

The Blood Red Dawn

Charles Caldwell Dobie

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THE BLOOD RED DAWN

by

CHARLES CALDWELL DOBIE

1920

To My Mother

Book I

CHAPTER I

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The pastor's announcement had been swallowed up in a hum of truant inattention, and as the heralded speaker made his appearance upon the platform Claire Robson, leaning forward, said to her mother:

"What?... Did you catch his name?"

"A foreigner of some sort!" replied Mrs. Robson, with smug sufficiency.

For a moment the elder woman's sneer dulled the edge of Claire's anticipations, but presently the man began to speak, and at once she felt a sense of power back of his halting words, a sudden bursting forth of bloom amid the frozen assembly that sat ice-bound, refusing to be melted by the fires of an alien enthusiasm. She could not help wondering whether he felt how hopeless it would be to force a sympathetic response from his audience. In ordinary times the Second Presbyterian Church of San Francisco could not possibly have had any interest in Serbia except as a field for foreign missionaries. Now, with America in the war and speeding up the draft, these worthy people were too much concerned with problems nearer their own hearthstones to be swept off their feet by a specific and almost inarticulate appeal for an obscure country, made only a shade less remote by the accident of being accounted an ally.

Claire, straining at attention, found it hard to follow him. He talked rapidly and with unfamiliar emphasis, and he waved his hands. Frankly, people were bored. They had come to hear a concert and incidentally swell the Red Cross fund, but they had not reckoned on quite this type of harangue. Besides, an appetizing smell of coffee from the church kitchen had begun to beguile their senses. And yet, the man talked on and on, until quite suddenly Claire Robson began to have a strange feeling of disquiet, an embarrassment for him, such as one feels when an intimate friend or kinsman unconsciously makes a spectacle of himself. She wished that he would stop. She longed to rise from her seat and scream, to create an outlandish scene, to do anything, in short, that would silence him. At this point he turned his eyes in her direction, and she felt the scorch of an intense inner fire. Instinctively she lowered her glance.... When she looked up again his gaze was still fixed upon her. She felt her color rise. From that moment on she had a sense that she was his sole audience. He was talking to her. The others did not matter. She still did not have any very distinct idea what it was all about, but the manner of it held her captive. But gradually the mists cleared, he became more coherent, and slowly, imperceptibly, bit by bit, he won the others. Yet never for an instant did he take his eyes from her. When he finished, a momentary silence blocked the final burst of applause. But Claire Robson's hands were locked tightly together, and it was not until he had disappeared that she realized that she had not paid him the tribute of even a parting glance.

The pastor came back upon the platform and announced that refreshments would be served at the conclusion of the next number. A heavy odor of coffee continued to float from the church kitchen. A red-haired woman stepped forward and began to sing.

Already Claire Robson dreaded the ordeal of supper. The fact that tables were being laid further disturbed her. This meant that she and her mother would have to push their way into some group which, at best, would remain indifferent to their presence. When coffee was served informally things were not so awkward. To be sure, one had to balance coffee-cup and cake-plate with an amazing and painful skill, but, on the other hand, table-less groups did not emphasize one's isolation. Claire had got to the point where she would have welcomed active hostility on the part of her fellow church members, but their utter indifference was soul-killing. She would have liked to remember one occasion when any one had betrayed the slightest interest in either her arrival or departure,

or rather in the arrival and departure of her mother and herself.

The solo came to an end, and the inevitable applause followed, but before the singer could respond to the implied encore most of the listeners began frank and determined advances upon the tables. The concert was over.

Mrs. Robson rose and faced Claire with a look of bewilderment. As usual, mother and daughter stood irresolutely, caught like two trembling leaves in the backwater of a swirling eddy. At last Claire made a movement toward the nearest table. Mrs. Robson followed. They sat down.

The scattered company speedily began to form into congenial groups. There was a great deal of suddenly loosened chatter. Claire Robson sat silently, rather surprised and dismayed to find that she and her mother had chosen a table which seemed to be the objective of all the prominent church members. The company facing her was elegant, if not precisely smart, and there were enough laces and diamonds displayed to have done excellent service if the proper background had been provided. Claire was further annoyed to discover that her mother was regarding the situation with a certain ruffling self-satisfaction which she took no pains to conceal. Mrs. Robson bowed and smirked, and even called gaily to every one within easy range. There was something distasteful in her mother's sudden and almost aggressive self-assurance.

Gradually the company adjusted itself; the tables were filled. The only moving figures were those of young women carrying huge white pitchers of steaming coffee. Claire Robson settled into her seat with a resignation born of subtle inner misery. Across her brain flashed the insistent and pertinent questions that such a situation always evoked. Why was she not one of these young women engaged in distributing refreshments? Did the circles close automatically so as to exclude her, or did her own aloofness shut her out? What was the secret of these people about her that gave them such an assured manner? No one spoke to her with cordial enthusiasm.... It was not a matter of wealth, or brains, or prominent church activity. It was not even a matter of obscurity. Like all large organizations, the Second Presbyterian Church was made up of every clique in the social calendar; the obscure circle was as clannish and distinctive in its way as any other group. But Claire Robson was forced to admit that she did not belong even to the obscure circle. She belonged nowhere—that was the galling and oppressive truth that was forced upon her.

At this point she became aware that one of the most prominent church members, Mrs. Towne, was making an unmistakably cordial advance in her direction. Claire had a misgiving.... Mrs. Towne was never excessively friendly except for a definite aim.

"My dear Miss Robson," Mrs. Towne began, sweetly, drooping confidentially to a whispering posture, "I am so sorry, but I shall have to disturb you and your mother!... It just happens that this table has been reserved for the elders and their wives.... I hope you'll understand!"

For a moment Claire merely stared at the messenger of evil news. Then, recovering herself, she managed to reply:

"Oh yes, Mrs. Towne! I understand perfectly.... I am sure we were very stupid.... Come, mother!"

Mrs. Robson responded at once to her daughter's command. The two women rose. By this time the task of securing another place was quite hopeless. Claire felt that every eye in the room was turned upon them. Picking their way between a labyrinth of tables and chairs, they literally were stumbling in the direction of an exit when Claire felt a

hand upon her arm. She turned.

"Pardon me," the man opposite her was saying, "but may I offer you a place at our table?"

Claire said nothing; she followed blindly. Her mother was close upon her heels.

The table was a small one, and only two people were occupying it--the man who had halted Claire, and a woman. The man, standing with one hand on the chair which he had drawn up for Mrs. Robson, said, simply:

"My name is Stillman, and of course you know Mrs. Condor--the lady who has just sung for us."

Claire gave a swift, inclusive glance. Yes, it was the same woman who had attempted to beguile a weary audience from its impending repletion; at close range one could not escape the intense redness of her hair or the almost immoral whiteness of the shoulders and arms which she was at such little pains to conceal.

"Stillman?" Mrs. Robson was fluttering importantly. "Not the old Rincon Hill family?"

"Yes, the old Rincon Hill family," the man replied.

Mrs. Robson sat down with preening self-satisfaction. Wearily the daughter dropped into the seat which Mrs. Condor proffered. The name of Ned Stillman was not unfamiliar to any San Franciscan who scanned the social news with even a casual glance, and Claire had a vague remembrance that Mrs. Condor also figured socially, but in a rather more inclusive way than her companion. At all events, it was plain that her mother, with unerring feminine insight, had placed the pair to her satisfaction. Already the elder woman was contriving to let Stillman know something of her antecedents. She was Emily Carrol, also of Rincon Hill, and of course he knew her two sisters--Mrs. Thomas Wynne and Mrs. Edward Finch-Brown! As Stillman returned a smiling assurance to Mrs. Robson's attempts to be impressive, a young woman in white arrived with ice-cream and messy layer-cake. Unconsciously Claire Robson began to smile. She could not have said why, but somehow the presence of Ned Stillman and Mrs. Condor at a table spread with such vacuous delights seemed little short of ridiculous. They did not fit the picture any more than her beetle-browed, red-lipped Serbian who.... She turned deliberately and swept the room with her glance. Of course he had gone. It was not to be expected that he would descend to the level of such puerile feasting. A sudden contempt for everything that only an hour ago seemed so desirable rose within her, and, in answer to the young woman's query as to whether she preferred coffee to ice-cream, she answered with lip-curling aloofness:

"Neither, thank you.... I am not hungry."

Stillman looked at her searchingly. She returned his gaze without flinching.

Claire Robson did not sleep that night. She lay for hours, quite motionless, staring into the gloom of her narrow bedroom, her mind ruthlessly shaping formless, vague intuitions into definite convictions. She could not put her finger upon the precise reason for her inquietude. Was it chargeable to so trivial a circumstance as a stranger's formal courtesy or had something more subtle moved her? If the depths of her isolation had been thrown into too high relief by the almost shameful sense of obligation she felt toward Stillman for his courtesy, what was to be said of the uniqueness of the solitary position which the Serbian awarded her by singling her out for a sympathetic response? Could it be

that a vague pity had stirred him, too? Had things reached a point where her loneliness showed through the threadbare indifference of her glance? In short, had both men been won to gallantry by her distress? In one case, at least, she decided that there was a reasonable chance to doubt. And that doubt quickened her pulse like May wine.

But the humiliation of her last encounter with chivalry stuck with profound irritation. She recalled the scene again and again. She remembered her contemptuous silence before Stillman's obvious suavities, the high, assured laugh which his companion, Mrs. Condor, threw out to meet his quiet sallies, the ruffling satisfaction of her mother, chattering on irrelevantly, but with the undisguised purpose of creating a proper impression. How easily Stillman must have seen through Claire's muteness and the elder woman's eager craving for an audience! And all the time Mrs. Condor had been laughing, not ill-naturedly, but with the irony of an experienced woman possessing a sense of humor.

And at the end, when the four had left the church together, to be whirled home in Stillman's car, the sudden nods and smiles and farewells that had blossomed along the path of her mother's exit! Claire could have laughed it all away if her mother had not betrayed such eagerness to drink this snobbish flattery to the lees....

Claire's father had never entered very largely into her calculations, but to-night her readjusted vision included him. Stubborn, kind, a bit weak, and inclined to copying poetry in a red-covered album, he had been no match for the disillusionments of married life. Her mother's people had felt a sullen resentment at his downfall--he had taken to drink and died ingloriously when Claire was still in her seventh year. Claire, influenced by the family traditions, had shared this resentment. But now she found herself wondering whether there was not a word or two to be said in his behalf. Her father had been a cheap clerk in a wholesale house when he had married. The uncertain Carrol fortunes were waning swiftly at the time, and Emily Carrol had been thrown at him with all the panic that then possessed a public schooled in the fallacy that marriage was a woman's only career. The result was to have been expected. Extravagance, debts, too much family, drink, death--the sequence was complete. He had been captured, withered, cast aside, by a tribe that had not even had the decency to grant his memory the kindness of an excuse.

Wide-eyed and restless, Claire Robson felt a sudden pity for her father. Tears sprang to her eyes; it overwhelmed her to discover this new father so full of human failings and yet so full of human provocation. In her twenty-four years of life she had never shed a tear for him, or felt the slightest pang for his failure. If she had ever doubted the Carrol viewpoint, she had never given her lack of faith any scope. She had taken their cast-off prejudices and threadbare convictions as docilely as she had once received their stale garments. She had shrunk from spiritual independence with all the obsequious arrogance of a poor relation at a feast. Her diffidence, her self-consciousness, her timidity, were the outward forms of an inbred snobbery. It was curious how suddenly all this was made clear to her....

At length she fell into a troubled sleep.... When she awoke the room's outlines were reviving before the advances of early morning. For the first time in her life she caught the poetry of the new day at first hand. For years she had reveled vicariously in the delights of morning. But it had always been to her a thing apart, a matter which the writers of romantic verse beheld and translated for the benefit of late sleepers. It never occurred to her that the day crawling into the light-well of her Clay Street flat was lit with precisely the same flame that colored the far-flung peaks of the poet's song. And instantly a phrase of the Serbian's harangue came to her--blood-red dawn! He had repeated these words over and over again, and somehow under the heat of

his ardor and longing for his native land this hackneyed phrase took on its real and dreadful value. In the sudden sweep of this vital remembrance, Claire Robson rose for a moment above the fretful drip of circumstance.... _Blood-red Dawn_!... She threw herself back upon her bed and shuddered....

She rose at seven o'clock, but already the morning had grown pallid and flecked with gray clouds.

An apologetic tap came at the door, and the voice of Mrs. Robson repeating a formula that she never varied:

"Better hurry, Claire. If you don't you'll be late for the office!"

CHAPTER II

As Claire stepped out into the cold sunlight of early November, she smiled bitterly at the exaggeration of last night's mood. After the first hectic flush of dawn there is nothing so sane and sweet and commonplace as morning. The spectacle of Mrs. Finnegan, who lodged in the flat below, slopping warm suds over the thin marble steps, added a final note of homeliness, which divorced Claire completely from heroics.

"Well, Miss Robson, so you really got home, last night," broke from the industrious neighbor as she straightened up and tucked her lifted skirts in more securely. "I thought you never would come!... A package came from New York for you. The man nearly banged your door down. I had Finnegan put it on your back stoop.... It's from that cousin of yours, I guess. I was so excited about it I kept wishing you'd get home early so that I could get a peep at all the pretty things. But I'll run up just as soon as I get through with the breakfast dishes."

Claire smiled wanly. "It was very good of you to take all that trouble, I'm sure, Mrs. Finnegan!"

"Oh, bother my trouble!" Mrs. Finnegan responded. "I just knew how crazy I'd be about a box. I guess we women are all alike, Miss Robson. Anyway, your mother and I are!"

Mrs. Finnegan bent over her task again with a quick exasperated movement, and Claire passed on. Her neighbor's abrupt rebuke gave Claire a renewed sense of exclusion. She had meant to be warmly appreciative, but she knew now that she had been only coldly polite. But, as a matter of fact, the prospect of delving through a box of Gertrude Sinclair's discarded finery moved her this morning to a dull fury. She felt suddenly tired of cast-offs, of compromise, of all the other shabby adjustments of genteel poverty. And by the time she reached the office of the Falcon Insurance Company her soul was seething with a curious and unreasonable revolt. The feminine office force seemed seething also, but with an impersonal, quivering excitement. Nellie Whitehead had been dismissed!

This Nellie Whitehead, the stenographer-in-chief, was big, vigorous, blond—vulgar, energetic, vivid; and Miss Munch, her assistant, a thin, hollow-chested spinster, who loafed upon her job so that she might save her sight for the manufacture of incredible yards of tatting, never missed an opportunity to lift her eyes significantly behind her superior's back.

"And what do you suppose?" Miss Munch was querying as Claire stepped into the dressing-room. "She told Mr. Flint to go to hell!... Yes, positively, she used those very words. And I must say he was a gentleman

throughout it all. He told her gently but firmly that her example in the office wasn't what it should be and that in justice to the other girls...."

Claire turned impatiently away. The fiction of Mr. Flint's belated interest in the morals of his feminine office force was unconvincing enough to be irritating. For a man who never missed an opportunity to force his attentions, he was showing an amazingly ethical viewpoint. On second thought, Claire remembered that Miss Munch was never the recipient of Mr. Flint's attentions, which to the casual eye might have seemed innocent enough—on rainy days gallantly bending his ample girth in a rather too prolonged attempt to slip on the girls' rubbers, insisting on the quite unnecessary task of incasing them in their jackets and smoothing the sleeves of their shirt-waists in the process, flicking imaginary threads where the feminine curves were most opulent. Not that Mr. Flint was a wolf in sheep's clothing; he played the part of sheep, but he needed no disguise for his performance; he merely lived up to a sort of flock-mind consciousness where women were concerned.

The group clustered about Miss Munch broke up at the approach of Mr. Flint, who gave a significant glance in the direction of Claire Robson, intent upon her morning work. But the excitement persisted in spite of the scattered auditors, and the fact was mysteriously communicated that Miss Munch's interest in the event was chargeable to her hopes. It seemed impossible to Miss Munch that any one but herself could succeed to the vacant post of stenographer-in-chief.

At precisely eleven o'clock the buzzer on Claire Robson's desk hummed three times. This announced that she was wanted by Mr. Flint. She gathered her note-book and pencils and answered the call.

Mr. Flint was busy at the telephone when Claire entered the private office. She seated herself at the flat oak table in the center of the room.

Mr. Flint's office bore all the conventional signs of business—commissions of authority from insurance companies, state licenses in oak frames, an oil-painting of Thomas Sawyer Flint, the founder of the firm, over a fireplace that maintained its useless dignity in spite of the steam-radiator near the window. On his desk was the inevitable picture of his wife framed in silver, a hand-illuminated platitude of Stevenson, an elaborate set of desk paraphernalia in beaten brass that bore little evidence of service. In two green-glazed bowls of Japanese origin, roses from Mr. Flint's garden at Yolanda scattered faint pink petals on the Smyrna rug. These flowers were the only concession to esthetics that Mr. Flint indulged. In spite of a masculine distaste for carrying flowers, hardly a day went by when he did not appear at the office with a huge harvest of blossoms from his country home.

Claire was bending over, intent on picking up the crumpled rose-petals, when Mr. Flint finally spoke. She straightened herself slowly. Her unhurried movements had a certain grace that did not escape the man opposite her. She tossed the bruised leaves into a waste-basket and reached for her pencil. Her heart was pounding, but she faced Mr. Flint with a clear, direct gaze.

"Miss Robson, of course you've heard all about the rumpus," Mr. Flint was saying. "I had to fire Miss Whitehead.... I think you can fill the bill."

Claire rose without replying. Mr. Flint left his seat and crossed over to her.

"I hope," he said, flicking a thread from her shoulder, "that you're

game.... Some girls, of course, don't care a damn about getting on ... especially if there's a Johnny somewhere in sight with enough cash in his pocket for a marriage license."

"I am very much taken by surprise," Claire faltered. "You see, the change means a great deal to me."

Mr. Flint moved closer. His manner was intimate and distasteful. "Sometimes I think we business men ought to get more of a slant on our employees.... You know what I mean, not exactly bothering about how many lumps of sugar they take in their coffee, or their taste in after-dinner cheese ... but, well, just how often they have to resole their boots and turn the ribbons on their spring bonnets.... Now, in Miss Whitehead's case.... But of course you're not interested in Miss Whitehead."

"Why, I wouldn't say that," stammered Claire. Then, as she reached for her shorthand book she said, more confidently: "To be quite frank, Mr. Flint, I liked Miss Whitehead tremendously. She was so alive ... and vivid."

Flint beamed. "Do you know why I picked you instead of that Munch dame?... It's because you had all the frills of a woman and none of the nastiness. For instance, you wouldn't be bothered in the least if I took a notion to overload the office with another pretty girl.... I've watched you for some time. It has taken me six months to make up my mind to fire Miss Whitehead and boost you into her job."

He stood with an air of condescending arrogance, his thumbs bearing down heavily on his trousers pockets, his broad fingers beating a self-satisfied tattoo upon his thighs. Claire shrank nearer the table. "You mean, Mr. Flint, that you dismissed Miss Whitehead merely to give me her position?"

Flint smiled. "Well, now you're coming down to brass-headed tacks. I'm not keen on spelling out the whys and wherefores of anything I do.... But one thing is certain enough--if Miss Munch had been the only available candidate I could have stood Miss Whitehead.... There ain't much question about that."

"Oh, Mr. Flint! I'm sorry!"

He gave a wide guffaw. "That only makes you all the more of a corker!" he answered, rubbing his hands together in narrow-eyed satisfaction.

She escaped into the outer office, flushed, but with her head thrown back in an attitude of instinctive defense, and the next instant she literally ran into the arm of a man.

"Why, Miss Robson, but this is pleasant! I'm just dropping in to see Mr. Flint."

She drew back. Mr. Stillman stood smiling before her.

Greetings and questions flowed with all the genial ease of one who is never quite taken unawares. Claire, outwardly calm, felt overcome with inner confusion. She passed rapidly to her desk and sat down.

Miss Munch was upon her almost instantly.

"Do you know Ned Stillman?" Miss Munch asked, veiling her real purpose.

"Yes," replied Claire, with uncomfortable brevity.

"I have a cousin who was housekeeper for his wife's father.... You know

about his wife, of course."

Claire lifted her clear eyes in a startled glance that was almost as instantly converted into a look of challenge.

"Yes," she lied.

Miss Munch hesitated, then plunged at once into the issue uppermost in her mind. "It's too bad you've had to be bothered with Flint's dictation, Miss Robson. It just happens I'm writing up a long home-office report, otherwise I'm sure he wouldn't have annoyed you."

Claire Robson fixed Miss Munch with a coldly polite stare. "You've made a mistake, Miss Munch. Mr. Flint has given me no dictation." The speech in itself was nothing, but Claire's tone gave it unmistakable point. Miss Munch grew white and then flushed. She turned away without a word, but Claire Robson knew that in a twinkling of an eye she had gained not only an enemy, but an uncommon one.

