fellows. Jake, set 'em up." There was a murmur of approbation.

"Begorra, Mr. Sterling, you're the last man, sir, I'd be expectin' to stand alongside of an' me foot on the rail," said the man named Harrigan, "but it's a bit of a raw night, I'm thinkin', an' you so late gettin' home an' all. If ye'll pardon the familiarity, sir, an' me meanin' no harm, I'd advise a teetotaler like yourself to go light on the whisky——"

Rolf laughed his bravado.

"I've the need to conserve, Harrigan! Conservation's always been my motto. To-night it's time. Whisky works fast——"

Harrigan, a burly Irishman the color of brick, stared jovially.

"Faith, an' ye'd better go aisy, I'm tellin' ye——"

For a time they stood like brothers, the uncouth men who patronized Jake's, greasy, sweated, full of coarse humor and loud discussion, half proud to be drinking with their employer, half converted to the new picture of him as a good fellow of their ilk. They remembered

their resentment of his stern example, and were rejoiced. Rolf succumbed very quickly, grateful for the commiserating numbness that took him far, far out of the reach of his agonies, that broke down the difficult barriers between him and the others. Red necks and the protruding cartilage of the drinking throat appealed to him as a lovely and a brotherly sight. Caught between the muscled shoulders of his companions he wondered how the kinship of them had escaped him so long. He put his arm about the neck of one who had eaten garlic and addressed him tenderly as, "Big brother Antonio!" He was back in his own days of moiling and shared with them their grievances and their fatigue.

"Come and tell me when you've a complaint," he invited oratorically. "I'm a workman—same's you. Thish one thing I want you understand. I've done every dirty job you're doing now and I know conditions in this fact'ry. I'm here to see every las' man o' you gets a square deal."

"Like hell you are," said a voice from a distant corner, and there swaggered into the nimbus of the hanging lamp an enormous Russian named Strunsky, he who had been the spokesman for the mechanics in the recent strike. He moved toward Sterling with a slow and sinuous motion, his dark and brooding face lit by an expression as insidious as his walk. Two feet away he stopped, in superb impudence, his contempt singeing the capitalistic Sterling. "Like hell you are, you poor example of a profiteer. Yes, go on and drink with him," he recommended to the others, "so long as he'll pay for swilling it down yer, the big, smooth-smiling Judas. He's a handsome plutocrat, he is! Teetotaler, and churchman, and holy—example of a citizen. But what did he do for you in the winter when your

wives and children were next to starving and you hadn't enough coal in your houses to keep a canary warm? Why, he consulted with the big guns, he did, and heard 'em whining about their dividends that had been chopped since the war, and he threw out his chest to show they'd chose the right man when they made him the manager of their factory. He fought your demand for a living wage, he did, living himself strong all the time, feedin' fat, an' keepin' his house warm, an'—an' turnin' on his own wife when she showed humanity enough to feel for the other women. Sterling," he said dropping his voice, "they tell me in the beginning you were a good fellow before this successful stuff began working in your bean. You simply got a swell head when you found you was on the elevator goin' up. And now it's got so a man'd as lieves appeal to a stone wall as he had to you, Manager Sterling."

The fellow was drunk and during this long indictment Rolf had become conscious of his own unfitness as well. The whisky had strong hold of him. For once in his life he was at a disadvantage and the pitiful satisfaction of his erstwhile popularity was broken. The men who had been drinking with him were sobered. There was a low sound of dissension, whispers of, "That's so, by Gawd," "Boris has said it," "He's the boy to speak his mind," and the like.

Well did Rolf know the fickle psychology of the crowd. He felt a great loneliness, a maudlin pity for himself and just the faintest wonder that he was somehow deprived of the use of his faculties. That was due to his unusedness in drinking. The dissipating fires in his brain threw all his thoughts into confusion despite the willingness of his tongue.

"See here, you damned socialist, I can't go into that

now. It's the system you must blame for conditions—conditions. Blame system. I can't help it, can I, if a stock company's not run on philanthropic principles. Show me one that is. I've got to look out for my job, haven't I? I've got to protect the interests of—interests of—why, the interests of the company, of course." He was angry that the old arguments he knew so well and was accustomed to employ so dexterously eluded him. He groped childishly for words and an expression of acute distress came into his face.

"Will ye be holdin' your tongue now?" put in the friendly Harrigan. "Sure the lad's gone under entirely—entirely, and it's no use bandyin' words wid him now . . . nary a word."

"Gone under, am I?" cried Sterling, growing ugly and wearing a pretentious smile. "Who says I'm gone under, I want to know. Because I'll show the liar what—a—liar he is." He swayed slightly, and rested an elbow on the bar, presenting an improbable picture with his clear-comely face and meticulous grooming starred among the grimy laborers. His eye struck Harrigan's and glanced off, returned, unsure.

"Was it you, Harrigan? Then I'll ask you to repeat it. . . ."

"I'll not be quarrelin' wid ye, Mister Sterling," said Harrigan.

"Aw," said a twisty voice from the edge of the crowd, "if it's lookin' for trouble he is, let's muss him up. Let's muss him up if we get jail for it, the starchy dude. Been a common working man hisself, has he? Then he'd orter know how to move his fists. Clear away, Buddies," in a tone of dainty derision. "I sorter hanker to close his lamps."

