

FICTION

Clara Louise Burnham

In
**Apple-Blossom
Time**

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK



eBookTakeAway

FICTION

In Apple-Blossom Time

A Fairy-Tale to Date

By CLARA LOUISE BURNHAM

With Illustrations

Boston and New York

Houghton Mifflin Company

The Riverside Press Cambridge

COPYRIGHT, 1919, BY CLARA LOUISE BURNHAM

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED



"Lifted the Girl in after it"

CONTENTS

[ILLUSTRATIONS](#)

[DRAMATIS PERSONAE](#)

[CHAPTER I. The Princess](#)

[CHAPTER II. The Ogre](#)

[CHAPTER III. The Prince](#)

[CHAPTER IV. The Good Fairy](#)

[CHAPTER V. The New Help](#)

[CHAPTER VI. The Dwarf](#)

[CHAPTER VII. A Midnight Message](#)

[CHAPTER VIII. The Meadow](#)
[CHAPTER IX. The Bird of Prey](#)
[CHAPTER X. The Palace](#)
[CHAPTER XI. Mother and Son](#)
[CHAPTER XII. The Transformation](#)
[CHAPTER XIII. The Goddess](#)
[CHAPTER XIV. The Mermaid Shop](#)
[CHAPTER XV. The Clouds Disperse](#)
[CHAPTER XVI. Apple Blossoms](#)

[By Clara Louise Burnham](#)

ILLUSTRATIONS

Drawn by B. Morgan Dennis

[Lifted the Girl in after it](#)

[Tingling with the Increasing Desire to knock down his Host and catch this Girl up in his Arms](#)

["Geraldine Melody belongs to me. Her father gave her to me"](#)

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

IN THE ORDER OF THEIR APPEARANCE

The Good Fairy *Mehitable Upton*
The Princess *Geraldine Melody*
The Ogre *Rufus Carder*
The Dwarf *Pete*
The Slave *Mrs. Carder*
The Prince *Benjamin Barry*
The Grouch *Charlotte Whipp*
The Queen *Mrs. Barry*

IN APPLE-BLOSSOM TIME

CHAPTER I

THE PRINCESS

Miss Mehitable Upton had come to the city to buy a stock of goods for the summer trade. She had a little shop at the fashionable resort of Keefeport as well as one in the village of Keefe, and June was approaching. It would soon be time to move.

Miss Upton's extreme portliness had caused her hours of laborious selection to fatigue her greatly. Her face was scarlet as she entered a popular restaurant to seek rest and refreshment. She trudged with all the celerity possible toward the only empty table, her face expressing wearied eagerness to reach that desirable haven before any one else espied it.

Scarcely had she eased herself down into the complaining chair, however, before a reason for the unpopularity of this table appeared. A steady draught blew across it strong enough to wave the ribbons on her hat.

"This won't do at all," muttered Miss Mehitable. "I'm all of a sweat."

She looked about among the busy hungry horde, and her eye alighted on a table at which a young girl sat alone.

"Bet she'll hate to see me comin', but here goes," she added, slipping the straps of her bag up on her arm and grasping the sides of the table with both hands.

Ben Barry was wont to say: "When Mehit is about to rise and flee, it's a case of Yo heave ho, my hearties. All hands to the ropes." But then it was notorious that Ben's bump of reverence was an intaglio.

Miss Upton got to her feet and started on her trip, her eyes expressing renewed anxiety.

A lantern-faced, round-shouldered man, whose ill-fitting clothes, low collar several sizes too large, and undecided manner suggested that he was a visitor from the rural districts, happened to be starting for the young girl's table at the same moment.

Miss Upton perceived his intention.

"Let him set in the draught," she thought. "He don't look as if he'd ever been het up in his life."

With astonishing swiftness her balloon-like form took on an extra sprint. The man became aware of her object and they arrived at the coveted haven nearly simultaneously.

Miss Mehitable's umbrella decided the victory. She deftly moved it to where a hurdle would have intervened for her rival in their foot-race, and the preoccupied girl at the table looked up somewhat startled as a red face atop a portly figure met her brown eyes in triumph. The girl glanced at the defeated competitor and took in the situation. The man scowled at Mehitable's umbrella planted victoriously beside its owner and his thin lips expressed his impatience most unbecomingly. Then he caught sight of the vacant table and started for that with the haste which, like many predecessors, he was to find unnecessary.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," said Miss Upton, still excited from her Marathon, "but you'd have had him if you hadn't had me."

The girl was a sore-hearted maiden, and the geniality and good-humor in the jolly face opposite had the effect of a cheery fire in a gloomy and desolate room.

"I would much rather have you," she replied. "I couldn't have sat opposite that Adam's apple."

Miss Mehitable laughed. "He wasn't pretty, was he?" she replied; "and wasn't he mad, though?"

Then she became aware that if the disappointed man had not been prepossessing, her present companion was so. A quantity of golden hair, a fine pink-and-white skin, with dark eyebrows, eyes, and lashes, were generous gifts of Nature; and the curves of the grave little mouth were very charming. The girl's plain dark suit and simple hat, and above all her shrinking, cast-down demeanor made her appear careless, even unaware of these advantages, and Miss Mehitable noticed this at once.

"Hasn't the child got a looking-glass?" she thought; and even as she thought it and took the menu she observed a tear gather on the dark lashes opposite.

As the girl wiped it away quickly, she glanced up and saw the look of kindly concern in her neighbor's face.

"I'd rather you would be the one to see me cry, too," she said. "I can't help it," she added desperately. "They just keep coming and coming no matter what I do, and I must eat."

"Well, now, I'm real sorry." Miss Upton's hearty sincerity was a sort of consolation. After she had given her luncheon order she spoke again to her vis-a-vis who was valiantly swallowing.

"Do your folks live here in town?" she asked in the tone one uses toward a grieving child.

"Oh, if I had folks!" returned the other. "Do people who have folks ever cry?"