* * * * *

That night Claire took an unusually long way round on her walk home. Her path from the Falcon Insurance Company's office on California Street to the Clay Street flat was never a direct one, first, because there were hills to be avoided, and, second, because Claire found the streets at twilight too full of charm for a rapid homeward flight. The year was on the wane and the November days were coming to an early blackness. Claire reveled in the light-flooded dusk of these late autumn evenings. To her, the city became a vast theater, darkened suddenly for the purpose of throwing the performers into sharper relief. Most clerks made their way up Montgomery Street toward Market, but Claire climbed past the German Bank to Kearny Street. She liked this old thoroughfare, struggling vainly to pull itself up to its former glory. The Kearny Street crowd was a varying quantity, frankly shabby or flashily prosperous, as far south as Sutter Street, suddenly dignified and reserved for the two blocks beyond. To-night Claire missed the direct appeal of the streets lined with bright shops. They formed the proper background for her broodings, but they scarcely entered into her mood. She could not have said just what flight her mood was taking, or upon just which branch her thought would alight. She was confused and puzzled and vaguely uneasy. She had a sense that somehow, somewhere, a door had been opened and that a strong, devastating wind was clearing the air and bringing dead things to ground in a disorderly shower. She was stirred by twilights of uneasiness. It was almost as if the monotonous truce of noonday had been darkened by a huge, composite, masculine shadow, made up in some mysterious way of the ridiculous Serbian and his blood-red dawn, and this man Stillman, who had a wife, and Flint, with hands so ready to flick threads from her sloping shoulders. Yesterday her outlook had been peaceful and unhappy; to-day she felt stimulation of an impending struggle. She was afraid, and yet she would not have turned back for one swift moment. And suddenly the words of Mrs. Finnegan recurred, "I guess we women are all alike." Were they?

At which point she came upon a pastry-shop window and she went in and bought a half-dozen French pastries. The thought of her mother's pleasure at this unusual treat brought her in due time smiling to her threshold.

Mrs. Robson was not in her accustomed place at the head of the stairs; about half-way up the long flight her voice sounded triumphantly:

"Oh, Claire, do hurry and see what Gertrude has sent! Everything is perfectly lovely."

Claire quickened her pace and gained the cramped living-room. Thrown

about in a sort of joyous disorder, Gertrude Sinclair's finery quite lit up the shabbiness. Hats, plumes, scraps of vivid silks, gilded slippers, a spangled fan—their unrelated vividness struck Claire as fantastic as a futurist painting. Her mother seemed suddenly young again. Claire wondered whether, after the toll of sixty-odd years, she could be moved to momentary youth by the mere sight of the prettiness that was quickening her mother's pulse.

Mrs. Robson held up a filmy evening gown of black net embroidered with a rich design of dull gold. "Isn't this heavenly?" she demanded. "And it will just fit you, Claire. I think Gertrude has spread herself this time."

"Yes, on finery, mother. But didn't she send anything sensible? What possessed her to load us up with a lot of things we can never possibly get a chance to wear?"

Claire had not meant to be disagreeable, but there was rancor in her voice. Mrs. Robson cast aside the dress with the carelessness of a spoiled favorite; she always adapted her manner to the tone of her background.

"Claire Robson!" she cried, good-naturedly. "You're a regular old woman! I'm sure I haven't much to be cheerful about, but I just won't let anything down me!... If I wanted to, I could give up right now. Where would we have been, I'd like to know, if I hadn't held my head up? Goodness knows, my folks didn't help me. If they had had their way, I'd been out manicuring people's nails and washing heads for a living. And you in an orphan-asylum! That's what my people did for me! As it is, they shoved you out to work. What chance have you of meeting nice people? No, Claire, I don't care how they have treated me, but they might have given you a chance. I'll never forgive them for that!... I thought last night when I was talking to Mrs. Condor and watching you and Mr. Stillman how nice it would have been if.... Oh, that reminds me! Who do you think has been here to-day?... Mrs. Towne! She came to apologize about asking us to move our seats the other night. She knows the Stillmans well. The old people were pillars of the Second Church in the 'sixties. I fancy he is dancing about that Mrs. Condor's heels a bit. Of course, as Mrs. Towne said, she wouldn't be likely to make herself a permanent feature of Second Church entertainments. But now in war-times anything is possible. Mrs. Towne was telling me all about Stillman and his wife. I should have remembered, but somehow I forgot. Get your things off and I'll tell you all about it."

Claire handed her mother the package of pastries. "I heard about it to-day," she said, coldly.

"But Mrs. Towne knows the whole thing from A to Z," insisted Mrs. Robson, genially.

"I'm not interested in the details," Claire returned, doggedly.

Mrs. Robson's face wore a puzzled, almost a harried, expression. Claire moved away. Her mother gave a shrug and renewed her efforts to drag further finery from the mysterious depths of the treasure-box. Her daughter cast a last incurious glance back. The glow on Mrs. Robson's face, which Claire had mistaken for youth, seemed now a thing hectic and unpleasant, and gave an uncanny sense of a skeleton sitting among gauds and baubles.

A feeling of isolation swept Claire, such as she had never experienced. The person who should have been closest suddenly had become a stranger.... She went into her room and closed the door.

CHAPTER III

The following week Claire was surprised to find a letter on her desk at the office. The few written favors that came her way usually were addressed to the Clay Street flat, so that she was puzzled by this innovation and the unfamiliar handwriting. Glancing swiftly at the signature, she was surprised to see the name "Lily Condor," scrawled loosely at the foot of the note. It seemed that Mrs. Condor was giving a little musicale in Ned Stillman's apartments on the following Friday night, and, if one could believe such a thing, the lady implied that the evening would scarcely be complete without the presence of Claire Robson—or, to put it more properly, Claire Robson and her _mother_.

As Claire had scarcely said a half-dozen words to Mrs. Condor on the night of the Red Cross concert, this invitation seemed little short of extraordinary. But, as Claire thought it over, she recalled that there had been some general conversation about music, in which she had admitted a discreet passion for this form of entertainment, even going so far as to confess that she played the piano herself upon occasion. Her first impulse, clinched by the familiar feminine excuse that she had nothing suitable to wear, was to send her regrets. At once she thought of the scorned finery that Gertrude Sinclair had included in her last box, and the more she thought about it the more convinced she became that she had no real reason for refusing. But a swift, strange regret that her mother had been included in the invitation took the edge off her anticipations. She tried to dismiss this feeling, but it grew more definite as the morning progressed.

For days Claire had been striking at the shackles of habit with a rancor bred of disillusionment. She had been on tiptoe for new and vital experiences, and yet, for any outward sign, her life bid fair to escape the surge of any torrential circumstance. Particularly, at the office, things had gone on smoothly. The other clerks had accepted Claire's advancement without either protest or enthusiasm. Even Miss Munch had veiled her resentment behind the saving trivialities of daily intercourse. She had gone so far as to introduce Claire to her cousin, a Mrs. Richards, who had come in at the noon hour for a new tatting design. This cousin was a large, red-faced woman, with an aggressively capable manner. She had the quick, ferret-like eyes of Miss Munch and the loose mouth of a perpetual gossip.

"She's the one I told you about the other day," Miss Munch had explained later—"the housekeeper for _your friend_ Stillman's father-in-law." She gave nasty emphasis to this trivial speech.

Flint had been direct and business-like almost to the point of brusqueness. But Claire knew that such moods were not unusual, so she took little stock in the ultimate significance of his restrained manner.

Perhaps the most indefinable change had come over Claire's home life. Her mother's unflinching string of trivial gossip, formerly not without a certain interest, now scarcely held her to even polite attention. Indeed, her self-absorbed silence, while Mrs. Robson poured out the latest news about Mrs. Finnegan's second sister's husband's mother—who was suddenly stricken with some incurable disease, made all the more mysterious by the fact that its nature was not divulged—was so apparent that her mother, goaded on to a mild exasperation, would ask, significantly:

"What's the matter, Claire? Have you a headache?"

Mrs. Robson was never so happy as in the discovery of some one with a mysterious disease, particularly if the victim's relatives were loath to

discuss the issue.

"They think they fool me!" she would say, triumphantly, to Claire, "but I guess I know what ails her.... Didn't her mother, and her uncle, and her sister's oldest child die of consumption? I tell you it's in the family. The last time I saw her she nearly coughed her head off."

Not that Mrs. Robson was unsympathetic; brought face to face with suffering, she blossomed with every impulsive tenderness, but her experiences had confirmed her in pessimism, and every fresh tragedy testified to the soundness of her faith. Her pride at diagnosing people's ills and pronouncing their death-sentences was almost professional. And she had an irritating way of making comments such as this:

"Well, Claire, I see that old Mrs. Talbot is dead at last!... I knew she wouldn't live another winter. They'll feel terribly, no doubt; but, of course, it is a great relief."

Or:

"Why, here is the death notice of Isaac Rice! I thought he died _years_ ago. My, but he was a trial! What a blessing!"

This was the type of conversation that Claire was finding either empty of meaning or illuminating to the point of annoyance. What amazed her was the fact that she had remained blind so long to the slightest of the conversational food upon which she had been fed.

Claire did not tell her mother about the invitation to Mrs. Condor's musical evening.

"I'll wait," she said to herself. "Thursday will be time enough." Although why delay would prove advantageous was not particularly apparent.

On Wednesday night at the dinner-table, Mrs. Robson, as if still puzzled at her daughter's altered mood, said, rather cautiously:

"There's to be a reception at the church on Friday night."

"For whom?" inquired Claire, with pallid interest.

"I didn't quite catch the name.... Some woman back from France. She's been nursing in one of the British hospitals. She's to get Red Cross work started at the church. It seems San Francisco is a bit slow over taking up the work, but, then, you know, we're poked off here in a corner and I suppose we don't quite realize yet.... Anyway, Mrs. Towne wants us to help with the coffee. She says you should have been in the church-work long ago. You look so self-contained and efficient.... I told her we would be there at half past seven and get the dishes into shape."

Claire's heart beat violently. "Friday night? I'm sorry, mother; I have another engagement."

"Another engagement? Why, Claire, how funny! You never said anything about it. I don't know what to say to Mrs. Towne."

Claire felt calm again. "Just tell her the truth."

"But she'll think so strange that I didn't know ... that I...."

"You shouldn't have spoken for me until you found out whether I was willing."

"Willing! _Willing!_ I didn't suppose you'd be anything else. I've been trying to get you in with the right people at the church for the last fifteen years. I've tried so hard...."

"Yes, mother, I know," said Claire, patiently. "But don't you see? That's just it. You've tried too hard."

Mrs. Robson began to whimper discreetly. "How you do talk, Claire! I declare I don't know what to make of it. I suppose you're bitter about Mrs. Towne the other night. I felt so at first, but I can see now we were at the wrong table. And, after all, everything came out beautifully. We sat with Mr. Stillman, and that had a very good effect, I can tell you. Especially when everybody saw us leave with him. Why, it brought Mrs. Towne to her feet."

"Yes, and that's the humiliating part of it."

"Well, Claire, when you've lived as long as I have you won't be so uppish about making compromises," flung back Mrs. Robson. "Of course, if you've got another engagement, you've got another engagement, but if...."

"I wouldn't have gone, anyway. I'm through with that sort of thing."

"Why, Claire, how can you! It's your duty, _now_!--with your country at war--and ... and ... Even that dreadful Serbian the other night made _that_ plain."

"I'll go with you to church on Sundays, of course, but--"

"What am _I_ to do?" wailed Mrs. Robson. "At least you might think of me! I've not had much pleasure in my life, goodness knows, and now just as I...."

Mrs. Robson broke off abruptly on a flood of tears. Two weeks ago these tears would have overwhelmed Claire. As it was, she sat calmly stirring her tea, surprised and a little ashamed of her coldness. The truth was that Claire Robson was feeling all the fanatical cruelty that comes with sudden conviction. The forms of her new faith had hardened too quickly and left outlines sharp and uncompromising.

For years Claire had found shelter from the glare of middle-class snobbery beating about her head, by shrinking into her mother's inadequate shadow as a desert bird shrinks into the thin shadow of a dry reed by some burned-out watercourse. Now a full noon of disillusionment had annihilated this shadow and given her the courage of necessity. And there was something more than courage--there was an eagerness to stand alone in the commonplace words with which she sought to temper her refusal to assist at the coming church reception:

"I can't see any good reason, mother, why you shouldn't go and help Mrs. Towne.... What have my plans to do with it?"

To which her mother answered:

"I do so hate to be seen at such places alone, Claire."

Claire made no reply. She did not want to give her mother's indecision a chance to crystallize into a definite stand. She knew by long experience that if this happened it would be fatal. But in a swift flash of decision Claire made up her mind for one thing--she would either go to Mrs. Condor's evening alone or she would send her regrets.

CHAPTER IV

By a series of neutral subterfuges and tactful evasions Claire Robson won her point--she went to the Condor musicale at Ned Stillman's apartments alone, and on that same night her mother wended a rather grudging way to the Second Presbyterian Church reception.

Acting under her mother's advice, Claire timed her arrival for nine o'clock, an hour which seemed incredibly late to one schooled in the temperate hour of church socials. Mrs. Condor herself opened the door in answer to Claire's ring.

"Oh, my dear, but I _am_ glad to see you!" burst from the elder woman as she waved her in. But she did not so much as mention the absence of Mrs. Robson, and Claire was divided between a feeling of wounded family pride, and gratification at the intuition which had warned her to leave her mother to her own devices. More people arrived on Claire's heels, and in the lively bustle she was left to shed her wraps in one of the bedrooms. Her heart was pounding with reaction at her outwardly self-contained entrance. She let her rather shabby cloak slip to the floor, revealing a strange, new Claire resplendent in the gold-embroidered gown that had once so stirred her rancor. For a brief instant she had an impulse to gather the discarded wrap securely about her and make a quick exit. A swooning fear at the thought of meeting a roomful of people assailed her. But there succeeded a courage born of the realization that they all would be strangers. With a sense of bravado she stepped out into the entrance hall again.

Ned Stillman came forward. She halted and waited for him. His face had lit with a sudden pleasure, which told Claire that for once in her life her presence roused positive interest. He inquired after her health, why her mother had not come, whether the abominable fog was clearing. His easy formality put her, as usual, completely at ease.

It was only when he asked her, with the most inconsequential tone in the world, "whether she could read music at sight" that a sinking fear came over her. And yet she found courage enough to be truthful and say yes.

"That's fine!" he returned. "Our accompanist hasn't come yet and we want to start off with a song or two."

From this moment on the evening impressed itself on Claire in a series of blurred hectic pictures.... She knew that Stillman was leading her toward the piano, but the living-room and its toned lights gave her a curious sense of unreality. She seated herself before the white keyboard and folded her hands with desperate resignation while she waited for Stillman to dictate the next move.

"My dear Mrs. Condor," Stillman explained, as that lady came up to them, "we sha'n't have to wait for Flora Menzies. Miss Robson will accompany you."

Claire sat unmoved. She was beyond so trivial a sensation as anxiety. Stillman drifted away; Mrs. Condor began to run through the sheet music lying on the piano.

"Of course you know Schumann, Miss Robson. Shall we start at once? How is the light? If you moved your stool a little--so. There, that's better."

Claire did not reply. She looked at the music before her. She was conscious that it was a piece she knew, although its name registered no other impression. She began to play. The opening bars almost startled

her. She felt a hush fall over the noisy room. Her fingers stumbled--she caught the melody again with staggering desperation. Mrs. Condor was singing.... The room faded; even the sound of Mrs. Condor's voice became remote. Claire had a desire to laugh.

All manner of strange, disconnected thoughts ran through her head. She remembered a doll she had broken years ago and buried with great pomp and circumstance, a pink parasol that had been given her as a child, the gigantic and respectable wig which had incased the head of her old German music-teacher, Frau Pfaff. And as she played on and on the music further evoked the memory of this worthy lady who had given her services in exchange for lodgings in an incredibly small hall bedroom, with certain privileges at the kitchen stove. And pictures of this irritating woman rose before her, stewing dried fruit, or preparing sour beef, or borrowing the clothes boiler for a perennial wash. What compromises her mother had made to give her child the gentle accomplishments that Mrs. Robson associated with breeding! It came to Claire that it was almost cruel to have denied this mother a share in the triumphs of that evening. And with that, she realized that Mrs. Condor had ceased singing. A hum broke loose, followed by applause. Claire grew faint. Her head began to swirl. She clutched the piano stool and by sheer terror at the thought of creating a scene she managed to keep her consciousness as she felt Mrs. Condor's hand upon her shoulder and heard a voice that just missed being patronizing:

"My dear, you did it beautifully."

Claire longed to burst into tears....

The concert was over shortly after eleven o'clock. Besides Mrs. Condor, there had been a 'cellist, very masculine in his looks but rather forceless in his playing, and a young, frail girl who brought great breadth and vigor to her interpretations at the piano. But Claire was really too excited for calm enjoyment. Supper followed--creamed minced chicken and extraordinarily thin sandwiches, and a dry, pale wine that Claire found at first rather distasteful. Claire sat with a little group composed of Mrs. Condor, Ned Stillman, a fashionable young man, Phil Edington, who frankly confessed boredom at all things musical except one-steps and fox-trots, and two or three artistic-looking souls who pretended to be quite shocked by young Edington's frankness.

Conversation veered naturally to the subject of the war. Edington had tried for a commission in an officers' training-camp and failed. He was extraordinarily frank about it all, and good-natured at the chaffing that Mrs. Condor and Stillman threw at him.

"I'm going to wait now and be drafted," he announced. "As long as I failed to make a high grade I want to begin at the bottom and see the whole picture."

Claire rather waited for a word from Stillman as to his convictions on the subject. Of course one could see that he was over the draft age, still.... For the most part she was silent, but happy and content. By contributing her share to the evening's entertainment she had justified her presence. Wine as a factor in midnight suppers was a new but not a revolutionary experience to Claire Robson, but she gasped a bit when the maid passed cigarettes to the ladies. And yet she felt a delicious sense of being a party to something quite daring and outré, although she did not have either courage or skill to enjoy one of the slender, gold-tipped delights.

The time for departure finally came. Claire rose reluctantly. Mrs. Condor, slipping one arm in Phil Edington's and the other in Claire's, sauntered with them toward the entrance hall.

"I say," ventured Edington as Stillman caught up to the group. "What's the matter with just us four dropping down to the Palace for a whirl or two?"

Claire stared. She had not grown used to the novelty of being included, but any instinctive objections to the plan were promptly silenced by Mrs. Condor's enthusiastic approval.

They arrived at the Palace Hotel shortly before midnight. The Rose Room was crowded. All the tables seemed filled, and Claire had a moment of disappointment caused by the fear that their party would be unable to gain admittance. But young Edington's presence soon set any uneasiness on that score at rest, and a place was evolved with deftness and despatch. The novelty of the situation to Claire was nothing compared with her matter-of-fact acceptance of it. She was neither self-conscious nor timid. Her three companions had a way of tacitly including her in even their trivial chatter that was unmistakable, though hard to define. She felt that she was one of them, and she blossomed in this strange new warmth like a chilled blossom at the final approach of a belated spring. All evening her starved sense of self-importance had been feeding greedily upon the compliments that had come her way. There had been her mother's rather apologetic words of approval at her appearance, to begin with, then Mrs. Condor's appreciation at the piano, and finally a word dropped by one of the women who had shared a mirror with her at the hour of departure.

"How do you manage your hair, Miss Robson?" the other had said, digging viciously at her shifting locks with a hairpin. "I do declare you're the only woman in the room that looks presentable."

But it was Edington's words to Stillman while they stood waiting for the hotel attendants to prepare the table that brought a quickened beat to her heart. The conversation was low and not meant for her ears, but her senses were too sharpened to miss Edington's furtive words as he whispered to Stillman:

"Where did ... amazing.... Miss Robson?"

Claire did not catch the reply which must have also been something of a query, but she heard Edington continue.

"Well ... a little too silent, I must admit.... No, I don't dislike 'em that way ... but I'm afraid of them."

Stillman answered with a low laugh.

They sat down. Edington ordered wine. The crowd at the tables was rather a mixed one. There was plenty of elaborate gowning among the groups of formal diners who had prolonged their feasting into the supper hour, but many casuals, drifting in for a few drinks and a dance or two, robbed the scene of its earlier brilliance.

The orchestra struck up a one-step. Claire denied Stillman the dance, explaining that she knew none of the new steps, and he whirled away with Mrs. Condor. Edington, robbed of his chance, pouted unashamed.

"I say, Miss Robson, can't you do a one-step--really? There isn't anything to it! Come on--try; I'll pull you through."

Claire's knowledge of dancing was instinctive, but not a matter of much practice, yet his distress was so comic that she relented. She wondered if he could feel her trembling as they swung into the dance. She stumbled once or twice from timidity, but Edington guided unerringly. Half-way round she suddenly struck the proper swing.

"There--that's it," cried Edington, enthusiastically. "Now you've got it! Fine!"

His praise mounted to her brain like a heady wine, and suddenly, in the twinkling of an eye, all the repressed youth within her awoke with a sweet and terrible joy.... They danced madly, perfectly, the rhythm entering into them like something at once fluid and flaming. Her ecstasy awoke a vague response in her partner, who bent forward as he kept repeating, monotonously:

"And you said you couldn't, Miss Robson! Fancy, you said you couldn't!"

The music stopped abruptly with a crash. Some of the dancers made their way leisurely back among the tables, but the most of them wandered about the polished floor, clapping insistent hands for an encore. In this brief interlude, groups arrived and departed. The musicians lifted their instruments to chin and lip, struck an opening chord; couples began to whirl and glide. Claire Robson, palpitant and eager, followed Edington's lead, but almost at the first moment of their rhythmic flight they came crashing into the overcoated bulk of a man cutting across the corner of the ballroom in an attempt at a swift exit. A smothered protest escaped Edington, and Claire detached herself from her partner long enough to see the offender bow very low and hear his apology in a voice and manner that seemed curiously familiar:

"I beg your pardon. Pray forgive me! I should have known better."

In the twinkling of an eye the interrupted dancers were sweeping on again, and the apologetic stranger, hat in hand, turning for a farewell look at the pair. Claire Robson felt an up-leap of the heart; a fresh ecstasy quickened her. It was the Serbian!