What happened was exactly what none of them had

expected. They had reckoned without the thought of Sterling's trained muscles, his absolute physical fitness maintained by daily bouts in a gymnasium. Even drunk he was a match for them. He remembered later with a tingling pleasure how he had cleared an avenue for himself out of the gamier element that impeded him, how once a smashing fist blow glancing off a man's jaw struck the edge of the bar and laid his knuckles open. Then he was outside in the foul, misty night, a night sweating as he sweated at every pore. He was in his car and swerving out into the highway without in the least knowing which way he headed. Sometimes he felt faint, sometimes a bit dizzy, but the dubious narcotic which drugged his brain clung tenaciously and would not be cheated by the night air. White flowers bloomed in the fog and sometimes there was a road, though oftener not, when he drove through clouds in a kind of subliminal safety. A corner designated itself, but cried too late. Looming ahead on the curve a gray obstacle uncovered itself. Swift in his skimming security, it seemed an easy feat to avoid it. He was wrong in his calculation, he crashed into it as blithely as though it were a phantom object to give way before him. Out of the gray fog he burrowed into a blacker void that had no beginning and no ending, a sort of cave of the winds where echoes of some titanic noise were busy repeating themselves. He succumbed not unpleasantly.

The impact was terrific. A comatose policeman on duty at the corner blew his whistle, rushed to the inextricable mêlée. Windows flew open and in five minutes the quiescent street had come to life and teemed with morbid onlookers. It was a milk-truck with which Sterling had collided, and the angle at which he had

crashed into it had turned his car on its side. The wheels of the truck had crumpled, the side was gashed and sagging, the driver lay in the road, and somewhere inside the pinned wreckage was Sterling, his faint groans indicating that he still lived.

The street ran, not blood, but milk, in long, pallid rivers and almost ankle-deep in the spreading liquid men worked to lift the side of the heavy truck where it brooded obstinately over the lighter car. Urgently they strained to the accompaniment of women's weeping and the shrill, explanatory cries of others, "There's a man under there. Oh, God, how awful." At length the exertions of the salvaging crew were rewarded. By tremendous effort the bruised roadster was laid bare, its shattered side torn away, a limp semblance to a human form extricated and borne to the sidewalk.

"It's Mr. Sterling," some one said immediately, and there was a hush of consternation. "Poor fellow, there's a piece of glass in his head." "Here's the ambulance now. The truck driver's conscious. He's talking. He says it was a caution how that man came round the curve on him."

Through the grim yet gloating horror of the throng nosed the ambulance, authoritatively clanging. The injured men were turned over to the doctors. Then, the meat of the situation being removed, the coagulated mass broke up. Many lingered to hold postmortems over the two wrecked automobiles, but gradually these too remembered their beds and yielded to the persuasion of them. The fog closed thicker. But from the jungle of buildings a lean, black cat with phosphorescent eyes prowled forth and began to lap the milk that was running in the gutters. It was joined by other derelicts of the same school, a conference of cats. Like

creatures of ill-omen they profited by the disaster, secretly nourishing themselves.

Meanwhile, in the house far out Wedgewater Road, Muffet Sterling stood in her nightdress at the telephone.

"Yes, I am Mrs. Sterling," she said sleepily. "Officer Meloney . . . I'm afraid I don't understand. . . . There has been an accident? My husband——" The ear-piece fell from her hand; she caught at the transmitter, but in another minute she was speaking again, constrainedly. . . . "Yes, yes, I'm here. . . . Is he badly hurt? Is he alive? Are you sure?"

Chapter XXVII

I

FOR six weeks Sterling lay in hospital accomplishing his slow journey back from the Valley of the Shadow. For six weeks Muffet was in constant attendance, the last lonely figure to leave the building at night, the first of all visitors to be admitted in the morning. The shock of Rolf's accident was deeply ingrained in her life; she had needed perhaps this imminence of danger to make her realize the serious bond of their marriage. With a bruised and suffering mind she abode his agonies, sparing herself nothing. Horror after horror she had shared with him in his hell, step by step she followed him up out of the bloody abyss. And her faithfulness contained more than the iron element of duty. Rolf, helpless and indifferent to his fate, was a Rolf to make utmost appeal to her. Nevertheless she accepted the phase of his dependability as in every sense transitory. She never for one moment doubted that, with fitness restored, the man-child of her nursing would rise and walk alone. She was unable to visualize him as permanently needy or for long in eclipse. The lustre of his activities still shone for her as something tangible—waiting. It was not in him to suffer patiently an entanglement with misfortune.

But when her anxieties had subsided to the point where she might be made aware of outside things, Muffet was amazed to learn of the ugly rumor attending the case. A policeman on duty at the scene of the

collision had reported that Sterling was driving his car in a reckless manner. Friends of the injured truck-driver had appeared and filed testimony to the effect that he had previously been seen drinking in a saloon called "Jake's"; they went so far as to say that he had engaged there in a drunken brawl with a crowd of his own mechanics. The driver of the milk cart, sustaining no more serious injury than a broken arm, was soon up and about. But Sterling, lying in bandages, was indicted on two serious charges.

Censure was strict; Muffet, inundated by ugly truths, learned that it was in her to suffer responsibly for a man. Rolf, hitherto but the blurred image in her mind of a legal protector, had clarified himself as something more. Seeing him as he lay in deathly indifference those first awesome days following the accident, she had known he was her husband, had been swept back irresistibly to the time of their mating. Thereby an inexorable law had been established that could not be gone back on. Whether or not they had found that alliance one of harmony had nothing whatever to do with its actuality. The identity of his husbandhood remained, and by whatever befell Rolf she was bound to abide. She was sick with her shared mortification; broken by the effort to comprehend a side of his life so flagrantly masculine. And her imagination once roused, dared faintly the thought of women. . . .

When David broached the subject of current gossip she was primed for defences.

"But it's absurd," she protested in sensitive wrath, "anyone who knows him will see that." And she added illogically, "As it was poor Rolf and not the horrid milkman who was hurt I can't see why he is making all this trouble."

"That is entirely outside the question," her father said with austerity, "the point is in finding out which of them was responsible for the accident."

She had, actually, tears in her eyes.

"But, Father, you know Rolf, and how it couldn't be true of him——"

David appeared grave.

"To say that I know Rolf or any other man is too broad a statement."