"Why, you poor child," said Miss Mehitable. For the girl caught her lower lip under her teeth and for a minute it seemed that she was not going to be able to weather the crisis of her emotion: but her self-control was equal to the emergency and she bit down the battling sob. Miss Mehitable saw the struggle and refrained from speaking for a few minutes. Her luncheon arrived and she broke open a roll. She continued to send covert glances at the young girl who industriously buttered small pieces of bread and put them into her unwilling mouth, and drank from a glass of milk.

When Miss Upton thought it was safe to address her again, she spoke: "Who have you got to take care of you, then?" she asked.

"Nobody," was the reply, but the girl spoke steadily now. Apparently she had summoned the calm of desperation.

"Why, that don't seem possible," returned Miss Mehitable, and her voice and manner were full of such sympathetic interest that the forlorn one responded again; this time with a long look of gratitude that seemed to sink right down through Miss Upton's solicitous eyes into her good heart.

"You're a kind woman. If there are any girls in your family they know where to go for comfort. I'm sure of that."

"There ain't any girls in my family. I'm almost without folks myself; but then, I'm old and tough. I work for my livin'. I keep a little store."

"That is what I wanted to do--work for my living," said the girl. "I've tried my best." Again for a space she caught her lip under her teeth. "First I tried the stores; then I even tried service. I went into a family as a waitress. I"--she gave a determined swallow--"I suppose there must be some good men in the world, but I haven't found any."

Miss Upton's small eyes gave their widest stare and into them came understanding and indignation.

"I'm discouraged"--said the girl, and a hard tone came into her low voice--"discouraged enough to end it all."

"Now--now--don't you talk that way," stammered Miss Mehitable. "I s'pose it's because you're so pretty."

"Yes," returned the girl disdainfully. "I despise my looks."

"Now, see here, child," exclaimed Miss Upton, prolonging her troubled stare, "perhaps Providence helped me nearly trip up that slab-sided gawk. Perhaps I set down here for a purpose. Desperate folks cling to straws. I'm the huskiest straw you ever saw, and I might be able to give you some advice. At least I've got an old head and you've got a young one, bless your poor little heart. Why don't we go somewheres where we can talk when we're through eating?"

"You're very good to take an interest," replied the girl.

"I'm as poor as Job's turkey," went on Miss Upton, "and I haven't got much to give you but advice."

The girl leaned across the table. "Yes, you have," she said, her soft dark eyes expressive. "Kindness. Generosity. A warm heart."

"Well, then, you come with me some place where we can talk; but," with sudden cheerfulness, "let's have some ice-cream first. Don't you love it? I ought to run a mile from the sight of it; and these fried potatoes I've just been eatin' too. I've no business to look at 'em; but when I come to town I just kick over the traces. I forget there is such a thing as Graham bread and I just have one good time."

She laughed and the young girl regarded her wistfully.

"It's a pity you haven't any daughters," she said.

"I haven't even any husband," was the cheerful response, "and I never shall have now, so why should I worry over my waistline? Queen Victoria had one the same size and everybody respected *her*. Now I'm goin' to order the ice-cream. That's my treat as a proof that you and I are friends. My name is Upton. What's yours, my dear?"

"Melody."

"First or last?"

"Last. Geraldine Melody."

"It's a *nawful* pretty name," declared Miss Upton impressively. "There ain't any discord in melody. Now you take courage. Which'll you have? Chocolate or strawberry?"



CHAPTER II

THE OGRE

It proved that Miss Upton's new acquaintance had an appointment later at a hotel near by, so thither they repaired when the ice-cream was finished.

"Now tell me all about it," said Miss Mehitable encouragingly, when they had found the vacant corner of a reception-room and sat down side by side.

"I feel like holding on to you and not letting you go," said the girl, looking about apprehensively.

"Are you afraid of the folks you're goin' to meet here? Is it another job you're lookin' for? I can tell you right now," added Miss Mehitable firmly, "that I'm goin' to stay and see what they look like if I lose every train out to Keefe."

"You are so good," said the girl wistfully. "Are you always so kind to strangers?"

"When they're a hundred times too pretty and as young as you are I am," returned Miss Upton promptly; "but this is my first experience. What sort of position are you tryin' for now?"

"I don't know what to call it," replied Geraldine, with another apprehensive look toward the door. "General utility, I hope." She looked back at her companion. "When my father died, it left me alone in the world; for my stepmother is the sort that lives in the fairy tales; not the loving kind who are in real life. I know a girl who has the dearest stepmother. I was fourteen years old when my father married again. My mother had been dead for three years. I was an only child and had always lived at home, but my stepmother didn't want me. She persuaded my father to send me away to school. I think Daddy never had any happiness after he married her. He had always been very extravagant and easy-going. While my precious mother lived she helped him and guided him, and although I was only a little girl I always believed he married again because he was greatly embarrassed for money. This woman appeared to have plenty and she was so in love with him! If you had seen *him*, I think you would have said he was a hundred times too handsome. Well, from what I could see at vacation time she was never sufficiently in love with him to let him have her money; and I am sure the last years of his life were wretched and full of hard places because of his financial ill-success. Poor father." The girl's voice failed and she waited, looking down at the gloved hands in her lap. "I had been at home from school only a few months when he died," she went on. "My stepmother endured me and that was all. She is a quite young woman, very fond of gayety, and she made me feel that I was very much in her way no matter how hard I tried to keep out of it."

"I'll bet you were," put in Miss Upton *sotto voce*.

"As soon as my dear father was gone she threw off all disguise to her impatience. She put on very becoming mourning and said she wanted to travel. She said my father had left nothing, but that I was young and could easily get a position. She broke up the home, found a cheap room for me to lodge, gave me a little money and went away." Again Geraldine's voice broke and she stopped.

"You poor child," said Miss Upton; "to try as you have and find all your efforts failures!"