They finished the dance almost opposite their table and were met by a patter of applause from Mrs. Condor and Stillman, who were already seated.

Claire was flaming with embarrassment as she faced Stillman.

"I hope you'll understand, Mr. Stillman," she faltered. "But Mr. Edington seemed willing to risk my ignorance."

Mrs. Condor turned Claire's plaintive apology into a covert attack upon Stillman's courage, but Stillman rescued Claire from further confusion by laughing back:

"Well, I'll have my revenge on Edington. I'll grant him all the one-steps, but he can't have any of the waltzes, Miss Robson."

The waiter began to pour out the champagne. Claire settled back in her seat with a feeling of delightful languor. The dance had released all the pent-up emotions that a night of vivid sensations had called into her life. She had come into the Rose Room of the Palace Hotel quivering in the leash of a restrained enjoyment; it had taken the quick lash of opportunity to send her spirits hurtling forward in wild and headlong abandon. She lifted her wine-glass in answer to the upraised glasses of her companions, and the thought flashed over her that it would be impossible for her to have quite her old vision again. In every life there are culminating moments of joy or sorrow which either clear or dim the horizon, and Claire felt that such moment was now hers.

Stillman rose promptly in his seat at the first strains of the waltz, which proved to be the next number. Claire stepped out upon the floor with confidence.

She did not need any word of reassurance this time to tell her that her

dancing was more than acceptable, and, true to her brief experience with Stillman, he refrained from voicing the obvious. They had begun the dance promptly and for the first whirl about they had the floor almost to themselves. Claire's discreet sidelong glances detected many approving nods in their direction; people were noticing them and making favorable comment.... The floor filled, but even in the crowd Claire had a sense that she and her partner were standing out distinctly.

The very nature of the waltz contrasted sharply with the one-step. There was less abandon and more art. The first dance had expressed a primitive emotion; the present slow and measured whirl a discriminating sensation. And slowly, under the spell of Stillman's calm and yet strangely glowing manner, Claire recovered her poise. All night she had been inhaling every fresh delight rapturously with the closed eyes and open senses that one brings to the enjoyment of blossoms heavy with perfume. It took Stillman's influence to rob the hours of their swooning delight by recapturing her self-consciousness. Things became at once orderly and reasonable. And as he led her back to their table she felt the flame within cease its flarings and become steady, with a pleasurable glow. For a moment she felt uneasy, as if she were being trapped by something sweetfully insidious. Slowly, almost cautiously, she withdrew her arm from his. He made no comment; it was doubtful if he really noticed her recoil.

* * * * *

Long past its appointed time the hall light in the Robson flat continued to burn dimly. Mrs. Robson, sleepless and a bit anxious, waited alertly for the sound of Claire's key in the door. The welcome click came finally, succeeded by the unmistakable slam of an automobile door and the sharp, quick note of a machine speeding up.

"She's come home in Stillman's car," flashed through Mrs. Robson's mind, as she sat up in bed. At that moment Mrs. Finnegan's cuckoo clock, sounding distinctly through the thin flooring, warbled twice with a voice of friendly betrayal. "Mercy! it's two o'clock!" she muttered. "I wonder if Mrs. Finnegan is awake?... I do hope she heard the automobile!..."

Seated at the foot of her mother's bed, Claire tried her best to give a satisfactory report of the evening, but she found that she had overlooked most of the details that her mother found interesting. Who was there? What did Mrs. Condor wear? Did they have an elaborate spread?—the questions rippled on in an endless flow.

Under the acceleration of Claire's recital, Mrs. Robson found her experiences at the church reception left far behind. Even with scant details, Claire had managed to evolve a fascinating picture of a life robbed sufficiently of puritanism to be properly piquant. There was a tang of the swift, immoral, fascinating 'seventies in Claire's still cautious reference to champagne and cigarettes. It was impossible for any San Franciscan who had lived through those splendid madcap bonanza days to deny the lure of gay wickedness. At least it was hard to keep one's eyes on a prayer-book while the car of pleasure rattled by. And a coffee-and-cake social was, after all, a rather tame experience in the face of beverages more sparkling and eatables distinctly enticing.... Of course, if Claire had been introduced to any of these questionable delights by anybody short of a survivor of the Stillman clan, Mrs. Robson might have had a misgiving. As it was, she was not above a certain forewarning sense that made her say with an air of inconsequence as Claire finished her recital:

"Mrs. Towne tells me that there is a chance that Mr. Stillman's wife may get well. She's in a private sanitarium, at Livermore, you know." She stopped to draw up the bedclothes higher. "I do hope it's so!... But I'm

always skeptical about _crazy_ people ever amounting to anything again. Seems to me they're better off dead."

CHAPTER V

For Claire Robson, there followed after the memorable Condor-Stillman musicale a period of slack-water. It seemed as if a deadly stagnation was to poison her existence, so sharp and emphasized was her boredom. On the other hand, Mrs. Robson seemed to have contrived, from years of living among arid pleasures, the ability to conserve every happiness that she chanced upon to its last drop. Claire's invitation to be one of a distinguished group fed her vanity long after her daughter had outworn the delights of retrospection. The memory of this incident filled Mrs. Robson's thoughts, her dreams, her conversation. Gradually, as the days dragged by, bit by bit, she gleaned detached details of what had transpired, weaving them into a vivid whole, for the entertainment of herself and the amazement of her neighbor, Mrs. Finnegan.

Formerly Mrs. Finnegan's information regarding what went on in exclusive circles was confined to society dramas on the screen and the Sunday supplement. The personal note which Mrs. Robson brought to her recitals was a new and pleasing experience. After listening to the authentic gossip of Mrs. Robson, Mrs. Finnegan would return to her threshold with a sense of having shared state secrets. On such occasions Mrs. Robson's frankness had almost a challenge in it; she exaggerated many details and concealed none.

"Yes," she would repeat, emphatically, "they served cigarettes along with the wine. They _always_ do."

"Well, Mrs. Robson," Mrs. Finnegan inevitably returned, "far be it from me to criticize what your daughter's friends do. But I don't approve of women smoking."

As a matter of fact, neither did Mrs. Robson, but she felt in duty bound to resent Mrs. Finnegan's narrow attacks upon society.

"Well, Mrs. Finnegan, that's only because you're not accustomed to it. Now, if you had ever...."

"Did Claire smoke?"

"Why, of course _not_! How can you ask such a thing? I hope I've brought my daughter up decently, Mrs. Finnegan."

And with that, Mrs. Robson would deftly switch to a less exciting detail of the Condor-Stillman musicale, before her neighbor had a chance to pick flaws in her logic. But sooner or later the topic would again verge on the controversial. Usually at the point where the scene shifted from Ned Stillman's apartments to the Palace Hotel, Mrs. Finnegan's pug nose was lifted with tentative disapproval, as she inquired:

"How many did you say went down to the Palace?"

"Only four--Mr. Stillman, Claire, Mrs. Condor, and a young fellow named Edington."

"I suppose _that_ Mrs. Condor was the chaperon. Finnegan knows her well! She used to hire hacks when Finnegan was in the livery business years ago. She's a gay one, I can tell you. When only the steam-dummy ran out to the Cliff House...."

"That's nothing. Everybody who was anybody had dinners at the Cliff House in those days. I remember how my father...."

"Yes, Mrs. Robson, maybe you do! But I'll bet you never went to such a place without your husband ... and ... with a strange man."

Mrs. Robson never had, and she would tell Mrs. Finnegan so decidedly. This always had the effect of switching the subject again and Mrs. Robson found her desire to know the real details of Mrs. Condor's questionable gaities offered up on the altar of class loyalty. For it never occurred to Mrs. Robson to doubt that her social exile had nothing to do with the inherent rights of her position.

When everything else in the way of an irritating program failed to rouse Mrs. Robson's dignified ire, her neighbor fell back upon the fact that Stillman was a married man. Mrs. Finnegan really worshiped Mrs. Robson to distraction, but she had a natural combative tendency that was at odds with even her loyalty.

"Mr. Stillman is a married man," Mrs. Finnegan would insist, doggedly. "And I don't approve of married men taking an interest in young girls. Who knows?—he may spoil your daughter's chances."

This statement always had the effect of dividing Mrs. Robson against herself. She resented Mrs. Finnegan's insinuations concerning Stillman, because it was not in her nature to be anything but partizan, and at the same time she was mollified by her neighbor's recognition of the fact that Claire had such things as chances. She always managed cleverly at this point by saying, patronizingly:

"Why, how you talk, Mrs. Finnegan! Mr. Stillman is just like an old friend. Not that we've known him so long ... but the family, you know ... they're old-timers. Everybody knows the Stillmans! Really one couldn't want a better friend."

Thus did Mrs. Robson take meager and colorless realities and expand them into things of blossoming promise. She was almost creative in the artistry she brought to these transmutations. In the end she convinced herself of their existence and she was quite sure that Mrs. Finnegan shared equally in the delights of her fancy.

Meanwhile November passed, and the first weeks of December crowded the old year to its death. November had been shrouded in clammy fogs, but no rain had fallen, and everybody began to have the restless feeling engendered by the usual summer drought in California prolonged beyond its appointed season. The country and the people needed rain. Claire, always responsive to the moods of wind and weather, longed for the cleansing flood to descend and wash the dust-drab town colorful again. She awoke one morning to the delicious thrill of the moisture-laden southeast wind blowing into her room and the warning voice of her mother at her bedroom door calling to her:

"You'd better put on your thick shoes, Claire! We're in for a storm."

She leaped out of bed joyously and hurried with her dressing.

As she walked down to work the warm yet curiously refreshing wind flung itself in a fine frenzy over the gray city. Dark-gray clouds were closing in from the south, and in the east an ominous silver band of light marked the sullen flight of the sun. People were scampering about buoyantly, running for street-cars, chasing liberated hats, battling with billowing skirts. It seemed as if the promise of rain had revived laughter and motion to an extraordinary degree. At the office this ecstasy of spirit persisted; even Miss Munch came in hair awry and blowsy, her beady eyes almost laughing.

Mr. Flint had not been to the office for two days. A sniffing cold had kept him at home. Claire had rather looked for him to-day, and had prepared herself for a flood of accumulated dictation. But the threat of dampness evidently dissuaded him, for the noon hour came and went and Mr. Flint did not put in an appearance. At about three o'clock in the afternoon a long-distance call came on the telephone for Miss Robson. Claire answered. Flint was on the other end of the wire. He wanted to know if she could come at once over to Yolanda and take several pages of dictation. His cold was uncertain and he might not get out for the rest of the week. He realized that it was something of an imposition on her good nature, but she would be doing him a great favor if.... She interrupted him with her quick assent and he finished:

"I'll have the car at the station, and of course you'll stay for dinner."

Claire hung up the receiver and looked at her watch. It was just half after three. The next ferryboat connecting at Sausalito with the electric train for Yolanda left at three-forty-five. She had no time to lose; it was a good ten minutes' walk from the office to the ferry and little to be gained by taking a street-car. She managed her preparations for departure successfully, but in the end she had to ask Miss Munch to telephone her mother. Miss Munch assented with an alarmingly sweet smile.

Claire walked briskly down California Street toward the ferry-building. No rain had fallen, but the air was full of ominous promise. The wind was even brisker than it had been in the morning, and its breath almost tropically moist.

"At sundown it will simply pour," thought Claire, as she exchanged fifty cents for a ticket to Yolanda.

She presented her ticket at the entrance to the waiting-room and passed in. The passageway to the boat was already open; she went at once and found a sheltered corner outside on the upper deck. A strong sea was running and already the ferryboat was plunging and straining like a restless bloodhound in leash. The air was full of screaming gulls and the clipped whistling of restless bay craft. Claire was so intent on all this elemental agitation that she took no notice of the people about her, but as the boat slid lumberingly out of the slip she was recalled by a voice close at hand saying:

"Why, Miss Robson, who would think of seeing you here at this hour!"

Claire turned and discovered Miss Munch's cousin sitting beside her, intent on the inevitable tatting.

"Oh, Mrs. Richards, how stupid of me! Have you been here long?"

"About ten minutes. But I get so interested in my work I never have eyes for anything else. How do you put in the time? A trip like this is so tiresome!"

Claire delved into her bag and brought out knitting-needles and an unfinished sock.

"I'm trying a hand at this," she admitted, holding her handiwork up ruefully. "But I'm afraid I'm not very skilful."

Mrs. Richards inspected the sock with critical disapproval.

"Oh, well," she encouraged, "you'll learn ... practice makes perfect. I've just finished a half-dozen pairs. I suppose I'm laying myself out

for a roast doing tatting in public _these_ war days! But it's restful and I'm not one to pretend. As long as my conscience is clear I can afford to be perfectly independent.... You don't make this trip every night, do you?"

"Oh my, no! I'm going over to Mr. Flint's to take some dictation. He's home sick."

"I saw Mrs. Flint and the children coming _off_ the boat just as I got on." Mrs. Richards's voice took on a tone of casual directness.

"You know Mrs. Flint?"

"My dear girl, a trained nurse knows everybody—and everything about them, too. You never get a real line on people until you live with them. I've never nursed any of the Flint family, but I wouldn't have to to get their reputation—or perhaps I should say, old Flint's."

"_Old_ Flint's?" echoed Claire.

"Well, of course he isn't so awfully old, but men like him always give that impression. They're so awfully wise—about _some_ things. I _was_ so relieved when Gertie didn't get that dreadful Miss Whitehead's place. Being in the general office is bad enough, but in his _private_ office...." Mrs. Richards lifted and dropped her tatting-filled hands significantly.

Claire felt the blood rush to her face. "I'm in the private office, Mrs. Richards.... No doubt you forgot it."

"Well now, you know I _had_ ... for the moment. But with a girl like you it's different. Some women can handle men, but Gertie would be so helpless!"

The humor of Mrs. Richards's remark saved the situation for Claire. She changed the subject deliberately. But somehow, with the conversation forced from the particular to the general, Miss Munch's cousin lost interest, and by the time the boat had passed Alcatraz Island Claire was deep in her thoughts again and the other woman following the measured flight of the tatting-shuttle with strained attention.

The boat was romping through the stiff sea like a playful porpoise, dipping and plunging. A half-score of adventuresome gulls were still following in the foam-churned wake. In the face of all the pitching about, Mrs. Richards had quite a battle to direct her shuttle to any efficient purpose, and Claire was almost amused at the grim determination she brought to the performance.

Presently a warning whistle from the ferryboat betrayed the fact that they were nearing Sausalito. Mrs. Richards began to gather up her numerous bundles, and Claire and she made their way down the narrow stairs to the lower deck. Their progress was slow and uncertain. The southeaster was tearing across the open spaces and bending everything before it; the lumbering boat dipped sideward in a stolid encounter with its adversary.

"Mercy! What a night!" gasped Mrs. Richards, clutching at Claire's arm.

A gust of wind struck them with its force just as they reached the lower deck. Mrs. Richards staggered and wrestled vainly with tatting-bag and bundles and a refractory skirt. For the moment both women were stalled in a desperate effort to retain their equilibrium.

"Come!" gasped Claire. "Let's get over there in the shelter of that automobile."

They made the leeward side of the automobile in question, and while Mrs. Richards began to recover her roughly handled dignity Claire turned her attention to the car. It was a huge dark-red affair, evidently fresh from the shop. Claire knew none of the fine points of automobiles, but this one had unmistakable evidences of distinction. She was peering in at its opulent depths when who should surprise her but Ned Stillman.

"My dear Miss Robson!" he cried, in a tone of delight, as he faced her from the opposite side of the car. "What do you think of it?"

"Yours?" she queried.

"Just out of the shop to-day. I couldn't wait until it cleared. I just had to get out with it. And this kind of weather always puts me up on my toes. Where are you going--to Ross? If you are, don't bother with the train. Come along with me."

He circled about the machine and came up to her with a frank, outstretched hand. "Oh, I beg your pardon!" he murmured as Mrs. Richards came into view.

Claire began an introduction, but Mrs. Richards cut in with her odd, challenging way.

"Oh, I know Mr. Stillman! But I guess he's forgotten me. It's been some years, of course. At Mr. Faville's--your wife's father's house."

Stillman paled for the briefest of moments, but he recovered himself cleverly. "Mrs. Richards--of course! How do you do? It has been some years."

"I'm going to Mr. Flint's--at Yolanda," said Claire, "to take some dictation. He's been ill, you know."

"Ill? No, I hadn't heard it. Nothing serious, I hope."

"Not serious enough to keep Mrs. Flint at home, anyway," volunteered Mrs. Richards, in her characteristically disagreeable way.

"Mrs. Richards saw Mrs. Flint and the children coming off the boat...."

"As I got on," interrupted the lady again.

"Oh, indeed, is that so?" Claire fancied that Stillman's tone held something more than polite acceptance of what he had just heard. "I can take you ladies to Yolanda if you'd like a spin in the open better than a stuffy ride in the train."

"Thank you," Mrs. Richards returned, "but I get off at Sausalito. I've no doubt Miss Robson will be delighted."

"I think I'd better not," said Claire. "Mr. Flint is sending his car to the train for me. I shouldn't want to change my program and cause confusion. But I'd like nothing better! The air is so bracing!"

"You can excuse me!" put in Mrs. Richards, moving toward the forward deck. "It's going to pour in less than ten minutes. I'm not one of those amphibious creatures who like to get wringing wet just for the fun of it!"

Stillman lifted his hat. Claire stood for a moment undecided whether to follow Mrs. Richards or remain for a chat with Stillman.

"I'm an awful fool, I suppose," Stillman smiled at Claire, "bringing the

car out on a night like this. But the truth is Edington promised to catch this boat and I wanted him to try out the new plaything. I might have known he wouldn't make it. We're running over for dinner with Edington's sister."

At this moment the boat crashed clumsily against the Sausalito ferry-slip, and in the sudden confusion of landing Claire was swept along without further ado.

She looked back. Stillman waved a genial good-by to her. She felt glad that he was behind her, in a vague, impersonal, thoroughly inexplicable way.

CHAPTER VI

Claire was disappointed that Mrs. Flint was not to be at home. She had caught glimpses of her now and then coming into the office and she was interested in the hope of seeing her at closer range. Mrs. Flint was a rather frumpish individual, who always gave the impression of pieced-out dressmaking.

"She must subscribe to the Ladies' Home Journal," Nellie Whitehead had commented one day. "You know that 'go-up-into-the-garret-and-get-five-yards-of-grandmother's-wedding-gown' column. Well, she's a walking ad for it. She's no raving beauty, but if she would throw out her chest and chuck those flat-heeled clogs of hers, and put a marcel wave in her hair, maybe the old man would sit up and take notice."

To which Miss Munch had replied:

"Well, she's a mighty sweet woman, anyway!" in a tone calculated to freeze the irrepressible Nellie Whitehead into silence.

"Who says she isn't? And at that, a good tailor-made suit and a decent-looking hat won't spoil her disposition any...."

The children, too, were what Nellie Whitehead had termed "perfect guys." On warm days Mrs. Flint would drag these two daughters of hers into the office, dressed in plaid suits and velveteen hats; and when a cold north wind blew it seemed inevitable that they would appear in gay and airy costumes up to their knees, with impossible straw bonnets trimmed with daisies and faded cornflowers, reminiscent of the white-leghorn-hat era.

"Men don't marry women for their clothes," Miss Munch used to say, challengingly, to Nellie.

"Oh, don't they, indeed! Well, I've lived longer than sixteen and a half years and I've noticed that it's the up-to-the-minute dame that gets away with it and holds onto it every time, just the same. And any woman silly enough to work the rag-bag game when her husband can afford seven yards of taffeta and a Butterick pattern is a fool!"

Claire knew women who looked dowdy on dress-parade and yet managed to be quite charming in their own houses. She was wondering whether this might not be Mrs. Flint's case; anyway, she had hoped for a chance to decide this point, and now Mrs. Flint was not at home.

As she settled into her matting-covered seat in the train she began to wonder just who would be home at the Flint establishment. And she thought suddenly of the disagreeable emphasis that Mrs. Richards had seen fit to give the fact that Mrs. Flint was bound cityward. At this stage she became lost in discovering so many points of contact between

Mrs. Richards and her cousin, Miss Munch. Then the train started with a quick lurch, and a view of the rapidly darkening landscape claimed her utterly.

Claire always took a childish delight in watching the panorama of the countryside unroll swiftly before the space-conquering flight of a train. And to-night the quick close of the December day warned her to make the most of her opportunity. The wind was whipping the upper reaches of the bay into a shallow fury, and the water in turn was beating against the slimy mud and swallowing it up in gray, futile anger. This part of the ride just out of Sausalito was always more or less depressing unless a combination of full tide and vivid sunshine gave its muddy stretches the enlivening grace of sky-blue reflections. Worm-eaten and tottering piles, abandoned hulks, half-swamped skiffs, all the water-logged dissolution of stagnant shore lines the world over, flashed by, to be succeeded by the fresher green of channel-cut marshes. The hills were wind-swept, huddling their scant oak covering into the protecting folds of shallow canons. At intervals, clumps of eucalyptus-trees banded together or drew out in long, thin, soldier-like lines.

Presently it began to rain. There was no preliminary patter, but the storm broke suddenly, hurling great gray drops of moisture against the windows. Claire withdrew from any further attempt to watch the whirling landscape. It was now quite dark, the short December day dying even more suddenly under a black pall of lowering clouds.