Muffet was greatly troubled and that day, during an interlude of absence on the part of the nurse, she spoke to Sterling, the new man, pale in his bandages. She approached the subject in all timidity and was shaken to learn that he had already received a summons to court, pending the time of his recovery. Her mouth went dry with embarrassment. There was something strange about the whole affair that defied acceptance.

"I've never talked to you about that night," she said hesitantly, "but I've always known that it was the fog which blinded you and not——"

"Oh, you've heard rumors?" he asked with a greater lassitude than even his illness warranted, and there was the unfamiliar glint of irony in his eyes. "Let me tell you that the charge was justified. I *had* been drinking, I *was* a menace to public safety, and I intend to plead guilty. . . ."

The hand that lay nearest her on the counterpane tapped negligently with all its fingers. His eyes watched her incredulous face with almost a hard amusement. At first she thought that those grim bandages across his brow covered some mutilated cells now refusing to function, next she wondered if his illness had bred in him a depraved sense of humor, lastly she be-

lieved. She believed him, though paradoxically his statement seemed no less a lie because it happened to be true. She bent over him with tremulous pleading.

"But, Rolf, you're talking about a different kind of man altogether. It's not in you to drink and riot any more than it's in Father to be a bully. And now they're saying that you've been like that always, only you kept it under cover."

He saw her face clouded by distress and he said,

"Ha . . ." Then, mumbling, a restless flush in his cheeks, "I wanted to know what it felt like, and besides I was tired of being so damned different from other men. I did it deliberately," and he added, "even if I wasn't much of a success."

"But, Rolf," she argued in shame for him, "you couldn't afford to degrade yourself, the fighting and all the rest of it. It—it was childish of you, Rolf. You should have remembered your good name and your position."

"Damn my good name and my position." He turned his face pettishly to the wall. And still without turning, "so you're ashamed of me, are you? Well, you've had chances enough to be proud of me, but you never were."

She caught her breath, pain-shot. It was true she had never been proud to be proud of him but perhaps she was proud to bear shame with him now. When Rolf turned to look at her once more he found that there was no one in the room and rang his bell to make an inquiry.

"Mrs. Sterling has gone home," said the nurse who answered it.

It seemed to Muffet that in order to understand the new Rolf, evolved from the old, she must first forget all earlier impressions. It was a long time before she could accept his changed point of view and incorporate it in her picture of the man. This was how he was to be permanently, grim with a shadow of whimsy, unplagued by any stirrings of the old ambition, absolutely dead to public opinion. She knew that Wedgewater had dethroned its idol. Fierce with exacting affection and furious in disappointment, it had cast him from his pedestal. It suffered from the blow to its own judgment; it went about wondering how Rolf Sterling had managed to deceive it all these years. For Sterling's popularity had certainly been phenomenal. A financier and a churchman, he had enjoyed prestige alike in civic or social circles. The directors of The Ship and Engine factory, those of the wide waists and the atrophied sensibilities, alone held loyal. They were upset at the aspersions cast upon their exemplary young man, but after all there had never been a more competent manager than Sterling and just so long as he did not break his neck they adhered to him.

At the end of his sojourn in the hospital Muffet took him home. She passed with him into the realm of humiliation, feeling the dark cloud go round them and suffering with curious exaltation. Always there was the feeling that something had happened to cut them off from the old contacts and to make them significant in each other's eyes. Had it been an heroic thing that Rolf had done, or had he been killed in the disaster, admiration or sorrow had left its clear imprint upon her without bringing her one jot nearer the foreign

substance of his soul. But the ignoble escapade had been quite without the color of glory. Seeking a gesture of escape, he had drunk whisky and smashed a milk cart. So had he chosen to manifest his sorrow. One of the features of the story's write-up in the local paper had been the part about the cats. She knew that Rolf's extraordinary behavior was the outgrowth of sore vanity which had to do with herself and for the first time, finding a need to understand and condone, she was tender toward him. Her heart expanded with womanly omniscience.

April came to Wedgewater Road and still he stayed convalescent, and sometimes she hoped that she understood why he would not get well. Then again she was chilled out of her vernal perceptions, prone to sadness. Rolf was neither a responsive nor a difficult patient, merely an engrossed one. As her spirit approached through the medium of her ministering fingers, her warm, rosy flesh, her eagerness to translate to him the idiom of spring, he withdrew deeper and deeper into the recess of his being, at times obviously or again with a deliberate effect of closing a door behind him. Then, like a child abandoned by its playmates, she looked about her for her father. But her father had entered upon a phase of life as foreign to his tradition as Rolf's inertia was foreign to his.

III

David Harlow had come into his own. At the end of his long sentence of waiting came the period of success. Everyone said that he had succeeded, his manner proclaimed the consummation of his dreams. As Rolf was so ill at the time his patent was adopted Muffet

had been debarred from active participation in his pleasure, but the consciousness of his good fortune was pastured in her mind.

Nevertheless the anomaly of the situation impressed her forcibly when Rolf had been brought home to Wedgewater Road and they were all three together again. It seemed strange in the nature of things that the older man's happy activity kept him coming and going while the younger sat patiently all day long by his window, diverted from his channels of usefulness, exempt from demand. Muffet told herself that she was glad the establishment of her father's pride had generated such independence, that she could now dismiss him from her mind at long intervals as a mother thankfully dismisses a child that is old enough to watch out for itself. She told herself that she gave herself to Rolf as the needy one of the two.

But it was some time before she came to recognize the cause underlying the change, which seemed likely to make of it a permanency. One day the startling discovery,— in the minds of these men—metamorphosis! Just as Rolf's in the registry of disaster and disgrace had become passive, so her father's stimulated by success, was the mind of a man at once quickened and solidified. It had thrown off the inferiority complex for all time and in its new, hard dress looked toward earthly rewards.

The truth had come to Muffet after her talk with Elijah Moore. Following Rolf's return from the hospital she had met Elijah one day when she had gone out for a bit of fresh air, and at the encounter had surprised him almost in tears.