"My stepmother has some relatives who live on a farm," went on the girl. "Before my father died we three had one talk which it always sickens me to remember. My stepmother was saying that it was high time I went out into the world and did something for my own support. My father perhaps knew that he was very ill; but we did not. His death came suddenly. That day while my stepmother talked he walked the floor casting troubled looks at me and I knew she was hurting him. 'Everybody should be where she can be of some use,' said my stepmother. 'I think the Carder farm would be a fine place for Geraldine, and after all Rufus Carder has done for you I should think you'd be glad to send her out there.'

"I shall never forget the light that came into Daddy's eyes as he stopped and turned on her. 'What Rufus Carder has done for me is what the icy sidewalk does for the man who trips,' he answered. My stepmother shrugged her shoulders. 'That was your own weakness, then,' she said. 'I think a more appropriate simile for Rufus would be the bridge that carried you over!' Her voice was so cold and contemptuous! Daddy came to me and there was despair in his face. He put his hand on my shoulder while she went on talking: 'Many times since the day that Rufus saw Geraldine in the park,' she said, 'he has told me they would be glad to have her come out to the farm and live with them. I think you ought to send her. She isn't needed here and they really do need somebody.' The desperate look in my father's face wrung my heart. He did not look at my stepmother nor answer her; but just gazed into my eyes and said over and over softly, 'Forgive me, Gerrie. Forgive me.' I took his hands in mine and told him I had nothing to forgive." The young girl choked.

When she could go on she spoke again: "A couple of days after that he died. My stepmother was angry because he left no life insurance, and she talked to me again about going to work, and again brought up the subject of the Carder farm. She tried to flatter me by talking of her cousin's admiration of me the day he saw me in the park. I told her I could not bear to go to people who had not been kind to my father, and she replied that what Daddy had said that day must have been caused by his illness, for Rufus Carder had befriended him times without number."

The girl lifted her appealing eyes to Miss Upton's face as she continued: "Of course I knew that my dear father had been weak and I couldn't contradict her; so after trying and failing, trying and failing many times, as I've told you, I came to feel that the farm might be the right place for me after all. Work is the only thing I'm not afraid of now. It must be a forlorn place if they need help and can't get it. I think they said he and his mother live alone, but I shan't care how forlorn it is if only Mrs. Carder is like--like--you, for instance!" The girl laid her hand impulsively on her companion's knee.

At that moment a man appeared in the wide doorway to the reception-room and looked about uncertainly. Instantly Miss Upton recognized the long, weather-beaten face, the straggling hair, the half-open mouth, and the revealing collar of her restaurant rival.

She gave her companion a mirthful nudge.

"He's right on my trail, you see," she whispered. "Adam's apple and all."

Geraldine glanced up and the stranger's roving gaze fell straight upon hers. He came toward her.

"Miss Melody?" he said in a rasping voice.

She rose as if impelled by some inner spring, her light disdain swallowed in dread.

"This is Mr. Carder, then," she returned.

"You've guessed right the very first time," responded the man with an air of relief. "I recognize you now, but you look some different from the only other time I ever saw you."

"This is Miss Upton, Mr. Carder, a lady who has befriended me very kindly while I have been waiting for you."

"Yes, and who prevented me from havin' lunch with you," responded the stranger, eyeing Miss Upton jocosely; but as if he could not spare time from the near survey of Geraldine his eyes again swept over her hair and crimsoning cheeks. "I thought I felt some strong drawin' toward that particular table," he added. "Well, we'll make up for it in the future you can bet. That your bag here? We'd better be runnin' along. Time, tide, and business don't wait for any man. Good-bye, Miss Upton, I'll forgive you for takin' my place, considerin' you've been good to this little girl."

Miss Mehitable's face was as solemn as lies in the power of round faces to be. At close quarters one observed a cast in Mr. Carder's right eye. She disapproved his assured proprietary air and she disapproved him the more that she could see repulsion in the young girl's suddenly pale countenance. She had time for only one strong pressure of a little hand before Geraldine was whisked away and she was left standing there stunned by the suddenness of it all.

"I never asked where it was!" she ejaculated suddenly. "I've lost the child!" People began to look at her and she continued mentally: "The critter looked as if he wanted to eat her up, the poor little lamb. Unless the mother's something different from the son she'll be driven to desperation. No knowin' what she'll do." Miss Upton clasped her plump hands together in great trouble of spirit. "I believe I said Keefe more'n once. Perhaps she'll have sense enough to write to me. Why didn't I just tell that old rawbones that her plans was changed and she was goin' with me. Oh, I am a fool! I don't know what I'd have done with her; but some way would have opened. Let's see. Where am I!" Miss Upton delved distractedly into the large bag that hung on her arm. "Where's my list? Am I through or not?" She seemed to herself to have lived long since her wearied entrance into that restaurant.

In her uneventful life this brief experience took deep hold on her imagination. As she rode out to Keefe on the train that afternoon she constructed the scenes of the story in her mind.

The weak, handsome, despairing father begging his child's forgiveness. The dismantling of the home. The placing of Geraldine in a cheap lodging while her father's widow shed all responsibility of her and set forth in new raiment for green fields and pastures new.

The shabby and carelessly put on suit in which Geraldine had appeared this morning told a tale. The girl had said she despised her looks. Her appearance had borne out the declaration. The lovely hair had been brushed tightly back; the old hat would have been unbecoming if it could: all seemed to testify that if the girl could have had her way not an element of attractiveness would have been observable in her. Miss Upton waxed indignant as she went on to picture

the probable scenes which had frightened and disgusted the child into such an abnormal frame of mind. The memory of Rufus Carder's gaze, as his oblique eye had feasted upon his guest, brought the blood to Miss Mehitable's face.

"I'll find out where she is if I have to employ a detective," she thought, setting her lips. "Now there's no use in bein' a fool," she muttered after a little more apprehensive thought. "I shall get daffy if I go on thinkin' about it. I'll do my accounts and see if I can take my mind off it."