She began to have distinctly uncomfortable thoughts about her visit to the Flints'. But the more uncomfortable her thoughts became, the more reason she brought to bear for conquering them. Surely one was not to be persuaded into a panic by any such person as Mrs. Richards! And by the time the brakeman announced the train's approach to Yolanda, Claire had recovered her common sense. What of it if Mrs. Flint had gone to town? There must be other women in the household—at least a maid. It was absurd! The train stopped and Claire got off.

Flint's car was waiting, and Jerry Donovan, the chauffeur, stood with a dripping umbrella almost at Claire's elbow as she hopped upon the platform.

As they swished through the inky blackness, Claire said to Jerry, with as inconsequential an air as she could muster:

"I thought I saw Mrs. Flint get off the boat in town. But I guess I was mistaken. She wouldn't be leaving Mr. Flint alone ... when he's ill."

"Ill?" Jerry chuckled. "Well, he ain't dead by a long shot. Just a case of sniffles, and a good excuse for hitting the booze. He's in prime condition, I can tell you."

Claire had never seen Flint in "prime condition," but she had it from Nellie Whitehead that there were moments when the gentleman in question could "go some," to use her predecessor's precise terms.

"About twice a year," Nellie had once confided to Claire, "the old boy starts in to cure a cold. I helped him cure one ... but _never_ again!"

Jerry's observations aroused fresh anxiety, but they did not settle the issue for Claire. She felt that she could not turn back at the eleventh hour. There was nothing else for her to do but go through with the game. Yet she still hoped for the best.

"_Did_ Mrs. Flint go to town to-day?" she finally asked, point-blank.

"Sure thing," said Jerry, swinging the car past the Flint gateway.

Claire refused to be totally lacking in faith.

"There must be a maid," flashed through her mind, as Jerry stopped the car and swung down to help her out.

A Japanese boy threw open the door as they scrambled up the rain-soaked steps. But the fine, orderly, Colonial interior reassured Claire. The few country homes she had seen had been of the rambling, unrelated bungalow type, with paneled redwood walls either stained to a dismal brown or quite frankly left to their rather characterless pink. This home was different. Even the pungent oak logs crackling in the fireplace did so with indefinable distinction. The general tone of the surroundings was as little in keeping with the patchwork personality of its mistress as one could imagine. It was as if the singular completeness of Mrs. Flint's home left no time nor energy for a finished individuality. Claire got all this in the briefest of flashes, just a swift, inclusive glance about the entrance hall and through the doorways leading into the rooms beyond. Particularly did she sense the severe opulence of the dining-room, twinkling at a remoter distance than the living-room--its perfectly polished silver, its spotless linen, its wonderfully blue china, not to mention the disconcerting fact that the table in the center was laid for but two.

And then Flint himself came forward with a very red face and an absurdly cordial greeting.

"Well, I began to wonder whether you'd risk it. This will be a storm and no mistake.... Here, let me have your coat. Come, you're quite wet.... Shall you warm up on a hot toddy or something cooler--a cocktail?"

She felt his hand sliding down her arm as she released the coat to his too-eager fingers. "Oh no, Mr. Flint! Thank you, nothing. It's only a bit of rain on the surface. I'm quite dry."

"Quite dry!" He echoed her words with a guffaw. "Well, then, we'll have to moisten you up. I always say everything's a good excuse for a drink. If you're cold you take a drink to warm up; if you're warm you take one to cool off. You dry out on one, and you wet up on one. I don't know of any habit with so many good reasons back of it. I'm dry, too.... We'll have a Bronx! That's a nice, ladylike drink."

Claire weighed her reply. She did not want to strike the wrong note; she wanted to let him have a feeling that she was accepting everything in a normal, matter-of-fact way, as if she saw nothing extraordinary in the situation.

"You're very kind, but really you know ... if I'm to get my dictation straight...."

"Well, perhaps there won't be any dictation. We're not slaves, you and I. Maybe it will be much pleasanter to sit before the fire and listen to the storm. What do you say to that?"

She turned from him deliberately, under the fiction of fluffing up her hair before a gilt mirror near the door. She was thinking quickly and with a tremendous, if concealed, agitation. "Why," she laughed back, finally, "that would be pleasant. But I came to take dictation, Mr. Flint. And women ... women, you know, are so funny! If they make up their minds to one thing, they can't switch suddenly to another idea."

He was paying no attention to her remark, a remark which she felt would have fallen flat in any event, since it was so palpably studied.

"The living-room is in there," he said, pointing. "Make yourself at

home."

She went in and sat before the fire. Flint disappeared. She tried hard to analyze the situation. It was unthinkable that Mr. Flint had deliberately planned this piece of foolishness. He must have had some idea of work when he had telephoned her; perhaps he still had. It was his way of being facetious, she argued, this fine pretense that it was all to be a pleasant lark, or it may have been his idea of hospitality. Of course he had been drinking, but she took comfort in the thought that there must be instinctive standards in a man like Flint that even whisky could not swamp. At least he must respect his wife--surely it was not possible for Flint, drunk or sober, to offer such an affront to _her_, however little he respected the women in his employ. She dismissed Mrs. Richards's exaggerated insinuations with their well-deserved contempt, but she could not thrust aside quite so readily the eye-lifting tone with which Stillman had met the announcement of Mrs. Flint's absence from home.

This was the first time that Claire had seen Stillman since the musicale. She had thought a great deal about him and particularly about his problem. She felt a great desire to know everything--all the details of the unfortunate circumstance that had driven his wife into a madhouse, and yet whenever her mother broached the subject Claire changed the topic with curious panic. She seemed to dread the hard, almost triumphant manner that her mother assumed in tracking misfortune to its lair and gloating over it. She began to wonder whether Stillman would be swinging back to the city on a late boat ... or would the storm keep him at Edington's sister's home all night?

She was in the midst of this speculation when Flint came into the room.

"We'll eat early and have that off our minds," he announced. His manner was brusque and business-like again. Claire felt reassured.

But she was disturbed to find a cocktail at her place at the table.

"Well, here's glad to see you!" Flint raised his glass and tilted it ever so slightly in her direction. Claire lifted the cocktail to her lips and set it down untasted. "What's the matter? Getting unsociable again?"

"No, Mr. Flint. I don't care for cocktails."

"Oh, all right! We'll send down-cellar and get some wine."

"Thank you, not for me."

"I suppose you don't care for wine, either?" His voice had a bantering quality, with a shade of menace in it. "Or maybe the right party isn't here. I've noticed that makes a difference. Females are damned moral with the wrong fellow."

His attack was so direct and insolent that Claire missed the trepidation that might have come with a more covert move. She was no longer uncertain. There was a sharp relief in realizing that all the cards were on the table. She felt also that there was no immediate danger. Flint was far from sober, but he was in his own home. She had the conviction that he was merely skirmishing, testing the strength or weakness of the line he hoped to penetrate. Her reply was rather more of a challenge than she could have imagined herself giving under such a circumstance.

"And if I were to tell you that I don't care for wine, Mr. Flint?"

He threw open his napkin with a flourish. "You'd be telling me a damned lie! You drink wine at the Palace with Stillman and Edington."

She had felt that he was going to say some such thing and for a moment it amused her. It was so ridiculous to find this rather wan and wistful indiscretion assuming damaging proportions. But a nasty fear succeeded her faint amusement. Could it be possible that Stillman had gossiped?

"Who told you?" she demanded.

"Oh, don't be afraid; it wasn't Stillman! You're like all women, you moon about sentimentalizing over Ned until it makes a man like me sick! I like Ned; I always have. But even when we went to college together it was the same way. Everybody ... yes, even the men ... always gave him credit for a high moral tone. Not that he ever took it.... I'll say that for him.... Ned Stillman didn't tell me, for the simple reason that he didn't have to. Nobody told me. I go to the Palace myself under pressure, and I've got two eyes. As a matter of fact, there isn't any reason why Edington or Stillman or the waiter who drew the corks shouldn't have mentioned it. A glass of wine is no crime. But the thing that makes me hot is to see any one pretending. If you drink with Stillman, you haven't any license to refuse a glass with me."

There was something more than wine-heated rancor back of his harangue. Claire guessed instinctively that he both loved and hated Stillman with a curious confusion of impulses. It was a feeling of affection torn by the irritating superiority of its object. One gets the same thing in families ... among children. It was at once subtle and extremely primitive.

"My dear Mr. Flint, this isn't quite the same thing. I've work to do for one thing and, and...."

"And ... and.... Why don't you say it? You're alone with me and all that sort of rubbish! Want a chaperon, I suppose. Mrs. Condor, for instance.... Good Lord!"

Claire dipped her spoon into the steaming bouillon-cup in front of her. She was growing quite calm under the directness of Flint's attack.

"It isn't the same," she reiterated, stubbornly. "I've work to do, Mr. Flint."

"I tell you that you haven't!" Flint brought his fist down upon the table.

"Well, then, why did you send for me?"

"I had something to say to you.... Gad! one can't talk in that ramping office of mine. We've never even settled the matter of an increase in salary for you. By the way, how much money do you get?"

Claire had never seen any man look so crafty and disagreeable. He gave her the impression of a petty tyrant about to bestow largess upon an obsequious and fawning slave.

"Sixty-five dollars a month."

"Well, I don't exactly know.... I've been trying to figure out just how valuable you are to me, Miss Robson. Or, rather, how valuable you're likely to be." He thrust aside his soup and leaned heavily upon the table. "That's why I invited you over to-night. I wanted to see you at a little closer range. You live with your mother, don't you?"

"Yes, Mr. Flint."

"You ... you support your mother, I believe?"

"Yes, Mr. Flint."

"Well, sixty-five dollars don't leave much margin for hair ribbons and the like, does it, now?"

"No, Mr. Flint."

"No, Mr. Flint.... Yes, Mr. Flint...." he mocked. "Good Lord! can't you cut that school-girl-to-her-dignified-guardian attitude. I'm human. Dammit all, I'm as human as your friend Ned Stillman. I'll bet you don't yes-sir and no-sir him.... You know, that night I saw you at the Palace you quite bowled me over. I'd been thinking of you as a shy, unsophisticated young thing. But you were hitting the high places like a veteran. Even old lady Condor didn't have anything on you. Except, of course, that she looks the part. By the way, where did you meet Stillman?"

"At ... at a church social," Claire stammered.

"At a church social! Say, I wasn't born yesterday. Ned Stillman doesn't go to church. Tell me something easy."

"It was really a Red Cross concert. He went with Mrs. Condor," Claire found herself explaining in spite of her anger. "We sat at the same table when the ice-cream was served."

Flint was roaring with exaggerated laughter. Even Claire could not restrain a smile. What made the statement so ridiculous, she found herself wondering. Was she unconsciously reflecting Flint's attitude or had she herself changed so tremendously in the last few weeks?

"Stillman at a church social! But that _is_ good! And eating ice-cream.... How long ago did all this happen, pray?"

"Sometime in November."

He stopped his senseless guffawing and looked at her keenly. "Where did you get the church-social habit?"

"I ... why, I guess I formed it early, Mr. Flint. As you say, sixty-five dollars a month doesn't leave much for hair ribbons or anything else. Going to church socials is about the cheapest form of recreation I can think of."

The bitterness of her tone seemed to pull Flint up with a round turn. "Well, we're going to get you out of this silly church-social habit. Dammit all, Stillman isn't the only possibility in sight. That's just what I wanted to get at--your viewpoint. I take an interest in you, Miss Robson--a tremendous interest. Good Lord! I can dance one-steps and fox-trots and hesitations as well as anybody! I danced every bit as well as Ned Stillman when we went to dancing-school together. But he always got most of the applause. He _has_ an air, I don't deny that, but he's working it overtime.... And he's not in any better position for being friendly to you than I am--_he's_ married."

The talk was sobering him a little. Claire was amazed to find that she did not feel indignant. His tone was offensive, but at least it was forthright. Besides, she had known instinctively that some day he would force the issue, and she was rather glad to get it settled. And she began to hope that she could persuade him skilfully against his warped convictions. She was trembling inwardly, too, at the thought that she might make a false step and find herself out of a position. Positions were not easy to land these days. She knew a half-score of girls who had tramped the town over in a desperate effort to find a vacancy. Two or

three months without salary meant debts piling up, clothes in ribbons, and no end of hectic worries.

"I think you've got a decidedly wrong impression of my friendship for Mr. Stillman," she said, after some deliberation. "I really know him only slightly. He was good enough, or rather I should say Mrs. Condor was good enough, to include me in a little musical evening. That was on the night you saw me at the Palace. We dropped down for a dance or two after the music was over. I'd never been to such a place before, and I dare say I'll never go again. It was just one of those experiences that come to a person out of a clear sky. It's over as quickly as a shower."

"Oh, don't you worry! There'll be other showers. I'm going to see to that. You know, the more I talk to you the more amazing you are.... Fancy your graduating from dinky church things into Stillman musicales, and Palace dansants, and young Edington, and old lady Condor, all of a sudden ... and getting away with it as if you were an old hand at the game. Say, if you're that apt I'll give you a post-graduate course in high life that'll make your hair curl forty-seven ways. I don't mean anything vulgar or common ... _you_ understand. I'm a gentleman, Miss Robson, at that."

He stopped for a moment to ring the bell for the Japanese boy. Claire maintained a discreet silence. She had a feeling that it would be just as well to let him take his full rein. The servant came in and cleared away the empty bouillon-cups. Fish was served.

Flint took one taste of the fish and shoved it away impatiently. "You know, a fellow like me gets awfully bored at all this sort of thing." He swept the room with an inclusive gesture. "Not that my wife isn't the best little woman in the world, but _you_ know. She's got standards and convictions and all that sort of rot. I can't bundle _her_ off for dinner and a little lark at the Red Paint or Bonini's or some other Bohemian joint like them.... You know what I mean, no rough stuff ... but a good feed, and two kinds of wine, and a cigarette with the small black. Just gay and frivolous.... Of course I can get any number of girls to run around and help eat up all the nourishment I care to provide. But, good Lord! that isn't it! I'm looking for somebody with human intelligence. Not that I want to discuss free verse and the Little Theater movement. But I like to feel that if I took such a crazy notion the person sitting opposite me could qualify for a good comeback.... I like my home and everything, but.... Oh, well, what's the use in pretending? I'm just as human as your friend Ned Stillman and I've got just as keen an eye for class."

He sat back in his seat with an air of satisfaction, waiting for Claire's reply. She had been calm enough while he talked, but under the tenseness of his silent expectancy she felt her heart bound.

"Dammit all! Why don't you say something?" he blurted out. "I know, you need a little wine. I'm going down-stairs and pick out the best in the cellar ... _myself_."

She did not attempt to dissuade him; as a matter of fact, she felt relieved to be left alone for a moment. She must leave as soon as dinner was over. She began to wonder about the trains. The storm was raging outside. She could hear the frenzied trees flinging their branches about and a noisy flood of rain against the windows. She spoke to the Japanese boy as he was carrying away Flint's unfinished fish course.

"Do you know what time the next train leaves?"

He laid the tray on the serving-table. "Please.... I telephone. Please!" He bobbed at her absurdly and went out into the hall. She listened. He was ringing up the station-master. He came back promptly.

"Please," he began, sucking in his breath, "please ... no train to-night."

"No train to-night? Why, what do you mean?"

"Please ... very much water. Train track washed out. No train to-night. To-morrow morning, maybe."

"Oh, but I must go home to-night! I really must! I...."

She broke off suddenly, realizing the futility of her protest.

"To-morrow morning," replied the Japanese, blandly. "All right to-morrow morning. You stay here.... I fix a place. You see.... I fix a very nice place for young lady."

He went out with the tray and Claire rose and walked to the window. Flint broke into the room noisily. She turned—he had two dusty bottles in his hand, and an air of triumph.

"Mr. Flint, it seems that there has been a washout. I understand that no trains are running. What can I do? I must get back; really I...."

"Who says so?" Flint laid the bottles down with an irritating calmness.

"The station-master. Your ... your servant just telephoned for me."

"Oh, well, _we_ should worry! Sit down."

"Mr. Flint, really, I must.... You know I can't.... I...."

"Sit _down_!"

His tone was a dash of cold water thrown in the face of her rising hysteria. She sat down. Flint ignored the bottles on the table and, crossing over to the Sheraton sideboard, poured himself a stiff drink of whisky. His hair-towsled condition stood out sharply against the precise background.

He made no further comment, but he began to open the bottles of wine deliberately. Then he rummaged in the china-closet for the wine-glasses and set four, two at his place and two at Claire's, upon the table.

"White wine with the entree and red wine with the roast," he muttered. And he poured out the white wine without further ado.

The servant came in with creamed sweetbreads. Claire forced herself to make a pretense of eating, although her appetite had long since deserted her. She was thinking, and thinking hard.

She should never have come, in the first place—at least she should have turned back upon the strength of Jerry's announcement. But she saw now, with a clearness that surprised her, that the situation had really challenged her imagination. She had been too calm, too collected, too well-poised, full of smug over-confidence. She had read in the current novels of the day how hysterically unsophisticated heroines conducted themselves in tight corners and she had followed their writhings with ill-concealed impatience. She never had really put herself in their place, but she had had a vague notion that they carried on absurdly. Her fear all evening had been not what Mr. Flint would do or say or even suggest—she had been anxious merely to have the impending storm over, the air cleared, and her position in the office assured upon a purely business-like basis. She had really welcomed the forced issue; for weeks her mind had been entertaining and dismissing the idea that Mr. Flint

had any questionable motives in yielding Nellie Whitehead's place to her. With this fleeting trepidation had come the realization of her dependence, the importance her sixty-five dollars a month in the scheme of things, the compromises that she might be forced into accepting in order to insure its continuance; not definite and soul-searing compromises, it was true, but petty, irritating trucklings which wear down self-esteem.

It had been the primitive violence of Flint's commanding, "Sit down!" to thrust the issue from the economic to the elemental. For the first time in her life Claire was face to face with unstripped masculine brutality. She had wondered why women of a lower order took men's blows without striking back, without at least escaping from further torment. But she was beginning to see, as her spirits tried to rise reeling from Flint's verbal assault, the fawning submission, half admiration, half fear, that could follow a frank, hard-fisted blow. And she had a terror, sitting there trying to thrust food between her trembling lips, that the sheer physical force of the male opposite her might shatter in one blow a will that could have withstood any amount of spiritual or material attrition. She had never seen Flint so clearly as at this moment; in fact, she had never seen him at all. Formerly, he had been a conventionalized masculine biped in a blue-serge covering who paid her salary and struck attitudes that were symbols of predatory instincts rather than an indication that such instincts existed. Life had, after all, been peopled by the precisely labeled puppets of a morality play; they came on, and declaimed, and made gestures—but they remained abstractions, things apart from life, mere representations of the vices and virtues they impersonated. She had entertained this idea particularly with regard to Flint. She had felt that the day would come when he and she would occupy the stage together. He would speak his part with a great flourish of the hands and much high-sounding emphasis, and when he had finished she would reply with a carefully worded retort, setting forth the claims and rewards of virtue. Thus it would continue, argument succeeding argument, a declamatory give and take, dignified, passionless, theatrical.

They were occupying the stage now, it was true, but there was something warm and human and ragged about the performance. Flint was not a mere spiritless allegory in red-satin doublet and hose to give flame to his conventionality. Instead, she saw sitting opposite her a ponderous, quick-breathing, drunken male, handsome in a coarse, rough-hewn way, speaking in the quick, clipped speech of passion and striking her to the ground with the energy of his stage business. She was afraid, almost for the first time in her life, with a primitive, abandoned fear. And suddenly her vista of womanhood narrowed to include the ugly foreground of life that youth had looked over in its eager, far-flung scanning of the horizon beyond. Suddenly she felt all the oppression and sorrow of the sex bear down upon her and mark her with its relentless finger. Because she was a woman she would pay for every joy with a corresponding sorrow; receive a blow for every caress; know courage and fear with equal intimacy.... She stopped eating and she began to realize with a vivid terror that Flint was looking at her fixedly and beginning to speak.

"What's the matter with the sweetbreads? Don't you like 'em?... And the wine?... Say, I'm going to get peeved in a minute. You don't suppose we serve this French-restaurant style of meal every day do you? I should say not! That's another one of the frau's convictions. Plain living at home so as to set the right example to the girls!" Flint threw his head from side to side, mincing out his last statement. "Gad! I'm tired of setting a good example!... And even Sing gets tired. Chinks, you know, like to cook a bang-up meal once in a while. They like a chance to show their speed and put in all the fancy trimmings."

His mood, during this speech, had changed with drunken facility from

irritability to good humor. Claire, still attempting to marshal her wits, picked up her fork again and murmured:

"Oh, you have a Chinese cook, then? I had no idea.... The Japanese boy, you know. They say that the two never get along."

"That's a fairy-tale. Besides, it's next to impossible, these days, to get a Chinese second-boy. And the missus _won't_ hire a girl." He winked broadly. "Can't get one ugly enough, I guess. Sing's a wonder. I copped him from the Tom Forsythes. _You_ know--young Edington's in-laws. They've never quite forgiven me. Though they _will_ come back and tuck away one of his dinners occasionally."

Claire's mind closed nimbly over Flint's statement. "The--the Tom Forsythes of Ross?" she asked.

He nodded and tossed a glass of wine off in one gulp. The Tom Forsythes of Ross ... Edington's sister ... Ned Stillman! The sequence of ideas flashed through Claire's mind with flashing detachment. She leaned back in her seat and raised the wine-glass in obvious pretense to her lips. Flint was watching her keenly: an ugly gleam was in his eyes.

"Well, Miss Robson, you might just as well make up your mind to finish that glass of wine first as last. We're not going to have the next course until you do."

She measured him deliberately. She knew now that it was to be a fight to a finish. She was honestly afraid and full of the courage of realization.