"Why, Uncle Elijah," she exclaimed, using her childhood's name for him, and half chiding, half censuring

him for neglect, "we thought you had deserted us. Where have you been all these weeks?"

"My dear, you mustn't think me careless. I've felt for you in your trouble, I've inquired for Rolf constantly but—well, the fact is your father and I have had a little misunderstanding and so I felt that I would not be welcome."

"Welcome?" She looked her distress. "So that explains everything. But surely, surely you are making mountains out of molehills. You know, of course, that Rolf has left the hospital and is in the convalescent stage. Poor fellow, the time is very long for him. Won't you forget anything that may have happened and come to see him?"

"That depends," said Elijah, his eyes watering furiously, "that depends entirely on your father."

"But I don't understand what could make you both so stubborn. Aren't you two boys ashamed of yourselves?" She attempted raillery, but she saw almost at once by the stricken look of Elijah's face that a really serious difference had arisen between the two old friends. Constitutionally they warred, but their anger was always shortlived.

"You don't understand," mourned Elijah, "and you never will but tell him what I have said all the same."

"I will give him your message," she promised, sighing, "but you know he is often very hard to convince when he is in the wrong."

"Possibly we were both wrong," rued Elijah magnanimously, "possibly we were both wrong, my dear. Who knows? But I can't come to the house till he is ready to receive me."

"Please," she made a gesture of pleading, "don't be too literal. I am sure he wants to see you but he

is completely swept away by all this business about the patent. You have heard, of course, that it is no end of a success!"

"Yes, yes, I've heard." Elijah essayed to smile but his forlorn lips would not obey him. "And to think that I, who have been interested in it from the start, must be an outsider now!"

"It really is a *shame*," agreed Muffet, warming to his grievance, "it really is a shame and I think that Father is treating you very badly. I shall tell him so," and impulsively she bent and kissed him on the cheek. "We all love you, Uncle Elijah, and we can't do without you for long."

IV

Rolf, being a shut-in, was humble to the point where he found interest in inconsequential gossip. Muffet sought ways of manufacturing it as she had once sought similar distraction for her father, and was never so happy as when she had brought a smile to his thinny grave lips. She and Rolf spent hours now in the pleasant house that Rolf had hitherto known but superficially and day by day their isolation grew more complete. At first, after his move from the hospital, he had been called upon to grant audiences to members of his office staff, vicariously directing them in their work. But as gradually the machine of organization became self-governing he was left alone to taste oblivion. But not once did he repine; it was as though grimly he embraced the opportunity of solitude. From his minute observation of commonplace things, his studious, delving abstraction Muffet knew that he was building a philos-

ophy, and sometimes she said to herself, "This is not Rolf, but another!"

When David returned from the factory and looked in upon them it was to find two children who had been good by themselves all day, but who accounted his coming a sensation. He brought a breath of the outside world that was at once stimulating and upsetting. Long ago Rolf, feeling himself too loud a personality for that house, had thought that here only the softest breezes should insinuate. Now Rolf was the one who receded sensitively, hurt by the impact of David's importance. When one has been sitting helplessly all day one feels the reproach of another's fitness. So now when David entered, Rolf sat in his quilted dressing-gown, a blanket across his knees, at his elbow a little stand whereon were his books and smoking materials. He let David do all the talking, only watching him at unguarded moments with an edging smile.

David appeared taller, straighter, better groomed than ever before, like one entering upon a festive era. His physical appearance as well as his psychology was extraordinarily altered. His remarks were muscular with cheer, his very gesture one of confidence. Though he was jocular he showed a tendency to condense speech, conserve time, which was to Muffet particularly wounding. She had learned better than to expect that all his evenings might be claimed by them. No, his time was constantly in demand, his engagements clotted. So this evening, without preamble, she broached the subject of Elijah. She described the old man's unwonted emotion on seeing her, insisting with sympathy that it had been a great cross to Elijah to remain away from them.

"I really had no time to think of him," confessed

Muffet, "but I realize now that nothing short of one of your famous feuds could have kept him away so long. And he gave me a message for you, Father,—he said that he could only come when you were ready to receive him."

As she spoke a somber frown had come to rest upon her father's brow, but when she had finished he twitched it away impatiently.

"Elijah, oh, yes, he might well enlist your sympathy when you have no idea of the nature of the offense."

"Whose offense, Father?" she laughed, jeering at the pretentious word. "Not yours, I hope."

"No," said David hotly, "his. Did he say that it was mine?"

"Oh, dear no. He was quite nobly magnanimous on that score. He said that possibly both of you were at fault. Oh, I do wish you wouldn't quarrel with Elijah at your age—at his age. I assure you he's quite broken up about it, especially as all these years he has been so interested in the invention. Don't you feel you need him now?" The tone was persuasive.

Rolf watched to see how it would be received. What he saw was David Harlow assuming a face of consummate contempt. His lower lip protruded like that of a sullen, bull-headed boy and his answer was so long brewing that it seemed to explode.

"Need him?" he repeated, marveling, "Need him? That—dodderer!"

And because his dignity was threatened he turned on his heel and left them—left Muffet to the fact and the enigma of her husband's smile. She could not conceive that her father had spoken in this wise; all these years he had leaned on Elijah's faith, Elijah's support and now he called him "a dodderer." In the crux of

her loneliness she went over to Rolf and stood plucking at his sleeve.

"Don't smile, Rolf," she said, "there is certainly a great change in Father."

Then Rolf, looking up into her troubled face, surprised her by jingling the coin of a phrase she had once spent and which he had kept all these months hidden in the pocket of his mind.

"That's not a smile," he said whimsically, "that's —that's 'a tear for success'!"