Meanwhile Geraldine with her escort was also on a moving train. A creeping train it seemed to her. Rufus Carder was trying to make himself agreeable. She strove with herself to give him credit for that. She had not lived to be a nineteen-year-old school girl without meeting attractive young men. Her stepmother had always kept her in the background at times when it was impossible to eliminate her altogether, quite, as Geraldine had said, like the stepmother of a fairy tale; but there had been holidays with school friends and an occasional admirer; although these cases had been rare because Geraldine, always kept on short allowance as to money and clothes, avoided as much as possible social affairs outside the school.

She tried now to find amusement instead of mental paralysis in the proximity of her present escort, contrasting him with some men she had known; but recent bitter experiences made his probably well-intentioned familiarities sorely trying. There was a lump in his cheek. Geraldine hoped it arose from an afflicted tooth, but she strongly suspected tobacco. Oh, if he would but sit a little farther away from her!

"So you've renounced the city, the world, the flesh, and the devil," said Rufus when the conductor had left them, and he settled down in an attitude that brought his shoulder in contact with Geraldine's.

She drew closer to the window and kept her eyes ahead. "He is as old as Father," she thought. "He means to be kind."

"There is not much chance for those at school," she replied. "School is about all I know."

"Well, you don't need to know anything else," returned Rufus protectingly. "I'll bet Juliet kept you out of sight." He laughed, and his companion turning saw that he had been bereft of a front tooth.

"I didn't see very much of my stepmother," she answered in the same stiff manner.

"I'll bet you didn't," declared Rufus, "not when she saw you first." Again he laughed, convinced that his companion must enjoy the implication.

"I mean that I have been away from home at school for several years," said the girl coldly.

"Oh, I know where you have been, and why, and when, and just how long, and all about it." The tone of this was quiet, but there was something disquieting to Geraldine in his manner. "Perhaps you didn't know," he added after a pause filled by the crescendos and diminuendos of the speeding train, "that your father and I were pretty thick." At this the girl's head turned and her eyes raised to his questioningly. "Yes," he added, receiving the look, appreciative of the curves of the long lashes and lovely lips, "I don't believe anybody knew Dick Melody better than I did."

"Do you mean," asked the girl, "that you were fond of my father?"

Charming as her self-forgetful, earnest look was, her companion seemed unable to sustain it. He gave a short laugh and turned his head away.

"My wife attended to that part of it," he replied.

A flash of relief passed over Geraldine's face. "Your wife," she repeated. "I--I hadn't heard--I didn't know--I thought the Mrs. Carder they mentioned was your mother."

"She is. My wife died nearly a year ago, but she had the nerve to think your father was handsomer than me." The speaker looked back at his companion with a cheerful grin. "She said Dick Melody'd ought to be set up on a pedestal somewheres to be admired. I don't know as bein' good-lookin' gets a man anywhere. What good did those eyes ever do him!"

Geraldine sank closer to her window. The despair in those eyes, as her father begged for her forgiveness, rose before her. Never had she felt so utterly alone; so utterly friendless.

"Yes, I say leave the looks to the womenfolks," pursued Rufus Carder, feasting his gaze on the girl's profile. "When Juliet set out to get Dick, I warned her, but it wasn't any use. She had to have him, and she knew pretty well how to look

out for herself. I guess she never lost anything by the deal."

"Would you mind not talking about them?" said Geraldine stiffly.

"Please yourself and you'll please me as to what we talk about," returned Rufus cheerfully. "Shouldn't wonder if you were pretty sore at Juliet. Look out for number one was her motto all right." A glance at the shrinking girl showed the host that her eyes were closed. "Tired, ain't you?" he added.

"Dead tired," she answered. And as she continued to keep her eyes closed he contented himself by watching the lashes resting on her pale cheeks.

"Ketch a little nap if you can, that's right," he said. She kept silence.

She did not know how long the blessed relief from his voice had lasted when he announced their arrival.

"Be it ever so humble," he remarked, "There's no place like home."

To have him get out of the seat and leave her free of the touch of his garments was a blessing, and she rose to follow mechanically. The eternal hope that dies so hard in the human breast was suggesting that his mother might be not impossible; and at any rate a farm was wide. She would never be imprisoned in a car seat with him again.

"There now, my lady," he said triumphantly when they were on the platform. "I suppose you thought you were comin' to Rubeville. That don't look so hay-seedy? Eh?"

He pointed to a dusty automobile whose driver, a boy of eighteen or twenty, with a torn hat, eyed her with dull curiosity.

"I suppose you expected a one-hoss shay. No, indeedy. You've come to all the comforts of home, little girl." His airy geniality of tone changed. "What you starin' at, you coot? Come along here, Pete."

The boy moved the car toward the spot where they waited with their bags.

Rufus put these in at the front and himself entered the tonneau with his guest. His conversation as they sped along the country road consisted mainly of pointing out to her the cottages or fields owned by himself. The information fell on deaf ears. The roughness of her host's tone to the boy added one more item against him and lessened her hope that the woman responsible for his existence could be a better specimen.

"I'm free," thought Geraldine over and over. "I don't need to stay here." Of course the proprietary implication in every word the man said arose simply from the conceit of a boor. She would be patient and self-controlled. It might be possible still that she should find this a haven where she could live her own life in her leisure hours, few though they might be.

It was with a weary curiosity that she viewed the weather-beaten house toward which they finally advanced. In front of it stood an elm-tree whose lower branches swept the roof of the porch.

"That's got to come down, that tree," said Rufus meditatively.

His companion turned on him. "You would cut down that splendid tree?"

He regarded her suddenly vital expression admiringly.

"Why not, little one?" he asked. "It's makin' the house damp and injurin' property. Property, you understand. Property. If I'd indulged in sentiment do you s'pose I'd be owner of all the land I've been showin' you?" He smiled, the semi-toothless smile, and met her horrified upturned eyes with an affectionate gaze. "However, what you say goes, little girl. You look as if you were goin' to recite--'Woodman, spare that tree.' Consider the tree spared for the present."