"I've had enough as it is, Mr. Flint. Besides, we must either be getting to work or figuring how I am to make the boat at Sausalito. I suppose you could send me in the car ... with Jerry."

"Oh, with Jerry? So that's it!... No, not on your life! He's too good-looking a boy for a job like that. No, Miss Robson, you are going to stay _right_ here.... Now, understand me, I'm not a damn fool! You seem to have an idea that because I've had a glass or two that I've lost my reason. You're an attractive girl and all that, Miss Robson, and I am interested in you! But please don't flatter yourself that I'm staking everything on a throw like this. As a matter of fact, I'll see that you are properly chaperoned. We've plenty of neighbors. You've got the best excuse in the world for staying here and...."

"But, my dear Mr. Flint, can't you see, I...."

"No, I can't. I want you to stay _here_. My reasons are as good as yours. Now let's get that off our mind and enjoy the meal."

His manner struck her protests to the ground again. She was no longer fearing the immediate outcome, in fact, she never had, but she knew that if he broke her to his will now, all the safeguards, all the chaperons, all the conventions in the world wouldn't save her from ultimate consequences. This was the try-out that was to establish her pace in the final contest; she would stand or fall upon the record she made at this moment. For she was trying out something more than Flint's temper, something greater than a mechanical adjustment of human relationships--she was trying out _herself_. She sat for some moments, thinking hard, one hand fingering the slender base of the wine-filled glass in front of her, the other dropped in pensive limpness at her side. Flint had cleared the space in front of him of everything but his two wine-glasses. He had slipped down in his seat and his two bloodshot eyes were fixing her with a level stare.

She stirred finally and rose.

He was on his feet in an instant.

"I'm going to telephone," she said, calmly.

"Telephone ... where?... What's the idea?"

"Mr. Flint," she answered, a bit wearily, "at least I'm a guest in your house, am I not?"

He settled back in his seat with a grunt of acquiescence. She stood dazed for a moment, surprised at the chance that had put such telling words into her mouth. She had been fingering timidly for the key to his chivalry; quite by accident she had hit upon it in the shape of this appeal to her expectations of him in the role of host. She could have lied, of course, and told him that she wished to telephone her mother, but she had not yet been cornered sufficiently to resort to so distasteful a weapon.... As she left the room she found herself wondering whether Stillman had by any chance left the Tom Forsythes. She looked at the clock. It was not quite eight o'clock. She felt reassured, yet she was tremendously frightened.... Especially as she realized that the telephone was in the entrance hall within earshot of the dining-room....

She was decidedly more frightened when she got back from her telephoning, and looked at Flint. He was clutching at the table with both hands, his body tilted slightly forward, his lips ominously thin.

"You telephoned to the Tom Forsythes, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And you asked for Stillman.... Did you get him?"

"Yes."

"What did you want with him?"

"If you heard that much, I guess you heard the rest, Mr. Flint."

Claire stood at her place at the table. She decided not to sit. Flint bore down on both hands until things began to creak.

"Yes, I heard everything, but, dammit all, I couldn't believe my own ears. You're like every woman I ever knew ... you don't play fair. You appeal to my instinct as host and then you go and outrage every privilege you've got me to concede. You're a pretty guest, you are! And I sit here and let you 'play me for a fool.' Let you ring up Ned Stillman and ask him to fetch you away from my house in his car!" He stopped and took a deep breath; his words were no longer passionate; instead, they were precise and cool and venomous. "Understand me, young lady, I'm through with you. I wouldn't care, if I thought you were really virtuous. But you're too clever for a virtuous woman.... Oh, I dare say you subscribe to the letter of the law, all right. For instance, you take care not to run around with married men whose incumbrances are in plain view of the audience.... Oh, I've seen lots of clever women in my time, but in the end they always took too much rope. Remember, you'll have your bluff called some day."

He pushed back his chair noisily and rose. The Japanese servant came bobbing along.

"Clear away the things!" Flint bellowed. "We're through!... Good night, Miss Robson, and a pleasant journey to you—you and your immaculate friend Stillman."

He left the room with a melodramatic flourish.... Presently Claire heard him mounting the stairs.

"He's drunk!" flashed through her mind, as if the idea had just struck her. "Of course, he must be drunk, otherwise he wouldn't have dared to...."

She went out into the entrance hall and put on her hat.

CHAPTER VII

Midway between Yolanda and Sausalito Stillman's machine died with disconcerting suddenness. The rain was coming down in sheets. Stillman got out.

"It's no use," he announced, lifting himself back into his seat. "I can't do anything in this deluge."

This was the first word that had been said since he and Claire had left Flint's.

"The worst will be over in a few moments," replied Claire, easily. But she was far from reassured.

The deluge was not over in a few moments. It kept up with an ever-increasing violence, until it seemed that even the stalled car would be compelled to yield to its force. Claire had never seen it rain harder; the storm had a vindictive fury that reminded her of the dreadful tempest in "King Lear."

Stillman maintained his usual well-bred calm and smoked cigarettes while he chattered. He touched on every conceivable subject but the one uppermost in Claire's mind, until she began to wonder whether delicacy or contempt veiled his conversation. A half-hour passed ... an hour ... two. Still the rain swept from the sullen sky. Twice Stillman made a futile attempt to remedy the trouble with his engine, and twice he retired defeated to the shelter of the car. Claire was relieved that she was in the company of a man who did not emphasize the monotonous hours by indiscriminate raillery against the tricks of chance. At first he dismissed the situation with the most casual of shrugs; later he acknowledged his annoyance by an expression of regret at his companion's discomfort, but he stopped there.

As the hours went on, with no abatement of the storm's devastating energy, Claire grew less and less pleased at the prospect. She began to wonder whether the shelter of Flint's roof had not been, after all, the discreet thing. Was not her headlong flight in company with Stillman more open to criticism than the frank acceptance of her employer's hospitality? But these vagrant questions were the spawn of a colorless spirit of social expediency which fastens itself on weak natures, and in Claire's case they died still-born. She had been too well schooled in loneliness to lean heavily on the crooked stick of public opinion. Accustomed to standing alone, she had something of the spiritual arrogance that goes with independence. People could think what they liked. And it was more a realization of her mother's anxiety than any thought of self which made her suggest to Stillman that they might get out and walk into Sausalito.

"I think the last boat leaves there at twelve-thirty," she finished. "Surely we could make it if we keep going."

Stillman thrust his arm out into the drenching rain, and withdrew it instantly. "I'm afraid that's out of the question, so long as the rain keeps up, Miss Robson," he said, in a tone of implied objection. "Perhaps if it should stop...."

Claire settled back in her seat. Stillman was right. The storm was too furious to be lightly braved.

It was eleven o'clock before a quick veering of the wind brought a downpour so violent that what had gone before seemed little better than a rather weak rehearsal.

"It will clear presently," Stillman assured Claire. "Southeaster always break up in a flurry like this from the west."

In ten minutes the stars were peeping brilliantly through rents in the torn clouds. Pungent odors floated up from the rain-trampled stubble of the hillsides, the air was cleared of its stifling oppressiveness, the first storm of the season was over.

Both Claire and Stillman clambered out at the first signs of the storm's exhaustion. Stillman switched on his pocket-light and began to investigate the trouble with the engine. His decision was swift and conclusive.

"It's hopeless," he announced, turning to Claire with a slight grimace. "We're stalled absolutely and no mistake. I guess we'd better strike out and walk. No doubt we'll get a lift into Sausalito before we've gone very far, but I dare say it's well to be on the safe side."

They rolled the machine to one side of the roadway and struck out hopefully. The rain had made a thin chocolate ooze of the highway, and before they had gone a hundred yards their shoes were slimy with mud. It appeared that Stillman had been something of an aimless wanderer for many years, and as he talked on and on, giving detached glimpses of the remote places he had visited, Claire had a curious sense of futility.

She read between his clipped and vivid sentences the tragedy of a personality worsted by the soft hands of circumstances. This man might have done things. As it was he was an idler. He gave her the impression of a man waiting vaguely for opportunity—like some traveler pacing restlessly up and down a railway station platform in expectation of the momentary arrival of a delayed train. She tried to imagine him as she felt sure he must once have been—youthful, eager, ardent, a man of charming enthusiasms that just missed being extravagances, who could bring zest to his virtues as well as to his follies.

"Surely," she thought, "something more than inclination must have pushed him into this deadly stagnation."

And at once Miss Munch's insinuating question leaped up to answer:

"You know about his wife, of course!"

Were men put out of countenance by such impersonal tricks of fortune? Impersonal?... this domestic tragedy?... Yes, Claire felt that it must be, otherwise the man tramping at her side would have wrestled so passionately against fate as to have come away at least spattered with the mud of defeat. No, Stillman was not defeated, he was merely arrested, restrained, held for orders.

He had been in London when the war broke out. He had stayed long enough to watch the stolid, easy-going British public awake to the seriousness of the encounter, coming home after the first air raids.

"I didn't mind being killed," he laughed, in explanation of his sudden flight. "But I didn't like being so frightfully messed up in the process. I want a chance to strike back when I'm cornered. The Zeppelin game was too much like a rabbit-drive to suit me."

As he spoke of these experiences, Claire listened with a quickening of the spirit. The prospect of finding Stillman vibrant was too stirring to be denied. But he was still sober on this colossal subject of war ... a bit judicial, always well poised. He had his sympathies, but they did not appear vitalized by extravagances of feeling. Yet here and there Claire was conscious of truant warmths, like brief flashes of sunlight through a somber forest.

"And the draft--what do you think of that?" The question rose to her lips as if his answer might unlock the door to something deeper in the way of convictions.

He began with a shrug that chilled her; then his reply broke with sudden refreshment:

"It helps ... some of us. There are many who can't decide for themselves. The obvious duty isn't always the correct one. In my case...."

He did not stop speaking suddenly, but his voice trailed off into a dim region of musing. They both fell silent. But Claire knew. There was that haunting hope, almost like a fear, that his wife might some day get better. That was what he was waiting for! It might come to-morrow ... next week ... in a year ... never! But when it did come he felt that he must be there, ready. She wondered whether he loved his wife very much, and she found herself hoping that he did.... It would help, somehow ... yes, if that were so his sacrifice gained point. On the other hand.... She put the thought away with a quick thrust, feeling that she had no right to such a speculation, and presently she was aware that they were swinging into Sausalito.

Stillman looked at his watch. Twelve-thirty-five ... just five minutes late for the boat! She could see that he was disturbed.

"I thought sure we'd get a lift," he railed, tossing aside a mangled cigar. "This _is_ luck!... I guess we'll have to rout out the Sherwins. It's something of a pull up the hill, but any safe port in a storm, you know."

"The Sherwins?"

"Another one of the Edington girls. They have a bungalow at the very dizziest point in Sausalito."

But Claire objected and held firm. "I couldn't think of it, Mr. Stillman. No, really!... Please don't insist."

They agreed on a lodging for Claire in a freshly painted but otherwise rather decrepit lodging-house, just north of the ferry-slip. Its chief advantage was that it seemed quite too stagnant to be anything but respectable, and the suppressed grumbling of the old shrew whom they routed out confirmed their estimate. She didn't approve of couples who dragged God-fearing old women out of bed at unholy hours in the morning, and it was only the generous tip from Stillman and the assurance that he intended looking elsewhere for quarters for himself that reconciled her to her loss of sleep and the compromise with her convictions.

For a good half-hour Claire sat with folded hands peering out from her room upon the damp hillside to the west. From across the street came the

bawdy thumping of a mechanical piano and the swish of a sluggish tide. Her encounter with Sawyer Flint had forced the door of her virginal seclusion and thrust her at once into the primitive and elemental open. She felt like one who was coming out of voluntary exile to the pathos of a deferred heritage. Before her stretched the eagle's horizon, but she had only the fledgling's strength of wing. She longed for the faith and courage and daring to take life at its word, longed with all the dangerous fierceness of one who had fed too long upon the husks of existence. And, longing, she fell asleep, sitting in a chair before the open window, without thought or preparation....

* * * * *

The morning broke cloudless. All traces of the night's fury were obliterated as completely as sorrow from the face of a smiling child. The sun touched the open spaces with a tender, caressing warmth, but the shadows held a keen-edged chill.

Claire decided upon an early boat to town.

"I'll be less likely to meet any of the California Street crowd," she said to herself, as she picked her brief way toward the ferry.

The boat was crowded, especially the lower cabin. It was the artisans' boat and the air was heavy with the smoke of pipe-tobacco. Claire passed rapidly to the dining-room. Perched upon the high revolving chairs surrounding a horseshoe counter, a score or more of soft-shirted men sat devouring huge greasy doughnuts and gulping coffee. The steward, taking note of Claire's hesitation, came forward and led her to a seat at one of the side tables. She was about to take advantage of the chair which he had drawn out for her when she heard her name called. She turned. Miss Munch's cousin, Mrs. Richards, was sitting alone at the table just behind. Claire's first feeling was one of relief--she was glad to discover an acquaintance. She thanked the steward for his trouble and abandoned the proffered seat for the one opposite Mrs. Richards. Almost at once she regretted her impulsive decision.

"I didn't know you intended staying at Flint's all night," Mrs. Richards began, fixing Claire with a challenging gaze.

"I didn't intend to," returned Claire, her voice sharpened slightly.

Mrs. Richards took the lid off the sugar-bowl and powdered her grapefruit sparingly. "Have they a nice home?" she questioned.

"Yes, very nice."

"They gave you an early start, didn't they?... It's almost impossible to get servants these days to consider such a thing as serving breakfast much before eight o'clock."

Claire glanced at the bill of fare. Mrs. Richards's tone was a trifle too eager. "I suppose it is," Claire assented, placing the menu-card back in its place between the vinegar and oil cruets.

Mrs. Richards remained unabashed at her vis-a-vis's palpable indirectness. "I guess I'm old-fashioned, but, servants or no servants, I don't believe I could let a guest of mine leave the house without breakfast. It seems to me that if I'd been Mrs. Flint I'd have gotten up and made you a cup of coffee myself."

Claire's growing annoyance was swallowed up in a feeling of faint amusement. "Perhaps Mrs. Flint wasn't home," she said, beckoning the waiter.

"Oh!" Mrs. Richards exclaimed with shocked brevity.

It was not until the arrival of Claire's order of toast and coffee that Mrs. Richards found her voice again.

"This business of wives staying from home all night gets me," Mrs. Richards hazarded, boldly. "Why, I never remember the time when my mother remained away overnight ... not under _any_ circumstances. My father expected her to be there, and she always _was_."

Claire distributed bits of butter over the surface of her toast. She felt that in justice to the Flint family it was not right for her to give Mrs. Richards's dangerous tongue any further scope, however tempting was the prospect of leaving such venomous inquisitiveness ungratified.

"I think you misunderstood me, Mrs. Richards. I didn't say that Mrs. Flint remained away from home last night. As a matter of fact I didn't stay at Yolanda, so I don't know anything about it."

"Oh!" faintly escaped Mrs. Richards for the second time that morning, but Claire was conscious that there was more incredulity than surprise registered in the lady's tone.

"As a matter of fact," Claire continued, stung to incautious exasperation, "I spent the night in Sausalito."

Mrs. Richards met this information with a disarmingly bland smile. "I didn't know you had friends in Sausalito," she said, letting a spoonful of coffee trickle back into her cup.

"I haven't. I spent the night in a lodging-house ... on the water-front...."

"My dear Miss Robson, really I.... Why, I hope you don't think I was inquisitive!"

It was the simplicity of the challenge that made it impossible to be ignored. Claire knew that she was trapped, but she was angry enough to decide on some reservation.

"The storm put the track between Yolanda and Sausalito out of commission," Claire found herself snapping back too eagerly at her tormentor. "We tried to make the last boat by auto, but we got stalled and missed it. We had to walk a good half of the way."

"I shouldn't think that would have done Mr. Flint's cold any good," Mrs. Richards said, drawlingly.

"Mr. Flint's cold?... I don't quite see what that has to do with it."

"Oh, you said 'we' I somehow got the impression...."

"No, Mrs. Richards, you've misunderstood me again." Claire threw a cool, even glance at her antagonist. "I made the trip from Yolanda to Sausalito in Mr. Stillman's car."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Richards for a third time, and in this instance her voice was warm with gratification.

Claire directed her attention to her plate of buttered toast and her cup of coffee. She was chagrined to think that she had fallen so easily into Mrs. Richards's very obvious traps. Not that it mattered. She was quite sure that the truth could not harm Stillman, and she was equally sure that her position in life was too obscure to stand out conspicuously

against the darts of Mrs. Richards's vindictive tongue. But she had the pride of her reticences and she did not like to surrender these privileges at the point of insolent curiosity. The two continued to eat in silence.

It was Mrs. Richards who finished first, and she dipped her fingers hurriedly into the battered metal finger-bowl which the Japanese bus-boy thrust before her.

"Do you mind if I go along?" she inquired of Claire, with an air of polite triumph. "I think I'll go forward where I can get a quick start ... before the crowd gets too thick. I've got a million errands to do before nine o'clock. And I _do_ want to run into the office before Gertie settles down to work. I haven't seen her for a week and I've got _more_ things to tell her!"

CHAPTER VIII

"Why, Miss Claire, how could you! Where have you been? And your mother in such a bad way!" Mrs. Finnegan broke into sudden tears.

Claire, fumbling in her bag for the front-door key, looked up. Mrs. Finnegan had swung open the door to the Robson flat and she stood like a vision of disaster upon the threshold.

"What has happened?" Claire's voice rose with a note of swift apprehension.

"Your mother ... she's paralyzed! She was taken last night. The doctor says it would have happened, anyway. But I say it was worry, that's what it was. With you away all night and never a word!"

Claire climbed the stairs in silence, aware that Mrs. Finnegan was following at a discreet distance. Already the house seemed permeated with an atmosphere of tragedy and gloom in spite of the morning light pouring in unscreened at every window. Mrs. Robson's room was the only exception to this unusual excess of cold radiance—unusual, because it was one of Mrs. Robson's prides to keep her window-shades lowered to a uniform and genteel distance.

Until Claire came face to face with her mother she almost had fancied that her neighbor was indulging in a crude and terrible joke, but one look sufficed. Mrs. Robson lay staring vacantly at the ceiling; she could not move, she could not speak, and her spirit showed through the veiled light in her eyes like a mysterious spot of sunshine in a shaded well. Above a swooning sense of calamity Claire felt the strength of a tender pretense struggling to communicate its vague hope to the stricken form. She raised the window-shade slightly and sat down upon the bed.

"Why, mother, what's all this?" she began, in a tone of gentle banter, as she stroked the helpless hands. "Were you worried? I'm so sorry! I asked Miss Munch to let you know. Didn't she?... I went over to Mr. Flint's to take dictation. The storm washed out the track. I tried to make the boat in Mr. Stillman's car, but we broke down and missed it.... I had to stay all night in Sausalito."

Mrs. Robson, stirring faintly, attempted to speak. Claire turned helplessly to Mrs. Finnegan. "I can't make out what she is trying to say."

Mrs. Finnegan bent an attentive ear. "It's about Stillman," she explained. "Your mother don't understand why...."

The speaker stopped with significant discretion. It was plain to Claire that nobody understood, and she felt a dreary futility as she answered both her mother and Mrs. Finnegan with:

"It's a long story. Some other time, when ... when you're feeling better."

A look of gray disappointment crossed Mrs. Robson's face. Mrs. Finnegan's upper lip seemed shaped suddenly with a suspicion that died almost as quickly as it began. There was a ring at the bell. "That's the doctor," said Mrs. Finnegan, and she left to open the door.

The doctor chilled Claire with his steely nonchalance as she stood apart while he went through the usual forms of a professional visit that was obviously futile. She followed him to the front door. He answered her eager inquiries with the cold triumph of authority.

"How long will she last?... Well, Miss Robson, that is hard to say. She might go off to-night. Then, again, she might live twenty years. She'll scarcely get any better, though. No, a nurse isn't essential, unless you can afford one. But you ought to have another woman about. If you have any relatives you'd better send for them and let them help out."

Claire did not find the doctor's announcement that her mother might die at once nearly so brutal as his assurance that she had an equal chance for existing twenty years. Twenty years! Claire closed the door and sank upon the steps overwhelmed.

But there was scant leisure on this first dreadful day of Mrs. Robson's illness for theatrical exuberances. Claire, unaccustomed to the routine of household duties, took a thousand unnecessary steps. She tried to work calmly, to bring an acquired philosophy to her tasks, but she went through her paces with a feverish, though stolid, anxiety. The long night which followed was inconceivably a thing of horror. Her wakeful moments were dry-eyed with despair, and when she slept it was only to come back to a shivering consciousness.

Mrs. Finnegan found her next morning fresh from an attempt to rouse her mother into accepting a few swallows of milk, which had ended in pathetic and miserable failure. She had thrown herself in an abandon of grief across the narrow kitchen table, and the coffee from an overturned cup was trickling in a warm, thick stream to the floor. But the paroxysm did her good. She rose to the kindly caresses of her neighbor like a flower beaten to earth but refreshed by a relentless torrent. After this, custom and habit began to reassert themselves in spite of the crushing weight of circumstance. She 'phoned to the office. Mr. Flint had returned, they told her. She explained her trouble to the cashier. "I'll try to be back the first of the week," she finished, in a burst of illogical hope.

Later in the day Mrs. Robson's two sisters arrived in answer to Claire's summons. Claire's impulse to send for them had been purely instinctive—an atrophied survival of clan-spirit that persisted beyond any real faith in its significance. Perhaps she had a feeling that her mother wished it; certainly she had no illusions as to the manner in which the unwelcome news of Mrs. Robson's illness would be received by these two self-centered females.