Chapter XXVIII

I

OH Albion," said David Harlow one spring day, negligently extending a hand to his brother, the portly manufacturer from Threadville, come to consort with his success, "sorry I can't see you just now. I'm off to a conference at the factory. It's about the new machinery they're installing to manufacture my patent. Why not step into the sitting-room and let Rolf entertain you while I'm gone? He's a shut-in, poor fellow."

Albion Harlow stared. He had come less ostentatiously this time, lacking the legend of his brother's failure. He had come, in fact, in a chastened spirit, to identify himself with David's success. He had come to tell him that he, Albion, had believed in his engine from the first. He was prepared to praise and verify, and perhaps drop a few statuesque hints as to how such honors might be carried. But he had not expected to find a David already out of the dark chrysalis and glamorous with wings. Indeed David had rallied to his dignities in a marked manner. The comedian's eye was charged with a full fire of direction. And seeing him so Albion could only stare, his composure bitterly shaken. It was he who had been given to back-thumping and clipped speech. And now David wrung his hand with an air of greeting him and dis-

missing him at once. "Why not step into the sitting-room, till I come back?"

Muffet came to greet him and this time he did not pinch her cheek and tell her benevolently that he would have her Aunt Alice ask her up for a visit. Muffet was now Mrs. Sterling, a very prettily groomed and poised young woman. She had a husband on the road to prominence, her house properly managed; she commanded his respect. But always her eye was lit with a mirthful distrust of his intentions.

"Rolf, here is Uncle Albion," she said to her husband, and led the manufacturer into the presence of the invalid as she had once admitted him to the presence of her sick father.

From his chair by the sunny window Sterling looked up and accorded Muffet's uncle a sinister civility. Long ago the two had met and Rolf had admired the older man, accounting him literally the one Harlow of importance. The new Rolf, registering differently, looked upon the fleshy financier as one likely enough belonging to a large school of frauds. Avarice and pomposity were his insignia; from the gold and platinum watch chain inward to the grisly marrow of his bones he was one of the fraternal order of materialists.

Albion, enkindled toward what he believed to be their common religion, talked business until, incredibly, he encountered the sick man's disinclination. Sterling sat in an attitude of relaxation, a blanket across his knees, his hands white, his face bearing that curious refinement of expression so often remarked as a result of long illness.

"It's irksome to be idle," remarked Mr. Harlow in a tone between sympathy and puzzlement. "Aren't you anxious to be getting out and back to your work?"

and he fixed the younger man with a look of incipient distrust. Sterling smiled in his listless way.

"It did fret me till I realized that my work goes on almost, if not quite as well without me. It's a tough blow to one's vanity, I admit, but who shall say it's not a good lesson to learn? My wife has been reading me a play translated from the French about the cock who thought he crowed the sun up each morning. He was devoted to the job till the lady pheasant of his choice playfully pricked his bubble of conceit." He looked at Albion Harlow with a glimmer of drollery, but Albion was not smiling.

"Besides," continued Sterling, "this is the first chance I have ever had in my whole life to think, to sit by a window and watch the parade go by. I tell you, Mr. Harlow, it pays to quit cold once in your life and stay quiet long enough to get your bearings. I tell you I had been going so hard and fast for years that I'd lost sight of the goal. I couldn't see the forest because of the trees."

"Hm," observed the manufacturer, deeply and mysteriously displeased, "there are very few men who can afford to 'quit cold,' as you call it, even for a short length of time. Competition's too pressing."

"You mean," said Rolf dryly, "that success is too tempting. Well, after all, what is success, materially speaking?"

"It's the only standard by which we can measure a man's ability," said Albion Harlow warmly.

Rolf fell to dreaming.

"But who's to measure the standard? That's what plagues me. I've thought myself half crazy about it. You say no man can afford to be idle and cultivate his spirit. I say no man can afford not to. Without dis-

tance there's no perspective; sickness takes one into a far country. Things that seemed relatively unimportant to me last year have assumed mammoth proportions." The faintest smile played at his lips. "When I was first married, my wife tried to show me some of the big things I'd overlooked, but I was too dull for her. I'm a better scholar now. For instance, the change of seasons opens up vast areas of study and speculation. This year I've seen the green coming and I've felt responsible for it, worried along with the leaves, you might say. Day and night I've looked out of my window and meditated on nature and the scientific laws of the universe. I've even come to think a devil of a lot about the stars."

"Hm," said his caller again, this time with a distinct trace of irritation, "next you'll be taking to poetry."

But Rolf shook his head.

"I'm hardly fit for that much culture. But I'm ready to admit that there's a touch of quaintness in life that needs expression."

"Well," coughed the manufacturer, "I must be getting on. But I trust you haven't lost your grip for good, Sterling. You mustn't let these fancies get too strong a hold on you. You're too useful a man for that. You've made your place in the world and it needs you, my boy, it needs you."

And he went out and left Rolf still smiling, and pondering on his probable escape from the morass of millions.

II

A curious sensitiveness inhered in Muffet. As dear as had grown the thought of her charge, she could not

bear that anyone should find Rolf backward in recovery or lacking in his old initiative, that anyone, in fact, should pity him save herself. She practised a savage protection of spirit the while he loitered in convalescence. Just as she had previously defended her father in the contact between the two men, so she now guarded her husband from David's overweening vigor.

"What kind of a day?" he would ask with a touch of something akin to Rolf's old impatience, when he returned in the evening and looked in upon the invalid.

"A splendid day," she would then answer singingly, flushed beneath the faint ridicule of Rolf's expression but valiant to uphold him at any cost. "He's gaining in strength steadily. Soon there'll be no holding him at home."