The automobile drew up at the house and in high good-humor the master jumped out and removed Geraldine's bag to the steps of the narrow piazza. A woman's face could be seen appearing and disappearing at the window, and Pete, the driver, looked with furtive curiosity at the guest as she stepped to the porch without touching the host's outstretched hand.

Rufus threw open the door. "Where are you, Ma?" he shouted, and a thin, wrinkled old woman came into the corridor nervously wiping her hands on her apron.

Geraldine looked at her eagerly.

"Well, you have to take us as you find us, little girl," remarked Rufus, scowling at his parent. "Ma hasn't even taken off

her apron to welcome you."

At this Mrs. Carder fumbled at her apron strings, but Geraldine advanced to her and put out her hand.

"I like aprons," she said; and the old woman took the hand for a loose, brief shake.

"I'm very glad to see you, Miss Melody," she said timidly. "I'm glad it has been a pretty day."

"Show her her room, Ma, and then perhaps she'd like some tea. City folks, you know, must have their tea."

Geraldine followed her hostess with alacrity as she went up the narrow stairway; glad there was an upstairs; and a room of her own, and a woman to speak to.

She was ushered into a barely furnished chamber; a bowl and pitcher on the small wash-stand seemed to indicate that modern improvements had not penetrated to the Carder farm.

"I s'pose you'll find country livin' a great change for you," said Mrs. Carder, pulling up the window shade. Geraldine wondered how in this beautiful state could have been found such a treeless tract of land. She remembered the threatened fate of the elm. Perhaps there had been other destruction. "My son never seemed to take any interest in puttin' in water here."

The girl met the wrinkled face. The apprehension in the old eyes under Carder's scowl had given place to curiosity.

"I have come to help you," said Geraldine, "I must get used to fewer conveniences."

"It's nice of you to say that," said the old woman, "Rufus don't want you to work much, though."

"But of course I shall," returned the girl quickly. "I'm much better able to work than you are."

"Oh, I've got a wet sink this year," said Mrs. Carder. "I told Rufus I just had to have it. I was gettin' too old to haul water."

"I should think so!" exclaimed Geraldine indignantly. "Mr. Carder is well off. He shouldn't allow you to work any more the rest of your life."

Mrs. Carder smiled and shook her head, revealing her own need of dentistry. "I'm stronger than I look. I s'pose if I was taken out of harness I might be like one o' these horses that drops down when the shafts don't hold him up any longer."

Geraldine regarded her compassionately. "I've heard--my stepmother told me it was very hard for you to get help out here. I suppose it is lonely for maids."

The old woman regarded her strangely, and her withered lips compressed.

"I don't mind loneliness," went on Geraldine eagerly. She had thrown her hat on the bed and the gold of her hair shone in the mean little room. "I love to be alone. I long to be."

"That ain't natural," observed Mrs. Carder, regarding her earnest, self-forgetful loveliness. "Rufus told me you was a beauty," she went on reflectively. "Your father was the handsomest man I ever saw."

"You knew him, then," said Geraldine eagerly.

"He was out here a number o' times. Rufus seemed to be his favorite man o' business, as you might say."

"Oh, Mrs. Carder, tell me all you can about his visits here." The girl's heart began to beat faster and she drew the clean, dried-up old woman down upon the edge of the bed beside her. Why should her father choose this dreadful place, this impossible man as a refuge? It could only have been as a last resort for him, just as it now was for her.

"I was always away at school after his marriage," she went on. "I saw so little of him."

Mrs. Carder looked uneasy.

"I saw nothin' of him except at a meal sometimes. He and my son was always shut up in Rufus's office."

"Did he seem--seem unhappy, Mrs. Carder?"

"Well--yes. He was a sort of an absent-minded man. Perhaps that was his way. Really, I don't know a thing about their business, Miss Melody." The addition was made in sudden panic because the girl had grasped both the wrinkled hands and was gazing searchingly into the old woman's face as if she would wring information out of her.

"You wouldn't tell me if you did," said Geraldine in a low voice. "You are afraid of your son. I saw it in your eyes downstairs. Had my father reason to be afraid of him? Tell me that. That is what I want to know."

"Your father is dead. What difference does it make?" asked the old woman, looking from side to side as if for a means of escape from the strong young hands and eyes.

"Yes, poor Daddy. Well, I have come to help you, Mrs. Carder." The speaker released the wrinkled hands and the old woman rose in relief. "I have come to work for you, not for your son, and I am not going to be afraid of him."

The mother shook her head.

"We all work for him, my dear. He holds the purse-strings."

Geraldine seemed to see him holding the actual bag and leering at her over it with his odious, oblique eye and smile.

"And let me give you a word of advice," continued the old woman, lowering her voice and looking toward the door. "Don't make him mad. It's terrible when he's angry." She winked and lowered her voice to a whisper. "He's crazy about you and he's the biggest man in the county." The old woman nodded and snapped her eyes knowingly. "You've got a home here for life if you don't make him mad. For life. I'll go down and make the tea. You come down pretty soon."

She disappeared, leaving Geraldine standing in the middle of the room. She looked about her at the cheap, meager furniture, the small mirror that distorted her face, the bare outlook from the window.

"For life!" she repeated to herself. "For life!"

CHAPTER III

THE PRINCE

Miss Upton's accounts were still in a muddle when she reached Keefe. Try as she might her unruly thoughts would wander back to the golden hair and dark, wistful eyes of that forlorn girl.

"I was such a fool to lose her!" she kept saying to herself. "Such a fool."

Arrived at her station she left the car, encumbered by her bulging bag and the umbrella which had performed a nobler deed to-day than keeping off the rain.

"I don't know, though," soliloquized Miss Mehitable. "If I hadn't had my umbrella I couldn't have stopped him and he'd have sat with her and I shouldn't be havin' a span-tod now."