It was Mrs. Thomas Wynne who came in first, bundled mysteriously in her furs and holding a glass of wine jelly as a conventional symbol of the role of Lady Bountiful which she had for the moment assumed. Claire could almost fancy how conspicuously she had contrived to carry this overworked badge of the humanities, and the languid drawl of her voice as she explained to her friends en route:

"So sorry I can't stop and chat. But, as you see, I'm running along to a sick-room.... Oh no, nothing serious, I hope! Just my sister.... Mrs. Ffinch-Brown? Oh, dear no! A younger sister. I don't think you know her. She's had a great deal of trouble and hasn't been about much for a number of years."

Mrs. Thomas Wynne had the trick of intrenching a stubborn family pride by throwing back her head and daring all comers to uncover any of the Carrol clan's shortcomings. But her selfishness had at least the virtue of a live-and-let-live attitude that contrasted with the futile aggressiveness of Mrs. Edward Ffinch-Brown. She asked Claire no questions concerning her life or her prospects; she did not even pry very deeply into the chances that her sister had for an ultimate recovery. Her philosophy seemed to be founded on the knowledge that uncovered cesspools were bound to be unpleasant, and, since she had no desire to assist in their purification, she was quite content to keep them properly screened. She came and deposited her wine jelly and patted her sister's hand and went away again without leaving even a ripple in her wake. As she departed she gave further proof of her insolent insincerity by calling back at Claire:

"Remember, Claire, if there is anything I can do, just let me know."

Mrs. Ffinch-Brown's visit was scarcely more comforting, but decidedly more exciting. She had not the suavity of her indifferences. Mrs. Robson's untimely tilt with fate irritated her, and she took no pains to conceal this fact.

"I suppose your mother is just as she's always been—a creature of nerves," she said, as she dropped into a seat for a preliminary session with Claire before venturing upon the unwelcome sight of her stricken sister. "I don't know why it is, but she seems to be one of those people who always has had something the matter with her. Poor Emily! Well, I suppose we are all made differently."

When she entered the sick-room she found fault with the arrangement of the bed, the manner in which the covers slipped off, the uncovered glass of medicine on the bureau.

"You should braid your mother's hair, too. And why don't you pull the window down from the top?"

Claire stood in sullen silence while her aunt vented a personal annoyance on the nearest objects. But when Mrs. Ffinch-Brown's ill-natured ministrations brought a dumb but protesting misery to the sufferer's face, Claire found the courage to say, as gently as she could:

"Why bother, Aunt Julia? Mother is really too sick now to care much about appearances?"

This was just what Claire's aunt had hoped for. It gave her a chance for escape without any strain upon her conscience. She did not remain long after what she was pleased to consider a rebuff.

"Well, Claire, I see I can't be of much help," she announced as she powdered her nose before the shabby hat-rack mirror and drew on her gloves.... After she was gone Claire found a five-dollar bill on the living-room table. She opened the gilt-edged copy of Tennyson that, together with a calf edition of Ouida's *Moths*, had stood for years as guard over the literary pretensions of the household, and thrust the money midway between its covers. Doubtless a time was coming when she would find it necessary to use this money, but the present moment was too charged with the giver's resentful benevolence to make such a

compromise possible.

For three consecutive days Mrs. Ffinch-Brown swooped down upon the Robson household and gave vent to her pique. She had been divorced so long from these melancholy relations of hers that she had really forgotten their existence, and she displayed all the rancor of a woman who discovers suddenly a moth hole in the long undisturbed folds of a treasured cashmere shawl. Her precisely timed visits had not the slightest suspicion of attentiveness back of them, and Claire guessed almost at once that they were more in the nature of assaults carried on in the hope that she would meet enough opposition to insure an honorable retreat. Unlike Mrs. Thomas Wynne, Aunt Julia inquired minutely into family matters, insisted on knowing Claire's plans, and was aggressively free with advice.

"You ought to be making plans, Claire," she said, at the conclusion of her second visit. "You can't go on like this. I'd like to be able to do more, but of course I can't spare much time. And next week you'll have to be getting into harness again. You'd better think it over."

And on the next day, finding that Claire obviously had not thought it over, she threw out a hint that was little save a thinly veiled threat. She came in with a more genial manner than she was accustomed to waste upon the desert air of penury, and Claire, well schooled in reading the significance of proverbial calms, had a misgiving.

"I've been talking to Miss Morton ... about your mother," Mrs. Ffinch-Brown began, without bothering to lead up to the subject. "You know Alice Morton.... Well, your mother does, anyway. I bumped into her yesterday, quite by accident ... at a Red Cross meeting. It seems she's one of the directors of The King's Daughters' Home for Incurables!" Claire was sitting opposite her aunt, nervously fingering a paper-cutter. Mrs. Ffinch-Brown eyed her niece sharply, and with an obvious determination to drive her thrusts home before her victim recovered from the first vicious stabs she continued: "It seems they haven't a great deal of room out there, but she thinks she could arrange things. They'll raise the price to two thousand dollars after the fifteenth of the month, so I thought that--"

"Oh, not quite yet, Aunt Julia!... Mother has a chance. Surely...."

"Now, Claire, don't get hysterical. You're a business woman and you ought to be practical if any of us are. The price to-day is one thousand dollars. Think of it! Care for life in a ward with only three others! Now I can't ask your uncle for any more than is necessary in a case like this. If we make up our mind promptly we can save just one thousand dollars."

For the moment Claire felt the harried desperation of a cornered animal. She had never seen anything more disagreeable than her aunt's sidelong glance. She felt herself rise from her seat with cold dignity.

"I'm afraid, Aunt Julia, I can't make up my mind as quickly as you wish. It isn't so simple as it seems. I'm not above a plan like this if I'm convinced it's necessary. But somehow.... Oh, I know what you're thinking--you're thinking that beggars shouldn't be choosers. Well, I'm not quite a beggar yet. But when I am, I won't choose.... I'll promise you that."

Mrs. Ffinch-Brown rose also. She was in a position to triumph in any case, and she was washing her hands of the situation with eager satisfaction. "Oh, indeed! I'm glad you can say that now. But you weren't always so independent. I suppose it never occurs to you to thank me for what I did when you were younger."

Claire felt quite calm. The events of the past twenty-four hours had wrung her emotions dry. "Yes, Aunt Julia," she said, with an air of cool defiance, "it occurred to me many times.... Perhaps if I'd had any choice...."

Mrs. Ffinch-Brown grew pale. "It's plain that I'm wasting my time here!" she sneered.

Claire went with her aunt to the door....

Mrs. Ffinch-Brown did not cross the threshold of the Robson home again, and when on the following day Claire saw the figure of Mrs. Thomas Wynne outlined against the lace-screened front door she let the bell ring unanswered.

* * * * *

The dismissal of the last of the Carrol clan from any participation in the Robson destinies gave Claire a feeling at once independent and solitary. There had been a vague hope that this crisis might germinate some stray seeds of kinship, shriveled by the drought of uneventful years. But the poisonous nettles of memory were the only harvest that had sprung from the presence of Mrs. Robson's sisters, and Claire was glad to uproot the arid product of their shallowness.

The week came to a close with a rush of visitors. Suddenly it seemed as if everybody knew of Mrs. Robson's illness. Fellow church members, old school friends, casual acquaintances began to ring the front-door bell insistently. Knowing her mother's instinctive craving for recognition, it struck Claire that it was the height of irony to see this belated crowd come swarming in on the heels of calamity at the moment when Mrs. Robson was unable to so much as see them. Mrs. Robson would have so liked to sit in even a threadbare pomp and receive the homage of her visitors, but fate had been scurvy enough to withhold this scant triumph.

Nellie Whitehead breezed in on Saturday afternoon just as Mrs. Finnegan's cuckoo clock cooed the stroke of three; immediately the air began to move out of adversity's tragic current. It was impossible to be wholly without hope under the impetus of Nellie Whitehead's flaming good humor.

"I'm all out of breath," she began, as she flopped into the first chair that came handy. "I keep forgetting I ain't sweet sixteen any more and never been kissed. I hate to walk slow, though. Don't you? Say, but you _are_ up against it, ain't you! I saw that Munch dame on the street and she nearly broke her old neck trying to catch up with me. I wondered what was the matter, because she ain't usually so keen about flagging _me_. But, _you_ know, she never misses a trick at spilling out the calamity stuff, especially if it isn't on her.... 'Oh, Miss Whitehead,' she called out before I had a chance to beat it, 'have you heard about Miss Robson's mother?' ...When she got through I fixed her with that trusty old eye of mine and I said, 'I suppose you see her quite often.' And what do you think the old stiff said? 'Oh, I'd like to, Miss Whitehead, but I really haven't had time. You know I'm doing all Mr. Flint's dictation now.' And she had the nerve to try and slip me a hint that she was going to keep on doing it. But I just said to myself: 'You should kid yourself that way, old girl! When Flint picks a bloomer like you to ornament the back office it will be because his eyesight's failed him.' ...By the way, how do you manage to stand him off--with religious tracts or a hat-pin?"

She hardly waited for Claire's reply, but plunged at once into another monologue.

"Do you know what I'm up to? I got my eye on the swellest fur-lined coat you ever saw ... at Magnin's. But you can bet I'm going to keep my eye on it until after the holidays. They want a hundred and a quarter for it now, but they'll be glad to take sixty-five when the gay festivities are over, or I miss my guess. I go in every other day to have a look at it, and when the girl's back is turned I hang it back in the case myself--way back where everybody else will overlook it. Oh, I know the game all right. I did the same thing with a three piece suit last summer. But I say, All is fair in war and the high cost of living. Maybe you think I haven't had a time scraping the wherewithal for that coat together. But I brought the total up to seventy the other day by getting Billy Holmes to slip me a ten in advance for Christmas. I never trust a man to invest in anything for me if I can help it. They usually run to manicure sets in satin-lined cases or cut-glass cologne-bottles. Billy Holmes?... Oh, you know him! He ran the reinsurance desk at the Royal for years. They put him on the road last week. He's some live wire. And what's better, he has no incumbrances. I'll tell you what it is, Robson, I'm getting kind of tired of the goings. I'm just about ready to settle down by the old steam-radiator. And as long as I've got eyesight enough to look the field over, I've decided on a traveling-man or a sea-captain. They'll be sticking around home just about often enough to suit me.... Not that I'm a man-hater, but I've never had 'em for a steady diet and I'm not going to begin to get the habit this late day."

Nellie Whitehead stayed about an hour, and, as Claire opened the front door upon her friend's departure the letter-man thrust an envelope into her hands. She opened it hastily and turned suddenly white.

"Well, Robson, what's wrong now?" inquired Nellie.

"Flint ... he's let me out ... Miss Munch was right!"

CHAPTER IX

On the selfsame Saturday of Claire's dismissal from the office ranks of the Falcon Insurance Company Ned Stillman was the recipient of an early telephone message from Lily Condor. It appeared that Flora Menzies, the young woman who usually accompanied her in her vocal flights, had been laid low with pneumonia and she wanted Stillman to persuade Claire Robson to succeed to the honorary position.

"She did so famously on that night of our musicale," Lily Condor had explained, "and Flora won't be in shape again for a good three months. Of course, there isn't anything in it but glory. I'm just one of those 'sweet charity' artists. But I think she is a dear, and I know that you have influence."

Stillman pretended to be annoyed at Mrs. Condor's assumption that his word would carry any weight in the matter, but as a matter of fact he felt pleased in secret masculine fashion. Chancing to pass Flint's office at the noon hour, he dropped in. It happened that Miss Munch was standing near the counter, and she answered his inquiries with suave eagerness.

"Oh, Miss Robson isn't with us any more. She hasn't been here for over a week--not since her mother was taken sick. Oh, I thought you knew. You're Mr. Stillman, aren't you? I've heard my cousin, Mrs. Richards, speak of you. Miss Robson went over to Mr. Flint's on that night of the storm and she missed the boat or something--you know! And when she got home next morning she found that her mother had worried herself into a stroke. They say she is quite helpless.... I'm sure I don't know what she intends doing. We mailed her check yesterday. It's always hard to

land another position when one is dismissed."

Stillman escaped quickly. Miss Munch's venom was a thing too crude and unconcealed to face with indifference. Her emphatic "_you_ know" was pregnant with innuendo and malice. Still, it did not occur to Stillman that he had any part in Claire Robson's misfortune. But he did know from Miss Munch's tone that the unfortunate situation, growing out of the automobile ride from Yolanda to Sausalito, had received due recognition at the hands of those who made a business of blowing out bubbles of scandal from the suds of chance. It was useless for him to deny that Claire Robson from the first had been of more or less interest. She seemed to rise in such a detached fashion from her environment.

He had to admit, as later he sat in the cloistered silences of his club library and blew contemplative smoke-rings into the air, that a certain idle curiosity had been the mainspring of his concern for her. He had been like a boy who captured a strange butterfly and clapped it under a glass tumbler where he could watch how easily it would adapt itself to its new surroundings. But, having caught the butterfly and held it a brief captive, the dust from its wings still lingered upon the hands that imprisoned it. He had made the mistake of imagining that one is always master of casual incidents. To meet a young woman by the most trivial chance, to extend a brief courtesy to her, these were matters which hold scarcely the germs of a menacing situation, not menacing to him, of course—they never could be menacing to him; he was still thinking of things from the viewpoint of Claire Robson.

To tell the truth, he was annoyed at having been mixed up in Claire's flight from the Flint household. Had Flint been a complete stranger he would not have minded so much. He was still divided by the appeal to his chivalry and the sense of loyalty that a man feels to the masculine friends of his youth. In her telephone message Claire had put the matter very casually—the track was washed out and she was wondering whether he contemplated returning to town that evening. But he guessed at once what lay back of her matter-of-fact boldness. He had guessed so completely that he had decided not only to return to town, but to start at once.

He wondered now whether he had answered the appeal because a woman was in a desperate situation or because that woman was Claire Robson. All through the dinner hour at the Tom Forsythes he had thought about her, had speculated vaguely what mischance or effrontery had been responsible for her ill-timed visit to Flint's. He remembered trying to decide whether the young woman was extraordinarily deep or extraordinarily simple and frank. He did not like to concede that he could be influenced by anything so transparently malicious as Mrs. Richards's statements regarding the absence of Mrs. Flint, but he was bound to admit that they did nothing to render the situation less innocent; what had particularly annoyed him was the fact that he should have given the matter a second thought. To begin with, it was none of his business and he was not a man who presumed to judge or even speculate on other people's indiscretions. Claire Robson was no sheltered schoolgirl. She was a full-grown woman, in the thick of business life. Such women were not taken unawares. He had just dismissed the whole affair from his mind on this basis when Claire's telephone message came to him. Even now he marveled at the sense of satisfaction that her appeal had given. But he had found no savor in a situation that compelled him to interfere in Flint's program. Such a move on his part was contrary to his standards, to his training in comradeship, to all his acquired philosophy. He had the well-bred man's distaste for getting into a mess. He abhorred scenes and conspicuous complications.

He had come through the incident with steadily waning enthusiasm and a decision to wash his hands in the future of all such unprofitable trifling. But the sudden knowledge that the young woman was in desperate trouble revived his interest. He had no idea how serious Mrs. Robson's

illness was or whether Claire had any hopes for a new position. But Miss Munch's words had been significant. Claire had been _dismissed_, and Stillman knew enough about present business stagnation to conclude that for the time, at least, Claire Robson faced a bleak outlook. He realized the indelicacy of any definite move on his part, but it occurred to him that it might be well to talk the situation over with some one—preferably a woman. As he tossed his cigar butt aside, Lily Condor appealed to him as just the person for the emergency. Therefore he looked her up without further ado.

He found her at home, curled up among the cushions of a davenport that did service as a bed when the scenes were shifted. She was living in a tiny apartment consisting of one room and a kitchenette that gave Stillman the impression of a juggler's cabinet. Nothing in this room was ever by any chance what it seemed. Things that looked like doors led nowhere; bits of stationary furniture usually yielded to the slightest pressure and revealed strange secrets. He had seen Mrs. Condor deftly construct a card-table out of an easy-chair, and he had no doubt that the oak table in the center of the room could have been converted into a chiffonier or a chaisse-lounge at a given signal.

In repose, it struck Stillman that Mrs. Condor seemed very much like a purring cat. He had never seen her quite so frankly behind the scenes, robbed of both her physical and mental make-up. She was one of those women in middle age who adapt themselves to the tone of their background and while she contrived to strike a fairly vivid note, she took care not to be discordant. She was clever enough to realize that her talents were not sensational and that she could only hope for an indifferent success as a professional. But in the role of a gracious amateur she disarmed criticism and forced her way into circles that might otherwise have been at some pains to exclude her. For, if the truth were known, there had been certain phases of Mrs. Condor's earlier life which were rather vaguely, and at the same time aptly, covered by Mrs. Finnegan's term of "gay." A perfectly discreet woman, for instance, would have made an effort to live down her flaming hair and almost immorally dazzling complexion, but Mrs. Condor had been much more ready to live _up_ to these conspicuous charms. In fact, she had lived up to them pretty furiously, until time began to take a ruthless toll of her contrasting points. From the concert-platform she still seemed to discount, almost to flout, the years, but in secret she yielded unmistakably to their pressure.

It was this yielding, pliant attitude that struck Stillman as he came upon her almost unawares on that early December afternoon, a yielding, pliant attitude which gave a curious sense of tenacity under the surface. And he thought, as he dropped into the chair she indicated, that she was a woman who gained strength in these moments of relaxation.

"Fancy your catching me like this!" she said, "I thought when the bell rang that you were my dressmaker.... If you want a highball you'll have to wait on yourself. Phil Edington brought an awfully good bottle of Scotch last night. I declare I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have a youngster or two on my staff. Old men are such bores, anyway, and, as a matter of fact, they never waste time on any woman over thirty. Well, I don't blame them. We're a sorry, patched-up mess at best.... Tell me, did you get hold of Miss Robson?"

"I dropped in, but she wasn't at the office," Stillman replied, tossing his hat on the center-table.

Mrs. Condor withdrew to the relaxation of her innumerable sofa pillows again. "Wasn't at the office? How thrilling! Is she one of the Sultan's favorites?... I've heard Sawyer Flint was an easy mark if you know how to work him. Miss Robson didn't strike me that way, though. But I ought to have known that silent women are always cleverer than they appear."

Stillman caught the barest suggestion of a sneer in Mrs. Condor's tone—the sneer of a woman relinquishing a stubborn hold upon the gaieties.

"Well, I guess Miss Robson didn't know how to work him, as a matter of fact," Stillman said, quietly. "She lost her job to-day. I'm a little bit worried about her.... I came here on purpose to talk the situation over with you."

His directness brought Lily Condor out of her languidness with a sharp turn. She wriggled up and sat erectly on the edge of the davenport, one slippered foot dangling just above the other. "Why, Ned Stillman, what an old fraud you are! I didn't fancy you were interested in anybody. I didn't think that you.... Oh, well, throw me a cigarette and let me hear the worst in comfort!"

He opened his cigarette-case and leaned over toward her. She made her choice. He struck a match and she put her hand tightly on his wrist as she bent over the flame and slowly drew in her breath. Even after she had released her grasp his flesh still bore the imprint of the rings on her fingers. For a moment he had an impulse to bow himself out of her presence without further explanation, but already she seemed to have a proprietary interest in him. Her smile was full of friendly malice.

He ended by telling her everything, in spite of the conviction that he had approached the wrong person.

"Of course," she hazarded, boldly, when he had finished, "you mean to help her out."

Her presumption annoyed but rather refreshed him. "I'd like to do something, but, hang it all, what can be done?"

"What can be done? If that isn't like a man! Or I should say, a gentleman!... Why don't you plunge in boldly and damn the consequences?... It's just your sort that sends women into the arms of men like Flint. You're so busy keeping an eye on the proprieties that you miss all the danger signals."

Her tone was extraordinarily familiar, and, to a man who rather prided himself upon his ability to keep people at arm's-length, it was not precisely agreeable. Yet he knew that it would be folly to give any hint of his irritation.

"Well," he contrived to laugh back at her, "so far as I can see, Miss Robson's problems are quite too simple. After all, it's largely a question of money.... I can't go and throw gold in her lap as if she were some beggar on a street corner."

"You mean, I suppose, that you are afraid to risk the outraged dignity of this ward of yours. I think that's a lovely name for her. Don't you?... You're acquiring such a benevolent old attitude. The only thing to be done, I fancy, is to adopt some transparent ruse—some sort of Daddy-Long-Leggyish deception." She closed her eyes thoughtfully—"Hiring her as my accompanist, for instance." She rose to dispense Scotch and soda. Stillman sat in thoughtful silence, while Mrs. Condor talked to very trivial purpose. She seemed suddenly to have grown tired of the subject of Claire Robson. The arrival of the expected dressmaker broke in upon the rather one-sided tete-a-tete.

"You'll have to go," Lily Condor announced with an intimate air of dismissal to Stillman. "It would never do to let a mere man in on the secrets of the sewing-room."

At the door he hesitated awkwardly over his good-by. "I was wondering," he said, "whether you were serious about ... about hiring Miss Robson as your accompanist. You know I think the plan has possibilities."

She threw back her head and smiled with hard satisfaction. "I've been trying to figure if you had killed your imagination. Think it over."

She gave him the tips of her fingers. He returned their languid pressure and departed.

As he drifted down the hall he heard her calling, half gaily, half derisively, after him:

"Don't decide on anything rash now.... Sleep over it!..."