In all that she now did for Rolf was the touch of quickened sympathy. In his presence she bloomed with a gipsy sweetness no whit less lovely because his abstracted eyes failed to comprehend it. The proclamation of her beauty was omnipresent, often pitiable in its thwarted purpose. For Rolf, while content in the realm of her ministering, had been broken in the fiercer longing for her love. The hectoring passion had gone down in actual physical suffering, and as he recovered, his subconscious mind provided an immunity. He accepted her devotion with a gratitude sincere if undemonstrative; he dared hazard a lift of spirit to the level of her whimsy. When she talked of "robins in rubber boots" or showed him in the distant meadow a comedy in "small, plush calves" he was able, as never before, to join in the game. But steadfastly he refused to consider the dangerous delight of her hair or make personal application of her nearness. Each day brought the innocent parade of prettiness that had hoped shyly

and retired in defeat. She saw now, as Rolf had seen, the incompleteness of their marriage, its deep and tragic helplessness.

"What have you in mind?" she asked him once, depressed by her sense of being an alien. "You tell me nothing, and sometimes I doubt, I really doubt if you mean to go back to the factory."

He laughed indolently.

"I've a feeling I don't want to decide—just yet. I think I should like to do something less arbitrary than I have been doing. I'm sick of the taint of authority that keeps one from meeting men on the plane of equality. I'll tell you something that may surprise you. I'll whisper in your ear if you'll promise me never to breathe a word of it,—success is a failure, Muffet. Now mind you keep it close. Too much of that poison in the system becomes a disease. I had just begun to find out how sick I was. I'm better now."

"Yes, Rolf," she answered, marveling when he spoke in this strain.

"I'd like to travel," mused Sterling, "not following the recognized routes at all, but rashly, like a vagabond, getting into all kinds of trouble, and rare, enlightening situations. I'd like to take a couple of years at it."

"Roll down, roll down to Rio," she quoted dreamily.

"Or the South Seas," said Rolf, "or the frozen Arctic."

He looked out of the window where there was a mist of green and a thin fountain of yellow, a Forsythia shrub in bloom, but he saw neither the spread grass nor the willing blossom. The fear smote Muffet that in his remote calculations she was not included, that having failed in a first attempt they would never build together

again. Her hand, plucking at his pillow, shook with the message of her uncertainty.

"But Rolf, what of me?" the voice was so small that it might have come from a mechanical doll.

"You?" he queried gently, yet with a certain aloofness, "why you've always your father to keep you company."

She blinked a bright eye. She turned from the room, her pride shrunken together within her, her needy love groping for its original object. Then she remembered that her father had no time for her now.

III

"Your father is a very remarkable man, my dear!" Muffet had become accustomed to hearing it, and at first the words made a musical sound in her ear, like wind-glass when the wind is merry. She basked in reflected glory, the great ambition of her life was achieved. But when love stops hoping, when its anxieties are at an end, where does love go? It dawned upon her at length that people had ceased talking of Rolf, the praise and the censure were at an end. His old laurels were dusty, even the scandal of his accident was laid away. Yet Rolf was young and, by the light of new vision, Rolf was to her beautiful. And she would not have it so. Her brooding tenderness embraced him as he sat in his enforced idleness, asking so little of anybody, patiently allying himself with things of the spirit. And the broad shoulders, thin down to their framework, the great useless hands beggared of their obligation. She longed to kneel between his knees and

set her lips in the hollow at the base of his throat. She longed to rally him with pledges and proclamations, to cry upon him, to see her once more as a man's possible mate and mind-spur, to make her beauty the tonic it should have been. And because he did not know that he needed her she wept wildly in secret.

Her flesh diminished as though she had willed it to him, her eyes were strange and starlike in a white face. As she ministered to him Rolf saw that she was wraith-like and roused himself from his abstraction long enough to say,

"You are completely worn out and this can't go on. Besides, it's useless. There is really nothing to do for me. You invent things to do for me."

Whereupon she burst into a storm of irrational tears.

"Then take that little happiness away from me. Leave me nothing to do, nothing to do. . . ."

He was far from understanding her when he said,

"Nonsense. You're overworked, I tell you. You ought to go away from me and have a long rest."

How strange his stupidity; how strange that he did not know she was ill not because she had given too much of herself but because she had been denied the full spendthrift measure of love. Again she turned to her father, insisting hopefully, "There must still be something I can do for him, something I can share with him. Surely success had not claimed him altogether!" But to her disheartenment she found that his self-absorption had no eyes with which to perceive her loneliness, no time for the dalliance of comradeship. She saw that all was well with David, and when she tiptoed out of his presence she knew that she was leaving him for good.

Rolf, vainly courting sleep for many hours, had resigned himself to a long night of wakefulness. It often happened that after a day of only mental activity his brain kept obstinately trudging like a pilgrim along an endless road. The room was rayless; darkness filled it like a thick dust and in the darkness were many thoughts. A man lay alone in his solitary consciousness, seeing with a dreadful clairvoyance the stark aspects of destiny veiled by day. Muffet came to him before retiring and did things to the bed and pillow, patting them to reposeful invitation. And though she was lovely and desirable, he let her go again unresistingly; he asked only peace. But to-night as he lay, in resignation to his absorbing loneliness, he heard a sound that penetrated like cold into his veins. It came at even intervals, faint and far, as the moan of a disembodied spirit, yet with a reality of sorrow behind it. Though he was not an imaginative man it smote upon his fancy as a sound supernatural. It was of a piece with his sick soul—he even hazarded the wild guess that it *was* his soul, behaving as he had known it to do during his days of delirium.

But a whiff of common sense blew away the cobwebs of his brain. Common sense bade him rise and investigate but as even now he got about with difficulty, using a crutch, it was not easy for him to attempt random pilgrimages. So he waited patiently for a voluntary explanation. And it was not long in coming. To his surprise the obscurity of his room gradually gave place to light. He slept with his door open and now, though no step sounded in the corridor, came a traveling glow, a sheen of gold stole through the aperture.