From the car in front of her she saw descend a young man with a bag. He was long-legged, lean and broad-shouldered, and Miss Upton, who had known him all his life, estimated him temperately as a mixture of Adonis, Apollo, and Hercules. He caught sight of his friend now and a merry look came into his eyes. Miss Mehitable's mental perturbation and physical weariness had given her plump face a troubled cast, accented by the fact that her hat was slightly askew. The young man hurried forward and was in time to ease his portly friend down the last step of her car.

"Howdy, Miss Mehit?" he said. "You look as if the great city hadn't treated you well."

"Ben Barry, was you on this train?" she asked dismally.

"I was. My word, you're careful of your complexion! An umbrella with such a sky as this!"

"You don't know what that umbrella has meant to me to-day," returned Miss Upton with no abatement of the portentous in her tone. "Let me have my bag, Ben. The top don't shut very good and you might drop something out."

"You must let me take you home," he said. "You don't look fit to walk. You have certainly had a big day. Anything left in the shops? The Upton Emporium must be going to surprise the natives."

As he talked, the young man led his friend along the platform to where a handsome motor waited among the dusty line of vehicles. "Gee, I'm off for a vacation and I'm beginning to appreciate Keefe, Miss Upton. The air is great out here."

"That's nice for your mother," observed Miss Mehitable wearily.

They both greeted the chauffeur, who wore a plain livery. Miss Upton sank back among the cushions. "It's awful good of you to take me home, Ben. I'm just beat out."

"Miss Upton's celebrated notions, I suppose," returned the young fellow as the car started. "They get harder to select every year, perhaps."

"I've come home with just one notion this time," returned his companion with sudden fierceness. "It is that I'm a fool."

"Now, Mehit, don't tell me you've fallen a prey in the gay metropolis and lost a lot of money."

"That's nothin' to what has happened. I'm poor and I don't know what I'd do if I lost money, but, Ben Barry, it's much worse than that."

"Look here, you're scaring me. I'm timid."

"If I'd seen you on the train I could have told you all about it; but there isn't time now." In fact the motor was rapidly traversing the short distance up the main street and was now approaching a shop on the elm-shaded trolley track which bore across its front a sign reading: "Upton's Notions and Fancy Goods."

Before Miss Mehitable disembarked, and this was a matter of some moments, she turned wistfully to her companion.

"Ben, do you think your mother ever gets lonely?"

"I've never seen any sign of it. Why? What were you thinking of--that I ought to give up the law school and come home and turn market-gardener? I sometimes think I'd like it."

Miss Upton continued to study his clean-cut face wistfully.

"Don't she need a secretary, or a sort of a--a sort of a companion?"

"Why? Have you had about as much of Bright-Eyes as you can stand? Do you want to make a present of her to some undeserving person?"

Miss Upton shook her head. "No, indeed, it ain't poor Charlotte I'm thinkin' of, Ben," again speaking impressively. "Can you spare time to come over and see me a little while to-morrow afternoon? I know your mother always has a lot of young folks in for tea for you Sundays."

"She won't to-morrow. I told her I wanted to lie in the grass under the apple-blossoms and compose sonnets; but your feelings will do just as well."

"I must tell somebody, and you know Charlotte isn't sympathetic."

"No, except perhaps with a porcupine. You might try her with one of those. Tether it in the back yard, and when she is in specially good form turn her out there and let them sport together.--Easy now, Mehit--easy." For Miss Upton's escort had jumped out and she was essaying to leave the car.

"If I ever knew which foot to put first," she said desperately, withdrawing the left and reaching down gingerly with her right.

"Let me have the bag and the umbrella," suggested her companion. "Now, then, one light spring. Steady!" For clutching both the young man's hands she made him quiver to the shock as she fell against him.

"I'm clumsy when I'm tired, Ben," she explained. "I'm so much obliged to you, and you will come over to-morrow afternoon?"

"To hear about the umbrella? Yes, indeed! Look at its fine open countenance. You can see at once that it has performed some great deed to-day." He shook the capacious fluttering folds and handed it to its owner.

"Thank you so much, Ben, and give my love to your mother."

The young fellow jumped into the car and sped away and Miss Upton plodded slowly up to her door whose bell pealed sharply as it was pulled open by an unseen hand, and a colorless, sour-visaged woman appeared in the entrance. Her hay-colored hair was strained back and wound in a tight, small knot, her forehead wore a chronic scowl, and her one-sided mouth had a vinegary expression.

"Think you're smart, don't you?" was her greeting; "comin' home in a grand automobile with the biggest ketch in the village."

"Yes, wasn't I lucky?" responded Miss Upton nasally. "I hope the kettle's on, Charlotte. I'm beat out."

"Well, what did you stay so long for? That's what you always do--stay till the last dog's hung and wear yourself out." The speaker snatched the bag and umbrella and Miss Mehitable followed her into the house, through the shop, and into the little living-room at the back where an open fire burned in the Franklin stove and the tea-table was neatly set for two.

Miss Upton regarded the platter of sliced meat, the amber preserve, and napkin-enfolded biscuit listlessly.

"How nice you always make a table look," she said.

"Well, set right down and give me your hat and jacket. Drink some tea before you talk any more. I should think you'd have some sense by this time."

Scolding away, Charlotte poured the tea and Miss Mehitable drank it in silence. Her companion's monotonous grumbling was like the ticking of the clock so far as any effect it had upon her. The autumn before, this woman's drunken husband, Whipp by name, had passed out of her life. She was penniless, not strong, and friendless as much by reason of her sharp tongue as by her poor circumstances. Miss Upton hired her one day a week for cleaning and once upon a time fell ill herself, when this unpromising person developed such a kindly touch in nursing and so much common sense in tending the little shop, that Miss Mehitable, seeing what a godsend it would be to the poor creature, asked her to stay on; since which time, though no gratitude had ever been expressed in words, Mrs. Whipp had taken upon herself the ruling of the small establishment and its mistress with all the vigor possible. Miss Upton had told her to bring with her anything she valued and the widow had twisted her thin, one-sided mouth: "There ain't a thing in that shanty I don't wish was burned except Pearl," she said. "I'll bring her if you'll let me. She's a Malt cat."