* * * * *

He thought it over for three days and when he called on Lily Condor again he found her divorced from her languishing mood. She was dressed for dinner down-town, and he had to confess she had made the most of what remained of her flaming hair and dazzling complexion.

He felt that she guessed the reason for his visit, although she took care to let him force the issue.

"About Miss Robson," he said, finally, "I've concluded to take you at your word."

Lily Condor smoothed out her gloves and laid them aside. "Take me at my word? You're welcome to the suggestion, if that is what you mean. As a matter of fact I wasn't serious."

He was annoyed to feel that he was flushing. He could not fathom her, but he had a conviction that she had been serious and that this attitude was a mere pose. "Nevertheless, I think it can be managed," he insisted. "And I want you to help me."

She listened to his plan. "What you will call a Daddy-Long-Leggish pretense," he explained to her with an attempt at facetiousness. "You to do the hiring and ... and yours truly to provide the wherewithal. Until things look up a bit. Of course then ... why, naturally, when things look up a bit for her...."

But Lily remained lukewarm. She wasn't quite sure that it would be ... oh, well, he knew what she meant! It seemed too absurd to think that he had given an ear to anything so extravagant. She would like to be of service to Miss Robson, of course, but, after all, she felt that it was taking an unfair advantage of the girl.

"If she's everything you say she is, she'd resent it all tremendously," she put forth as a final objection.

"But she isn't to know! That's the point of the whole thing," he explained, with absurd simplicity.

"Oh, my dear man, she isn't to know, but she will, ultimately. You don't suppose the secret of a woman's meal-ticket is hidden very long, do you? And, besides, you couldn't offer her enough to live on. That would be absurd on the very face of it."

"Oh, well, I could offer her enough to help out a bit, anyway, and half a loaf you know...."

He broke off, amazed at the determination her opposition had crystallized. She looked at him sharply and rose.

"I must be running along," she commented as she drew on her gloves. "I tell you, I'll go call on Miss Robson—some day this week. A woman can always get a better side-light on a situation like this. There are so many angles to be considered. She must have relatives. You wouldn't want to make a false move, would you, now?"

He was too grateful to be suspicious at this sudden compromise with her convictions.

"You're tremendously good," he stammered. "It will be a favor. And any time that I can...."

"You can be of service to me right now," she interrupted, gaily. "Order me a taxi ... that's a good boy! I always do so like to pull up at a place in style."

Stillman paid Lily Condor a third visit that week—this time in answer to the lady's telephone message. She had been to see Claire Robson and her report was anything but rosy.

"Her mother's perfectly helpless and will be for the rest of her life," Lily volunteered almost cheerfully. "And, frankly, I don't see what is going to become of them. It seems that Mrs. Robson is a sister of Mrs. Tom Wynne and that dreadful Finch-Brown woman. They both have about as much heart as a cast-iron stove. Miss Robson didn't say so in words, but I gathered that she had called both of them off the relief job. I almost cheered when I realized that fact. I threw out a hint about there being a possibility of my needing an accompanist. I said Miss Menzies was ill and perhaps ... and I intimated that there was something more than glory in it."

"And what did Miss Robson say to that?"

"Oh, she was more self-contained than one would imagine under the circumstances. She said she would like to think it over. She put it that way on the score of leaving her mother alone nights. But, believe me, that young lady is more calculating than she seems. Of course I didn't mention terms or anything like that. I left a good loophole in case you had changed your mind."

For the moment Stillman was almost persuaded to tell Lily Condor that he had changed his mind. Not that he had lost interest in Claire, but already he had another plan and there was something disagreeably presumptuous in Mrs. Condor's tone. He never remembered having taken anybody into his confidence regarding a personal matter. The trouble was that he had begun the whole affair under the misapprehension that it was a most impersonal thing. He still tried to look at it from that angle, but Lily Condor's manner seemed bent on forcing home the rather disturbing conviction that he had a vital interest in the issue. She had cut in upon his reserve and he would never quite be able to recover the lost ground. He felt that she sensed his revulsion, for almost at once she adroitly changed the subject and it did not come to life again during the remainder of his call.

But when he was leaving she thrust an idle finger into the lapel of his coat and said:

"I think it's awfully good of you, Ned, to be human enough to want to do something for others. I watched you as a young man, and when you married...." His startled look must have halted her, for she released her hold upon him and finished with a shrug.

He said good-by hastily and escaped. But he wondered, as he found his way out into the street, how long it would be before Mrs. Condor would

acquire sufficient boldness to discuss with him what and whom she chose.

CHAPTER X

Christmas Day came and went with a host of bitter-sweet memories for Claire Robson. Not that she could look back on any holiday season with unalloyed happiness, but time had drawn the sting from the misfortune of the old days. Through the mist of the years outlines softened, and she was more prone to measure the results by the slight harvest that their efforts had brought. For instance, they had never been too poor to deny themselves the luxury of a tree. And a tree to Mrs. Robson meant none of the scant, indifferent affairs that most of the neighbors found acceptable strung with a few strands of dingy popcorn and pasteboard ornaments. No, the Robson tree was always an opulent work of art, freighted with bursting cornucopias and heavy glass balls and yards of quivering tinsel. The money for all this dazzling beauty usually came a fortnight or so before the eventful day in the shape of a ten-dollar bill tucked away in the folds of Gertrude Sinclair's annual letter to Mrs. Robson. As Claire had grown older she had grown also impatient of the memory of her mother squandering what should have gone for thick shoes and warm plaid dresses upon the ephemeral joys of a Christmas tree. But now she suddenly understood, and she felt glad for a mother courageous enough to lay hold upon the beautiful symbols of life at the expense of all that was hideously practical. Shoes wore out and plaid dresses finally found their way to the rag-bag, but the glories of the spirit burned forever in the splendor of all this truant magnificence, and the years stretched back in a glittering procession of light-laden fir-trees.

Then some time between Christmas and New-Year came the Christmas pantomime at the Tivoli, with its bewildering array of scantily clad fairies and dashing Amazons and languishing princes in pale-blue tights; to say nothing of the Queen Charlottes consumed between acts through faintly yellow straws. How Claire would mark off each day on the calendar which brought her nearer to this triumph! And what a hurry and bustle always ensued to get dinner over and be fully dressed and down to the box-office before even the doors were opened, so that they could get first choice of the unreserved seats which sold at twenty-five cents. Then there would ensue the long, tedious wait in the dimly lighted cavern of the playhouse, smelling with a curious fascination of stale cigars and staler beer, and the thrill that the appearance of the orchestra produced, followed by the arrival of all the important personages fortunate enough to afford fifty-cent seats, which gave them the security to put off their appearance until the curtain was almost ready to rise. And when the curtain really did rise upon the inevitable spectacle of villagers dancing upon the village green! And Mrs. Robson carefully picked out in the chorus the stout sister of a former servant who had worked for her mother! And the wicked old witch swept from the wings on the traditional broomstick! From that moment until the final transformation scene, when scintillating sea-shells yielded up one by one their dazzling burdens of female loveliness and a rather Hebraic Cupid descended from an invisible wire to wish everybody a happy New-Year in words appropriately rhymed, there was no halt to the wonders disclosed. With what sharp and exquisite reluctance did Claire remain glued to her seat, refusing to believe that it was all over! Even at this late date Claire had only to close her eyes to revive the delights of these rather covert excursions into the realm of fancy—covert, because a Tivoli pantomime had not precisely the sanction of such a respectable organization as the Second Presbyterian Church. Mrs. Robson, while not definitely encouraging Claire to wilful dishonesty, always managed to warn her daughter by saying:

"I wouldn't tell any one about going to the Tivoli, Claire, if I were you ... unless, of course, they should ask about it."

Claire, in mortal terror lest any indiscretion on her part would put a stop to this annual lapse into such delightful immoralities, held her peace in spite of her desire to spread abroad the beauties which she had beheld. She had a feeling that all the participants in the pantomime must of necessity be rather wicked and abandoned creatures, and half the pleasure she had felt in viewing them arose from a secret admiration at the courage which permitted human beings to be so perfectly and desperately sinful. Although she was almost persuaded that perhaps it did not take quite such bravado to be wicked in blue-spangled gauze and satin slippers as it did to lapse from the straight and narrow path in a gingham dress and resoled boots.

The only thrill that the present Christmas Day produced came in the shape of a pot of flaming poinsettias bearing the card of Ned Stillman. These were the first flowers that Claire ever remembered having received. It pleased her also to realize that Stillman had been delicate to the point of this thoroughly unpractical gift, especially as he had every reason to assume that something more substantial would have been acceptable. She was confident that by this time he had heard through Mrs. Condor of her mother's illness and her loss of position. Claire was still puzzled at Mrs. Condor's visit. For all that lady's skill at subterfuge, there were implied evasions in her manner which Claire sensed instinctively. And then Claire was not yet inured to the novelty of being in demand. To have been forced by circumstance upon Mrs. Condor as an accompanist was one thing; to be desired by her in a moment of cold calculation was quite another; and there had been more uncertainty than caution in Claire's plea for time in which to consider the offer. But as the days flew by it became more and more apparent to Claire that she was in no position to indulge in idle speculation. She had long since given up the hope of fulfilling the demands of a regular office position, even if one had been open to her. Mrs. Finnegan's enthusiasm to be neighborly and helpful was more a matter of theory than practice, and it did not take Claire many days to decide that she had no right to impose upon a good nature which was made up largely of ignorance of a sick-room's demands. Claire's final check from Flint was dwindling with alarming rapidity; indeed, she was facing the first of the year with the realization that there would be barely enough to pay the next month's rent, let alone to settle the current bills. She had no idea what Mrs. Condor intended paying, but she fancied that it must be little enough. Surely Mrs. Condor did not receive any great sum for her singing and there must be any number of gratuitous performances. She decided quite suddenly, the day after Christmas, to take Mrs. Condor at her word, and she was a bit disturbed at both the lady's reply and the manner of it.

"Oh," Mrs. Condor had drawled rather disagreeably, "I thought you'd given up the idea. I spoke to somebody else only this morning. But, of course, I'm not certain about how it will turn out. I'll keep you in mind and if the other falls through.... By the way, how is your mother? I keep asking Ned Stillman every day what the news is, but he never knows anything. All men are alike ... unless they've got some special interest. Sometimes I marvel that he looks me up so regularly, but then I've known him ever since.... But there, I'll be telling more than I should! Do come and see me. I'm always in in the morning.... Yes, I can imagine you do have a lot to do. I'm so sorry you didn't call up sooner. But one never can tell. Good-by.... I hope you'll have a happy New Year."

Claire hung up the receiver. Well, she had lost an opportunity to turn an easy dollar or two and she had no one to thank but herself. Why had she delayed in accepting Mrs. Condor's offer?

Fortunately the unexpected arrival of Nellie Whitehead cut short any

further repinings. Claire was frankly glad to see her and at once she thought, "She has come to show me her new coat."

But Nellie Whitehead was incased in a wrap that showed every evidence of a good six months' wear.

"My new coat?" the lady echoed, in answer to Claire's question. "There ain't no such animal. Somebody else copped it. I didn't shove it back far enough the last time I took a look at it, I guess. Oh, well, I should worry! I can get along very well without it...."

When Nellie Whitehead rose to leave, dusk had fallen and Claire was fumbling for matches to light the hall gas, when she felt her friend's hand close over hers. There followed the cold pressure of several coins against Claire's palm and the voice of her visitor sounding a bit tremulous in the dusk.

"You'll need some extra money, Robson, or I miss my guess."

Claire fell back with a gesture of protest. "Why, Nellie Whitehead, how could you? It's your coat money, too! Well, _I_ never!"

And with that they both burst into tears.... When Claire recovered herself she found that Nellie Whitehead had escaped. She lit the gas and opened her palm. Four twenty-dollar gold pieces glistened in the light.

* * * * *

Next morning Claire received a telephone message from Mrs. Condor. The position of accompanist was hers at forty dollars a month if she desired it.

"It won't be hard," Mrs. Condor had finished, reassuringly. "Some weeks I've something on nearly every night. And then again there won't be anything doing for days.... How can I afford to pay so much? Well, my dear, that is a secret. But don't worry, you'll earn it...."

And toward the close of the week there came another surprise for Claire in the shape of a letter from Stillman, which ran:

MY DEAR MISS ROBSON.--I am going to take a little flier at the bean market.

That was my father's business and I know a few things about it--at least to the extent of recognizing the commodity when the sack is opened. Do you fancy you could arrange to give me a few hours a week at the typewriter? If so, we can get together and arrange terms.

Cordially,

EDWARD STILLMAN.

"At last," flashed through Claire's mind, "he's going in for something worth while."

This time she decided promptly. Over the telephone she made an appointment with Stillman, in his apartments, for beginning work on the second Wednesday in January.

Shortly after the first of the year Claire received her initial summons from Lily Condor--they were to appear at a concert in the Colonial Ballroom of the St. Francis for the Belgian relief. Mrs. Condor had intimated that the affair was to be smart, and so it proved. It was set at a very late and very fashionable hour, and all through the program groups of torpid, though rather audible, diners kept drifting in. Claire was not slow to discover that Lily Condor was first on the bill, and she remembered reading somewhere in a newspaper that among professionals the first and last place were always loathsome positions. Judging from the noise and confusion that accompanied their efforts, Claire could well understand why this was so, and she expected to find Lily Condor resentful. But to her surprise Mrs. Condor merely shrugged her shoulders and said:

"What difference does it make? They don't come to listen, anyway. Besides, I always open the bill. I like to get it over quickly."

But Claire had reason to suspect, as she followed the remainder of a very excellent program, that the choice of position did not rest with Mrs. Condor. Claire began to wonder how much money Mrs. Condor received for an effort like this. And she became more puzzled as she gathered from the conversation of the other artists about her that the talent had been furnished gratuitously.

"I understand," she heard a woman in front of her whisper to her companion, "that Devincenzi, the 'cellist, is the only one in the crowd who is getting a red cent. But he has a rule, you know--or is it a contract? I'm sure I don't know. At any rate, they say that the Ffinch-Browns donated his fee.... The Ffinch-Browns? Don't you know them?... See, there they are ... over there by the Tom Forsythes. She has on turquoise pendant earrings.... Oh, they're ever so charitable! But they do say that she is something of a...."

Claire lost the remainder of this stage whisper in a rather tremulous anxiety to catch a glimpse of her aunt before she moved. Claire had to acknowledge that at a distance her aunt gave a wonderful illusion of arrested youth as she stood with one hand grasping the collar of her gorgeous mandarin coat. But Claire was more interested in the turquoise pendants than in her aunt. She had never seen the jewels before, but she had heard about them almost from the time she was able to lisp.

"They're mine," Mrs. Robson had repeated to Claire again and again. "My father bought them for me when I was sixteen years old. I remember the day distinctly, and how my mother said: 'Don't you think, John, that Emily is a little young for anything like this? I'll keep them for her until she is twenty.' I nearly cried myself sick, but of course mother was right, _then_.... But like everything else, I never got my hands on them again. And what is more, Julia Carrol Ffinch-Brown knows that they are mine as well as anybody, because she stood right alongside of me when I handed them over to mother. Not that I care.... It's the principle of the thing!"

Claire felt disappointed in the pendants. They seemed so insignificant--to fall very far short of her mother's passionate description of them, and she began to wonder which was the more pathetic, Mrs. Robson's exaggerated notion of their worth or the pettiness that gave Aunt Julia the tenacity to hold fast to such trivial baubles.

Ned Stillman was in the audience, also. Claire saw him sitting off at the side. Indeed, she spotted him on the very moment of her entrance upon the stage. She had been nervous until his friendly smile warmed her into easy confidence; and though, while she played, her back had been

toward him, she felt the glow of his sympathy. As Lily Condor and she swept back upon the stage for their rather perfunctory applause, and still more perfunctory bouquets provided by the committee, Claire could see him gently tapping his hands in her direction, and she was surprised when the usher handed her a bouquet of dazzling orchids.

"They must be for you," Claire said, innocently enough, to Mrs. Condor. "I don't find any name on them."

"That shows that you've got a discreet admirer, at any rate," Lily Condor returned with that bantering sneer which Claire was just beginning to notice. And the thought struck her at once that Stillman had sent the flowers. She was pleased, but also a little annoyed to think he had so deliberately ignored Mrs. Condor.

The Flints were there, too; Flint looked uncomfortable and warm in his scant full-dress suit and his wife frankly ridiculous in a low-cut gown that exhibited every angle of a hopelessly scrawny neck. Claire did not see them until she was leaving the stage, and she smiled as she saw Flint lean over and pick up the opera-glasses from his wife's lap. But this was not all. In a far corner sat Miss Munch and her cousin, Mrs. Richards, their ferret eyes darting busily about and their tongues clicking even more rapidly. Doubtless Flint had invested in a number of tickets at the office for business reasons and passed them around for any of the office force who felt a desire to see society at close range.

Claire had not meant to stay beyond one or two numbers following her own appearance, but she kept yielding to Mrs. Condor's insistent suggestions that she "stay for just one more," until she discovered, to her dismay, that it was past midnight. The last artists were taking their places upon the stage. Claire resigned herself to the inevitable and sat out the remainder of the performance. She was making a quick exit into the dressing-room when she came face to face with her aunt. Mrs. Finch-Brown betrayed her confusion by the merest lift of the eyebrows, and she stepped back as if to get a clearer view of her niece, as she said with an air of polite surprise:

"You--_here_?"

Claire carried her head confidently. "I was on the program," she returned, consciously eying the turquoise pendants.

Mrs. Finch-Brown rested a closed fan against her left ear as if to screen at least one of the earrings from Claire's frank stare. "Oh, how interesting! I must have missed you--I came in late. It's rather odd. I thought I knew everybody on the program.... I helped arrange it."

"Well," Claire smiled, "I wasn't what you would call one of the head-liners. I played Mrs. Condor's accompaniments."

"That accounts for it ... my not knowing, I mean. I dare say your mother is better, otherwise you wouldn't be here."

Claire met her aunt's thrust calmly. "No, mother is worse, if anything. As a matter of fact, I'm here...."

She broke off abruptly, realizing suddenly that she had left her orchids behind. She turned to discover Stillman making his leisurely way toward her. He had the orchids in his hand.

"My dear Miss Robson," he said, gently, "Mrs. Condor came very near appropriating your flowers."

She could feel the color rising to her forehead. "I see you came to my rescue again," she said, simply, taking them from him. "I think you know

Mr. Stillman, Aunt Julia."

Mrs. Ffinch-Brown forced a too-sweet smile as she gave Stillman a nod of recognition. "Fancy any girl forgetting so much gorgeousness!" she exclaimed with an attempt at lightness, but Claire caught the covert rancor in her voice, and as her aunt made a movement of escape she put out a restraining hand and said:

"I wanted you to know, Aunt Julia, that I'm here merely as a matter of business. Mrs. Condor has hired me to play her accompaniments."

Mrs. Ffinch-Brown shook off Claire impatiently. "_Hired_ you!" she sneered. "How extraordinary!"

And with that she swept past, giving Stillman a glance of farewell.

Claire turned to Stillman. "What must you think of me? Leaving my flowers behind. Confess—it was you who sent them.... I was in such a rush to get away, though. I shouldn't have stayed so long. My mother is alone.... Of course there are neighbors just below and they will look in on her, but just the same...."

His smile reassured her. "Are you forgetting about to-morrow?" he asked. "Remember we are to begin business promptly at two o'clock. I hired a typewriting-machine yesterday. I'm really thrilled at the idea of—of going into business."

She looked at him steadily as she gave him her hand: "My dear Mr. Stillman," she said, quite frankly, "you are very kind."

He answered by pressing her hand warmly and she covered her face with the purple orchids. They were interrupted by Lily Condor sweeping rather arrogantly toward them.

"Haven't you gone yet?" she asked Claire. "I thought you were in a hurry! I hope you've persuaded Ned to get us a taxi. I hate street-cars at this hour." And in answer to Claire's embarrassed protest that she had never given such a thing a thought, Mrs. Condor finished: "Well, I've given it a thought, and don't you forget it. Come, Ned, is it a go?"

Claire fancied that a flicker of annoyance passed over Stillman's face as he answered, with a dry laugh:

"You might at least have given me time to prove my gallantry."

"I'm not taking any chances," was the prompt reply.

Claire turned away. What had contrived to give Mrs. Condor this disagreeable air of assurance toward Ned Stillman, she found herself wondering. It had not been apparent at the Condor-Stillman musicale....

She arrived home dismayed to find the front room illuminated, but the rattle of the departing taxi brought Mrs. Finnegan to the top of the stairs with a laughing apology.

"I just looked in to see how your mother was, Miss Claire, and I found a book on the front-room table"—Mrs. Finnegan held up Ouida's _Moths_—"and I got so interested in it that I just naturally forgot to go home. Finnegan's out, anyway. I was telling him about your good fortune. And all he said was: 'Well, it beats me how an old crow like Mrs. Condor gets paid for singing. I remember five years ago, when she wasn't so uppish, we had her for a benefit performance of the Native Sons, and she didn't get paid then. Her singing may be over my head. Anyway, it didn't get to my ears.' But Finnegan is always like that. He

just likes to contradict. I got back at him. I said, 'Well, if she can afford to pay Miss Claire forty a month for playing the piano, she must get a good piece of money every time she opens her mouth.' ...Mercy, look at the orchids! Well, you must have had a swell time. I'll bet you wouldn't like to tell who sent them.... There wasn't any card? That's not saying you don't know, Miss Claire.... I hope you won't think I'm a meddler, but I'm an older woman and.... Well, just you keep a sharp eye on the feller that sends you orchids, Miss Claire."