He sat up in bed, keyed for a ghostly manifestation. If it was a ghost he would challenge it. He preferred to hope that it was a thief. Then the revelation. The doorway framed an apparition the terror of whose beauty could scarcely be imagined. It was Muffet, sleep-walking and holding a lighted candle in her hand. It was Muffet and yet inexplicably not Muffet but a dweller from the innermost shrine. It was spirit claiming the dominion of her unconscious body. Such radiance was upon her as seemed to come from no earthly source, the straight folds of her gown, the clouded sepia of her hair, her very face appeared to give forth glow. Her cheeks with their chaste modeling were wet with tears. At once Rolf knew that she was bound in slumber, that in slumber she had risen and lighted the candle in her hand.

Awed by the visitation and acutely fearing for her, he held himself tense. If she lowered the candle ever so little her gown would be in flames. But the little hand stayed steady, like a hand in marble. Slowly she advanced into the room, sobbing a veiled, mysterious grief. Though her eyes were wide open she did not see him as she went through the pantomime of search. At length she touched the bed with her free hand and, reaching out cautiously, Rolf took the candle from her. She offered no resistance and he set it on the table. Only her eyes were blurred by endless tears as her hands moved along the counterpane. He remained immobile, choked by her pathos, not wholly comprehending what had brought her there. Presently she was so close that he could feel her warm breath above him and the sigh of her exhausted sobs. He

could feel her fingers across the territory of his shoulders. Half fearful he looked into her eyes. They were heavy with glaze. But her warm fingers paused contented in contact with his face. Her hair hung over him in a drowsy veil—she was assuaged in her loneliness, caught back again to normal slumber.

And Rolf understood. She had come to meet him the whole way; she had brought him a light, she had proclaimed herself his wife and never a word spoken. With pitiful, clumsy care he drew the blanket about her—he made her a beautiful resting-place in the hollow of his arm. . . .

v

David, letting himself in earlier than usual one afternoon, had Muffet in mind. He had neglected Muffet of late but at the first opportunity he was pledged to resume his rôle of devotion. He told himself remindingly that he would not let his new responsibilities and demands supersede her. He told himself that it was but one happy step back to the region where he had left her. But as he stood in the deserted hall, divesting himself of hat and coat, he was arrested by a conversation taking place on the other side of a closed door. It was Muffet discussing with Vannie the menu for the approaching meal.

“But yo’ Daddy, he doan eat dose beef steaks lak what he uster,” David heard the faithful woman protest. “He done say his teef bother him an’ he done say he cain’t chew lak what he uster——”

“But Vannie,” it was Muffet’s voice now, taut with severity, “Mr. Sterling needs red meat to build him up.

Oh, Vannie, do you remember how he looked before his illness, so handsome and robust?"

"Yas'm, Ah 'member. Hit doan seem lak he'd orter peak an' pine dissaway——"

"Oh, Vannie, do you think we could tempt him with a little lamb broth?"

The hand which David lifted toward the peg still held his hat and hung foolishly in midair while his faculties strained. Just as Sterling had once listened to the thrilling timbre of Muffet's voice, planning for her father, so David now read into the commonplace dialogue all the fanatical love of a woman's life for its most central object.

He had been preoccupied of late; had he been blind also? Never before had Rolf evoked in his wife this tone of possessive passion. David's ego stirred, prompted to the first wild pain of self-pity. Another man might have acceded gracefully, glad that the honors were even. Not so David Harlow. For no other father perhaps had ever known the maximum of a child's devotion. He had wanted it all forever and ever, insatiable man.

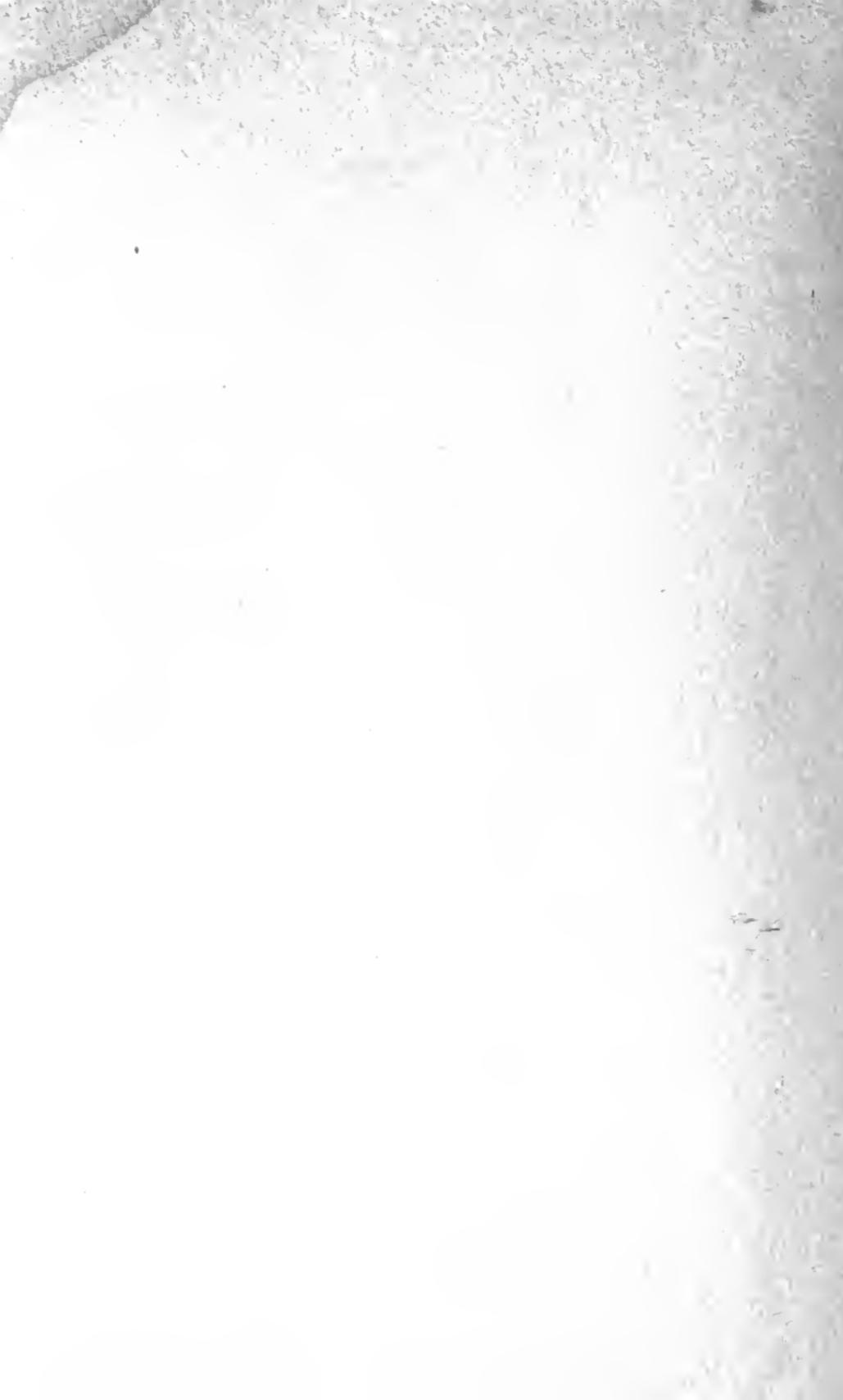
Old Age overtook him in a moment, plucking at his elbow with its talk of relinquishment and many times he drew his elbow away. But at last he consented to listen. And, listening, he learned something of the laws of compensation. During all his years of obscurity he had had Muffet's priceless love; he knew now that she had loved him not because she believed him a genius, but because she thought him a failure. Now in place of Muffet's love he had this barren thing men called success.