"Oh, bring her along," Miss Mehitable had replied. "I suppose I won't really sense that I'm an old maid until there's a cat in the house."

So Pearl came, and to-night she sat blinking at the leaping flame in the open stove while the two women ate their supper in the long spring evening.

"I brought some things home in my bag," said Miss Upton, "but most o' them are comin' out Monday."

"Put in a good day, did you?" asked Charlotte, who, now that her mind was relieved of rebukes, was ready to listen to the tales she always expected when Miss Mehitable returned from her trips.

"Yes, I think I did pretty well," was the answer.

But the widow regarded her friend with dissatisfaction. This dispirited manner was very different from the effervescence which usually bubbled over in anecdote.

"Well, next time don't stay till you're worn to a frazzle," she said.

"I missed the train, Charlotte. That was what happened."

"Well, didn't Mr. Barry have anything to say comin' out on the train?" asked Mrs. Whipp, determined to get some of her usual proxy satisfaction from Miss Upton's outing.

"I never saw him till we got to Keefe. Oh, Charlotte, if I'd ever met a boy like him when I was young I wouldn't be keepin' a store now with another woman and a cat."

"H'm, you're better off as you are. Ben Barry's young yet. He'll be in plenty of mischief before he's forty. His mother was in the shop to-day. With all her money it's queer she never married again."

"Oh, she's just wrapped up in her flowers and chickens," remarked Miss Mehitable.

"Well," returned Charlotte, "seems to me if I had a big house and grounds like that, I'd want somebody around besides servants."

Miss Mehitable lifted her eyes from her meat and potato and gazed at her companion.

"Queer you should say that," she returned. "I was speakin' of that very thing to Ben to-day. I should really think his mother would like somebody; somebody young and--and pleasant, you know."

"Well," returned Charlotte, breaking open a biscuit, "I suppose havin' got rid of her husband she thinks she'll let well enough alone. She's the happiest-lookin' woman in town. Why not? She's got the most money and no man to bother her."

"Why, Charlotte Whipp, you don't know what you're sayin'. Ben's father was a fine man. For years after he died Mrs. Barry couldn't hardly smile. Yes"--Miss Upton's thoughtful manner returned--"Ben's away so much I should think she'd like to have somebody, say a nice young girl with her. Of course, to folks with motors Keefe ain't much more'n a suburb to the city now, and Mrs. Barry, with her three months in town and three months to the port and six months here, has a full, pleasant life, and I s'pose that fine son fills it. Wasn't she fortunate to get him out o' the war safe? You'd ought to 'a' seen him in his Naval Aviation uniform, Charlotte. He looked like a prince; but he could 'a' bitten a board nail because he never got to go across the water. I s'pose his mother's average patriotic, but I guess she thanked Heaven he couldn't go. She didn't dare say anything like that before him, though. It was a terrible disappointment. Oh, Charlotte"--Miss Upton bent a wistful smile on her table-mate--"I can't help thinkin' what a wonderful home the Barry house would be for some needy girl--a lady, you know."

"H'm!" Charlotte's twisted mouth contracted further as she gave a dry little sniff. "She'd probably fall in love with Ben, and he wouldn't give a snap for her, so she'd be miserable anyway."

Miss Mehitable shook her head. "If all your probablys came true, Charlotte, what a world this would be."

"What a world it *is*!" retorted the other. "Have some more tea"--then as Miss Mehitable demurred--"Yes, have some. It'll do you good and maybe brighten up your wits so's you can remember somethin' that's happened to you to-day."

Miss Upton cudged her brain for the small occurrences of her shopping and managed to recall a few items; but she was not in her usual form and Charlotte received her offerings with scornful sniffs and silence.

Miss Upton's dreams that night were troubled and the sermon next morning fell on deaf ears. Ben and his mother were both in the Barry pew near the memorial window to his father. She could not resist the drawing which made her head turn periodically to make certain that Ben was really there. Miss Mehitable respected men in general, especially in time of trouble, and in this case the legal mind attracted her. Ben was going to be a lawyer even if he wasn't one yet. The Barrys had money and influence, they were always friendly to her, and while she could not impart poor little Geraldine's

story to Mrs. Barry direct without appearing to beg, it might reach and interest her via Ben.

When the last hymn had been sung and the benediction pronounced, Miss Upton watched with jealous eyes the various interruptions to the Barrys' progress down the aisle. Everybody liked to have a word with them. All the girls were willing to make it easy to be asked to the hospitable house for Sunday tea. Miss Mehitable glowered at the bolder and more aggressive of these as she moved along a side aisle.

When mother and son finally reached the sunlit out-of-doors they found Miss Upton waiting beside the steps.

"Why, if here isn't the fair Mehit," remarked Ben as they approached, and his mother smiled and shook her regal head and Miss Upton's hand simultaneously.

"I don't understand why you allow Ben to be so disrespectful," she said.

"Law, Mrs. Barry," replied Miss Upton, "you must know that women don't care anything about bein' *respected*. What they want is to be *liked*; and Ben's a good friend o' mine."

"Sure thing," remarked the young fellow, something in Miss Mehitable's eyes reminding him of her portentous yesterday and his promise. "Oh, I forgot to tell you, mother, Miss Upton is going home to dinner with us to-day."

"No, no, I'm not, Ben," put in Miss Mehitable hastily. "I couldn't leave Charlotte alone for Sunday dinner; but"--she looked at Mrs. Barry--"I do want to see Ben about something and he promised me a little time this afternoon."

"Mehit got into trouble yesterday," Ben explained to his mother. "Somebody tried to rob her of her notions and she beaned him with her umbrella. She's scared to death and she wants to consult the law." The speaker delivered a blow on his chest.