She went down-stairs without further ado. Claire put the orchids in water and set them on a sill near an open window. She did not feel in the least resentful of Mrs. Finnegan's warnings. She was too confident to be anything but faintly amused at her neighbor's middle-class anxiety. But Finnegan's skepticism concerning Mrs. Condor annoyed her and she remembered the disagreeable words of her aunt:

"_Hired_ you? How extraordinary!"

* * * * *

"Two o'clock _sharp_!" The memory of Stillman's air of delicate banter as he emphasized the hour for beginning his business venture struck Claire ironically the more she pondered his words. She had a feeling that there was something farcical in the prospect, and yet there seemed nothing to do but to go through with the preliminaries. She presented herself, therefore, at the appointed time at the Stanford Court apartments.

She found Stillman quite alone, his hands blue-black with the smudge from a refractory typewriter ribbon which he was vainly endeavoring to adjust. It took some time for him to get his hands clean again, and Claire sharpened her pencils while she waited. But there really proved to be nothing to do.

"I'm all up in the air over this bean business," Stillman confessed, nonchalantly. "The government, you know ... they're taking over all that sort of thing ... regulating food and prices. Of course, in that case...."

Claire felt an enormous and illogical relief. "Then you really won't need me," she ventured.

"Oh, quite the contrary.... I have a certain amount of business, of a sort. And I'm tired of dropping checks along the trail of public stenographers.... Suppose we talk terms. We haven't fixed on any salary, yet."

Claire felt a rising impatience. His subterfuge seemed too childish and obvious. "That will depend on how much of my time you expect, Mr. Stillman."

"Well, three times a week, anyway ... to start with. Say Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from two to five.... I was thinking that something in the neighborhood of fifteen dollars a week would be fair."

He turned a very frank gaze in her direction and she quizzically returned his glance.

"That's rather ridiculous, don't you think?" she said, trying to disguise her furtive annoyance. "You can hire a substitute through any typewriting agency on the basis of three dollars a day."

"Yes, and I can buy two cigars for a nickel, but I shouldn't want to smoke them."

She clicked the keys of her machine idly. "That is hardly a fair comparison. You can get any number of competent girls for three dollars."

He rested his chin on his upturned palm. "But, my dear Miss Robson, I happen to want you."

She thought of any number of cheap, obvious retorts that might have been flung back at his straightforward admission, but instead she said, with equal frankness:

"That's just what I don't understand."

He threw her a puzzled look and the usual placid light in his eyes quickened to resentful impatience.

"Is that a necessary part of the contract, Miss Robson?"

She caught her breath. His tone of annoyance was sharp and unexpected. There was a suggestion of Flint's masculine arrogance in his voice. She felt how absurd was her cross-examination of him, of how absurd, under the circumstances, would have been her cross-examination of anybody ready and willing to give her work to do and an ample wage in the bargain, and yet, for all the force of his reply, she knew it to be a well-bred if not a deliberate evasion.

"You mean it is none of my business, don't you?" she contrived to laugh back at him.

His reply was a further surprise. "Yes, precisely," he said, with an ominous thinning of the lips.

She rose instinctively to meet this thrust and she was conscious that even Flint had never managed so to disturb her. She glanced about hastily as if measuring the room in a swift impulse toward escape. Stillman had chosen the dining-room for a temporary office, and upon the polished surface of the antique walnut table the typewriter struck an incongruous note; indeed, it was all incongruous, particularly Stillman and his assumed business airs. Yes, it was absurd for her to either cross-examine or protest, but it was equally absurd for him to pay her such an outlandish sum for nine hours a week.

"He's doing it for me," she thought, not without a sense of triumph. Then, turning to him, she said, a bit awkwardly:

"I guess there isn't any use to dissuade you, Mr. Stillman. If you say fifteen dollars a week, I sha'n't argue with you."

He smiled back at her, all his former suavity regained. She slid into her seat again. Her mind was recalling vividly the one other time in her life when she had grappled vigorously with the masculine spirit of domination, and come away victorious. This time she had been defeated and she had impulses toward relief and fear. She looked up suddenly and trapped a solicitous glance from Stillman that rather annoyed her. And it struck her, as she mentally compared Stillman with most of the men of her acquaintance, how far he could have loomed above them if he had had the will for such a performance. As it was he fell somewhat beneath them in a curious, indefinable way. Had he been too finely tempered by circumstances or had the flame of life lacked the proper heat for fusing his virtues effectively? For the moment she found Flint's forthright insolence more tolerable than Stillman's sterile deference. Suddenly she began to think of home, not with any sense of security, but as something unpleasant, dark, disquieting....

CHAPTER XII

Toward six o'clock one afternoon in late February Ned Stillman, making his way from the business district at California and Montgomery Streets toward his club, suddenly remembered a forgotten luncheon engagement for that day with Lily Condor.

"Well," he muttered at once, "I'm in for it now! I guess I might as well swing out and see her and get the thing over with."

It was curious of late how often he was given to muttering. Previously, petty annoyances had not moved him to these half-audible and solitary comments which he had always found contemptuously amusing in others. He wondered whether this new trick was the result of his business ventures, his sly charities, or his approach toward the suggestive age of forty. Associating the name of Lily Condor with his covert charities, he was almost persuaded that they lay back of this preposterous habit. And the more he thought about it the more he muttered and became convinced that Lily Condor was usually the topic of these vocal self-communings.

Ned Stillman had always prided himself upon his sense of personal freedom concerning the trivial circumstances of life. Of course, like any man of sensibility, he was bound by the chains that deeper impulses forge, but he had never been hampered by any restraints directed at his ordinary uprisings and downittings. In short, he had answered the beck and nod of no man, much less a woman, and he was not finding Lily Condor's growing presumptions along this line altogether agreeable.

He would not have minded so much if there was any personal gratification in yielding to the lady's whip-hand commands. There are certain delights in self-surrender which give a zest to slavery, but there is no joy in being held a hostage. Looking back, Stillman marveled at the indiscretion he had committed when he handed over not only his reserve, but Claire Robson's reputation into the safekeeping of Lily Condor. Had he ever had the simplicity to imagine that a woman of Mrs. Condor's stamp would constitute herself a safe-deposit vault for hoarding secrets without exacting a price? Well, perhaps he had expected to pay, but a little less publicly. He had not looked to have the lady in question ring every coin audibly in full view and hearing of the entire market-place, and yet, if his experience had stood him in good stead, he must have known that this was precisely what she would do. Stillman's hidden gratitude, his private beneficences, did not serve her purpose, but the spectacle of him in the role of her debtor was a sight that went a long way to establishing a social credit impoverished by no end of false ventures.

Her command for him to take her to luncheon--and it had been a command, however suavely she had managed to veil it--bore also the stamp of urgency. Usually she was content to lay all her positive requests to the charge of mere caprice, but on this occasion she took the trouble to intimate that there was a particular reason for wanting to see him. It did not take him long to conclude that this particular reason had to do with Claire Robson. That was why he yielded with a better grace than he had been giving to his troublesome friend's disagreeable pressure.

Stillman knew that while Lily Condor was not precisely jealous of the younger woman, she was distinctly envious--with the impersonal but acrid envy of middle age for youth. The episode of the orchids still rankled. He had to admit that in this instance his course had been tactless, but he had ignored Mrs. Condor as a challenge to the presumption which he had already begun to sense. She, while seeming definitely to evade the real issue, had answered the challenge and he had paid for his temerity a hundredfold. She had reminded him again and again in deft but none the

less positive terms that she was keeping a finger on the mainspring of any advantage that came her way. Sometimes Stillman wondered whether she would really be cattish enough to betray his confidence and bring Claire Robson crashing down under the weight of the questionable position into which his indiscretion had forced her. Would she really have the face to publish abroad the pregnant fact that Ned Stillman was providing what she had been pleased to designate as a meal-ticket for a young woman in difficulty? For himself he cared little, except that he always shrank instinctively from appearing ridiculous.

He had been thinking a great deal of late as to the best course to pursue in ridding himself and Claire of this menacing incubus. He had a feeling that Claire, having exhausted the novelties of her position as accompanist to Lily Condor, was beginning to find the affair irksome.

The business venture had progressed in quite another direction from his original intention. Suddenly, without knowing how it had all come about, he found his plans clearly defined. The government needed him. Somehow, it had never occurred to him that he could be of service at a point so far from the center of war activities. He had been a good deal of an idler, it was true, but the seeds of achievement were merely lying in fallow soil.

At first, he had been stung into action more by Claire's accusing attitude than anything else. She used to come every other afternoon at the appointed time and almost challenge him by her reproachful silence to do something, if only to provide her with an illusion. It was as if she said:

"See, I have given in to you. I know that you are doing this for me, and I am deeply grateful. But won't you please make the situation a little less transparent? Won't you at least justify me in the eyes of those who are watching our little performance?..."

It had all ended by his offering his services to the Food Administration. He knew something of his father's business. He felt that he had a fair knowledge of beans, and he could learn more. He merely asked a trial, and it surprised him to find what a sense of humility suddenly possessed him. He was really overjoyed when a place was assured him. But he had to admit that his acceptance was not accorded any great enthusiasm. The newspapers mentioned it in a scant paragraph that was not even given a prominent place. He had received greater recognition for a brilliant play upon the golf-links! Well, in such stirring times he was nobody. He did not complain, even to himself, but the knowledge subconsciously rankled.

He hired an office down-town, joined the Commercial Club, religiously attended every meeting that had to do with food conservation, hunted out, absorbed, appropriated all the economic secrets that served his purpose.... Suddenly he found himself engrossed, enthusiastic, _busy_! Finally Claire said to him one day:

"Don't you think I ought to come to you every afternoon?"

"If you can arrange it," he almost snapped back at her.

She did arrange it, how he took no pains to inquire, and a little later she said again:

"You ought to have some one here all day. I guess you will have to look for another stenographer."

He remembered how menacingly he had darted at her. She was dressed for the street, on her way home, and she had halted at the door.

"Do you want to desert the work that you've inspired?" he demanded.

"Inspired?... By _me_?" Her voice took on a note of triumph.

"You didn't fancy that _I_ inspired it, did you?" he sneered at her.

His vehemence confused her. "I hadn't thought.... Really, you know.... Well, as you say.... But, of course, it is absurd when you can get any number of girls to...."

"But suppose I want _you_?" he demanded of her for a second time.

She left without further reply.

When she was gone he found himself in a nasty panic. It was as if the lady who had called him to her lists had suddenly decided upon a new defender.

"Is she tired of it all ... or is there some one else? Can it be possible that Flint...."

He had stopped short, amazed to find his mind descending to such a vulgar level. What had come over him? And he began to fancy things as they once had been—empty, purposeless days, and nights that found him too bored to even sleep. It seemed incredible that he could go back to them again. What lay at the bottom of his sudden deep-breathed satisfaction with life? For an instant, the truth which he had kept at bay with his old trick of evasion swept toward him.

"No ... no," he muttered. "Oh no!... That would be too absurd!"

But when he had gone to the mirror to brush his hair before venturing on the street he found thick beads of perspiration on his forehead and his hand shook as he lifted the comb.

The next day he told Claire that in the future her salary would be twenty dollars a week. He stood expecting her to rail against the increase, to try to put him to rout by explaining that she had received less for a full day's work at Flint's. But to his surprise she thanked him and went on with her work.

It was shortly after this that he began to haunt the various performances in which Lily Condor and Claire appeared. He always contrived to slip in during the first number, which as a rule happened to be Mrs. Condor's offering, and he sat in a far corner where nobody but that lady could have chanced upon him. But he never knew her to fail in locating him, or to miss the opportunity to sit out the remainder of the program at his side, or to suggest crab-legs Louis at Tait's, particularly if Claire were determined upon an early leave-taking. The effect of all this was not lost upon the general public, and it was not long before men of Stillman's acquaintance used to remark facetiously to him over the lunch-table:

"What's new in beans to-day?... Are _reds_ still a favorite?"

Stillman would throw back an equally cryptic answer, thinking as he did so:

"What a wiggling I must be getting over the teacups! I guess I'll cut it all out in the future."

But he usually went no farther than his impulsive resolves.

Sometimes he wondered what Claire thought of his faithful appearance. Did she fancy that he came to bask in the smiling impertinences of Lily

Condor?

As he made his way to a street-car on this vivid February afternoon, he called to mind that of late Claire had been bringing a fagged look to her daily tasks. He hoped again that Mrs. Condor's desire to see him had to do with Claire--more particularly with her dismissal as accompanist. Miss Menzies had quite recovered and there was really no reason for Claire to continue in her service. It struck him as he pondered all these matters how strange it was to find him concerned about these feminine adjustments--he who had always stared down upon trivial circumstances with cold scorn.

He arrived at Lily Condor's apartments almost upon the lady's heels. Her hat was still ornamenting the center-table and her wrap lay upon a wicker rocker, where, with a quick movement of irritation, it had been cast aside.

Her greeting was not reassuring. "Oh...." she began coldly. "Isn't this rather late for lunch?"

"I'm really very sorry," Stillman returned as he took a chair, "but to be frank, I quite forgot about you."

"Well," she tried to laugh back at him, "there isn't any virtue as disagreeable as the truth. I expected you would at least attempt to be polite enough to lie."

"I hope you were not too greatly inconvenienced," he said, in a deliberate attempt to ignore her irritation.

"I waited two hours, if that is what you mean. But then, _my_ time isn't particularly valuable."

He rose suddenly. "I've told you that I was sorry," he began coldly, reaching for his hat. "But evidently you are determined to be disagreeable. I fancied you wanted to see me about something urgent, so I came almost as soon as I remembered."

She snatched the discarded wrap from its place on the wicker rocker as she glared at him. "You're in something of a hurry, it seems.... Well, I sha'n't detain you. The truth is there's a pretty kettle of fish stewed up over this young woman, Claire Robson.... I want you to tell her that she can't play at the Cafe Chantant next Friday night."

"Want _me_ to tell her? I don't see where I come in.... Why don't you tell her yourself?"

"Because I don't choose to.... Besides, I think you might do it a little more delicately. I can't tell her brutally that she isn't wanted."

"Isn't wanted? Why, what do you mean?"

"The committee informs me that she isn't the sort of person they are accustomed to have featured in their entertainments. It seems that Mrs. Flint...."

"Mrs. Sawyer Flint?"

"Precisely."

"What is her objection?"

"Do you really want me to tell you?"

"Why not?"

"It appears that some time last fall Miss Robson tried to get her husband into a compromising position. She came over to the house one night when Mrs. Flint was away. Flint promptly ordered her out. It seems she went ... to be quite frank ... with you. And what is more, she...."

"It isn't necessary for you to go any farther. Tell me, do you mean to say that you believe this thing? Didn't you lift a hand to defend her?"

Lily Condor narrowed her eyes. "Oh, come now, Ned Stillman, don't be a fool! You know as well as I do that I'm hanging on to my own reputation by my finger-nails. I'm not taking any chances. As to whether it is so ... well, if I were to tell the committee everything I know it wouldn't help her cause any. I could wreck her reputation like that," she snapped her fingers, "with one solitary fact. If she hasn't wrecked it already with her senseless chatter.... Only last week her aunt, Mrs. Finch-Brown, said to me: 'So you're hiring my niece! I must say that is handsome of you!' You were sitting talking to Claire and she looked deliberately at you when she said it. Remember how I warned you, last December. I told you then that the secret of a woman's meal-ticket was never hidden very long."

During this speech Mrs. Condor's voice had dropped from its original tone of petty rancor to one of petulant self-justification. Stillman knew at once that her ill-temper had caught her off-guard and she was already trying to crawl slowly back into his favor. She had meant, no doubt, to soften her news over a glass or two of chilled white wine which she had counted on sipping during the noon hour. She might even then have gone farther and decided to cast her fortunes with Stillman and Claire if she had seen that her advantage lay in that direction. He was not sure but that she still had some such notion in her mind. But he felt suddenly sick of her past all hope of compromise, and he was determined to be rid of her once and for all.

"No doubt," he said, frigidly, "you will be glad to be relieved of Miss Robson's presence permanently. I take it that you don't consider her association exactly ... well ... shall we say discreet?"

Her eyes took on a yellow tinge as she faced him. She must have sensed the finality of his tone, the well-bred insolence that his query suggested.

"Discreet?" she echoed. "Well, I wouldn't say that that was quite what I meant. Desirable--that would be better. I don't find her association desirable.... I don't want her, in other words."

He had never been so angry in his life. Had she been a man he would have struck her. He felt himself choking. "My dear Mrs. Condor," he warned, "will you be good enough to take a little more respectful tone when you speak of Miss Robson?"

"Oh, indeed! And just what are your rights in the matter? You're not her brother ... you're surely not her husband. And I didn't know that it was the fashion for a...." His look stopped her. She trembled a moment, tossed back her head, and finished, defiantly, "Yes, that is what I want to know, what are your rights?"

He took a step toward her. Instinctively she retreated.

"A woman like you wouldn't understand even if I were to tell you," he flung at her.

She covered her face with both hands.

He left the room.

He himself was trembling as he reached the street--trembling for the first time in years. As a child he had been given to these fits of emotional tremors, but he had long since lost the faculty for recording physically his intense moments. Or had he lost the faculty for the intense moments themselves, he found himself wondering, as he walked rapidly toward his home. The evening was warm with the perfume of a bit of truant summer that had somehow escaped before its time to hearten a winter-weary world against the bitter assaults of March. Birds of passage sang among the hedges, the sun still cast a faint greenish glow in the extreme west.

His first thought was of the cowering woman he had just left. He had meant to lash her keenly with his verbal whipcords, but he had not expected to find her quite so sensitive to his cutting scorn. He remembered the gesture with which she had lifted her hand as if to screen herself from his insults. There was a whole life of futile compromise in just the manner of that gesture, a growing helplessness to give straightforward thrusts, a pitiful admission of defeat. But he knew that this surrender was temporary--a quick lifting of the mask under a relentless pressure. To-morrow, in an hour, in ten minutes, Lily Condor would be her dangerous self again, lashed into the fury of a woman scorned. For a moment he did not know whether to be relieved or dismayed at the prospect of Mrs. Condor for an enemy. How much would she really dare?

He thought with a lowering anger of Flint. He had been ready to concede everything but this former friend in the role of a cheap and nasty gossip. No--gossip was a pale, sickly term. Flint was a malignant toad, a nauseous mud-slinger, a deliberate liar. He had heard of men who had justified themselves with vile tales to their insipid, disgustingly virtuous wives, but he had not counted such among his acquaintances. By the side of Flint, Lily Condor loomed a very paragon of the social amenities.

Stillman was conscious that his mental process was keyed to the highest pitch of melodrama. It was not usual for him to indulge in mental abuse. He had never quite understood the dark and moving processes of red-eyed anger. There had been something absurd in the theatrical hauteur of his manner in this last scene with Mrs. Condor--that is, if it were measured by his own standards. His growing detachments from life had claimed him almost to the point of complete indifference. But now, suddenly, as if Fate had dealt him an insulting blow upon the face with her bare palm, he felt not only rage, but a sense of its futility, its impotence.

"Flint!" he thought again. And immediately he spewed forth the memory of this man in a flood of indiscriminate epithets.

* * * * *

Later, in the refuge of his own four walls and under the brooding solace of an after-dinner cigar, he lost some of the intensiveness of his former humor. But the force of the vehemence which had shaken him filled him with much wonder and some apprehension. He was too much a man of experience to deny questions when they were put to him squarely by circumstances.

"You're not her brother ... you're surely not her husband. And I didn't know it was the fashion for a...."

Lily Condor's clipped question struck him squarely now. Just what were his expectations concerning Claire Robson? The thought turned him cold. Essentially he was of Puritan mold, but he had always had a theory that love of illicit pleasures must have been uncommonly strong in a people

who found it necessary to fight the flesh so uncompromisingly. Battling with the elements upon the bleak shores of New England contributed, no doubt, to the gray and chastened spirits that these grim folks had won for themselves; spirits that colored and sometimes seeded swiftly under the softer skies of California. San Francisco was full of these forced blooms consumed and withered by the sudden heat of a free and traditionless life. He knew scores of old-timers--his father's friends--who had been gloriously wrecked by the passion with which they met freedom's kiss. They had pursued pleasure with an energy overtrained in wrestling with the devil and had paid the penalty of all ardent souls lacking the prudence of weakness. There was at once something fine and unlawful about the spirit of adventure: it implied courage, impatience of restraint, wilfulness--in short, all the virtues and vices of strength. He had felt at times the heritage of this strength, shorn of its power by the softness of a wilderness that had been wooed instead of conquered. His forefathers had found California a waiting, gracious bride, but there had been almost a suggestion of the courtesan in the lavishness of this land's response to the caresses of the invaders.

There was something fantastic in the memory of his father, fresh from the austere dawns of the little fishing village of Gloucester, transplanted suddenly to the wine-red sunsets of the Golden Gate. He felt that his father must have had the courage for substance-wasting without the temptation. Most men in those early days had plunged unyoked into the race--Ezra Stillman brought his bride, and therefore his household goods, with him, and unconsciously custom drew its restraining rein tight. Ezra Stillman came from a long line of salt-seasoned tempters of the sea; their virtues had been rugged and their vices equally robust; sin with them had been gaunt, sinewy, unlovely; there was nothing insinuating and soft about the lure of pleasure in that silver-nooned environment. Ezra had been the first of this long line to turn his back upon the sea, and the land had rewarded him lavishly as if determined to make his capture complete. Yet, he was not landsman enough to wrest a living direct from the soil; instead, he set up his booth in the market-place of the town and tr

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