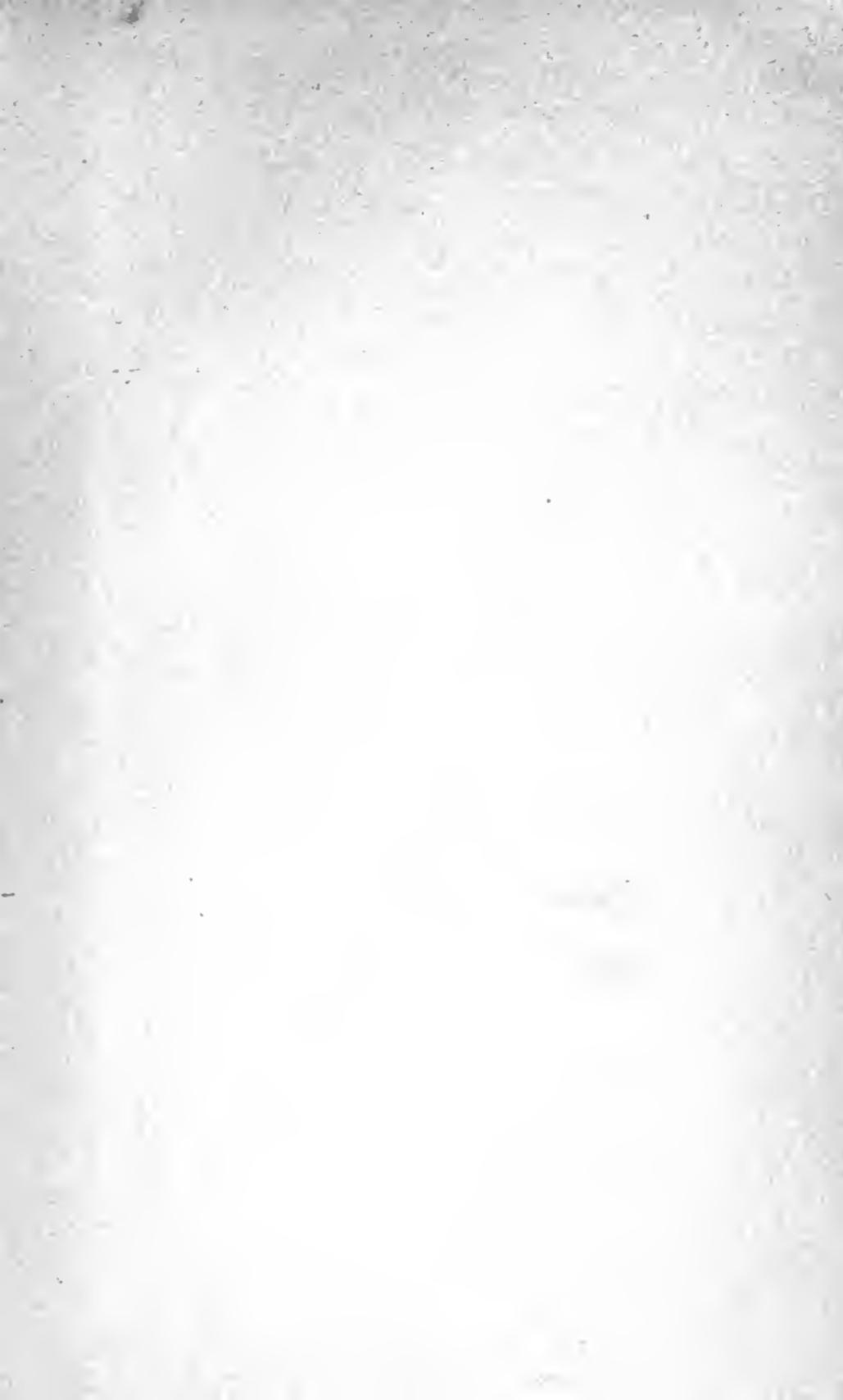
Even as she had loved and pitied her father so the dove-gray devotion of her breast had turned toward Rolf, once the favorite of fortune, now merely a patient young man who sat by a window.

Death had deferred to accommodate David, but surely a man may say when his hour has come. David Harlow stood listening. . . .

THE END









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