"I know you hate to spare him the little time he's home, Mrs. Barry," said Miss Upton apologetically; "but I'll keep him only a short time and--and I couldn't hardly sleep last night, though it ain't any o' my business, *really*."

"It's a good business if you're in it, I know that," said Mrs. Barry kindly, "and I'll lend you Ben with pleasure if he can do you any good!"

"Then when will you be over, Ben?" asked Miss Mehitable anxiously. "I'd like to know just when to expect you."

"You don't tr-r-ust me, that's what's the matter," he returned. "Will you promise to muzzle Merry Sunshine?"

"I--I think perhaps Charlotte will go out to walk," returned Miss Upton, somewhat troubled herself to know how to insure privacy in her restricted domain. "She does, sometimes, Sundays."

"How does it affect the Keefe springtime to have her walk out in it?" inquired Ben solicitously.

"I'll tell you, Ben," said his mother, sympathetic with the anxiety in Miss Mehitable's face, "bring Miss Upton over to see our apple-blossoms, and you can have your talk at our house."

Relief overspread Miss Upton's round countenance.

"Certainly. I'll call for you at three," said Ben, "Blackstone under my arm. If Merry Sunshine attacks me it will be a trusty weapon. Hop into the car, Mehit, and we'll run you home."

Mrs. Barry laughed. "The sermon doesn't seem to have done him any good this morning, Miss Upton. We shall be glad to take you home."



CHAPTER IV

THE GOOD FAIRY

So again Mrs. Whipp saw her friend and employer descend from the Barry car.

She didn't open the door for her this time, but sat, rocking, in the shop with Pearl in her lap, and sniffed at her as she entered.

"You and your fine friends," she scoffed. "Pretty soon you won't demean yourself to use the trolley at all."

"If you had only been willing to come to church, Charlotte, they'd have brought you home, too," said Miss Mehitable, hoping she was telling the truth.

"The Sabbath was made for man," snapped Mrs. Whipp, "not man for the Sabbath, to go and hear that man talk through his nose!"

"Now, Charlotte, I refused to go home to dinner with them just so's you and I could have our meal together; so don't you make me sorry."

Mrs. Whipp had started up at once alertly on her friend's entrance, spilling Pearl, and was already removing Miss Mehitable's jacket and hat with deft fingers and receiving the silk gloves she pulled off.

"H'm, I don't believe they'll eat any better things than we're goin' to have. How can I go to church and have us a good hot dinner?"

"Sunday dinner should be cold mainly," returned Miss Upton calmly. "Mine always was till you came. Of course you're such a splendid cook, Charlotte, it's kind of a temptation to you to spoil me and feed me up, yet you know I ought not to eat much."

"Oh, pshaw," returned Mrs. Whipp. "More folks die from the lack o' good things than from eatin' 'em."

"You'll have to look out," said Miss Mehitable warningly, following her friend's lead to the sunny living-room where the table was spread. "It's a sayin' that good cooks are always cross. The better you cook the more you must watch to have your temper as sweet as your sauces."

"Ho! Vinegar's just as important as oil," retorted the other. "You're so smooth to everybody it's a good thing I came to live with you and keep you from bein' imposed upon."

Miss Mehitable laughed. "You think together we make a pretty good salad, do you?" she returned.

When dinner was on the table and they were both seated, Miss Upton spoke again:

"I wonder how you're goin' to like it to the port?" she said.

"Awful rheumatic, I sh'd think 'twould be," returned Mrs. Whipp.

"Pretty soon we'll have to be goin'," said Miss Upton. "I usually lock everything up here tight as a drum for three months. I was talkin' to a man in town yesterday that thought it was a joke that folks in Keefe just went a few miles to their seashore cottages. He was from Chicago where you have to go a thousand miles to get anywhere. I told him I couldn't see anything funny about it. Keefe was a village and Keefeport was a resort; but he kept on laughin' and said it was like lockin' the door of one home and goin' across the street to another, then back again in the fall. I told him I was full as satisfied as I would be to have to make my way through Indians and buffaloes to get anywhere as you have to in those wild Western cities. He claimed that it was perfectly civilized around Chicago now; but of course he'd say that."

"H'm," returned Mrs. Whipp, non-committally.

"Now I was thinkin', Charlotte, that there ain't a reason in the world why you should go to the port if you don't want to. You can stay right here and look after the house. I shall move the shop goods just as I always do to my little port place."

"You don't get along there alone, do you?" asked Charlotte hastily.

"No; one o' the schoolgirls is always glad to live with me in vacation and work for her board. I had Nellie McIntyre last summer."

"Oh, of course, if you'd rather have Nellie."

"I wouldn't," said Miss Upton calmly; "but she don't have rheumatism nor mind the dampness. She thinks it's a great chance to be to the shore and swim every day, and she's happy as a bird from mornin' till night. If she ain't to go this year, I must let the child know, for I expect she's lottin' on it."

The silence that followed this was broken only by the purring of Pearl who had established herself upon a broad beam of sunshine which lay across the ingrain carpet. Miss Mehitable was recklessly extravagant of carpets in Mrs. Whipp's opinion. She would not allow the shutting-out of the sunlight.

Miss Upton drank her tea busily now to conceal her desire to smile. Some of Ben Barry's comments upon her companion returned to her irresistibly; for she easily followed Charlotte's present mental processes.

Mrs. Whipp was in a most uncomfortable corner and her friend had driven her into it with such bland kindness that it made the situation doubly difficult. There was nothing Charlotte could resent in being offered a summer of ease in the Keefe cottage; but to be confronted with the alternatives of renouncing all right to complain of fog and storm, or else to part from Miss Mehitable and allow her to run her own life and notions for the whole summer, was a dilemma which drove her also to drinking a great deal of tea, and leaving the floor to Pearl for some minutes.

Miss Upton did not help her out, but, regaining control of her risibles, continued to eat and drink placidly, allowing her companion to cerebrate.

Well she knew that now was the time to defend herself from a summer of grumbling as continuous as the swish of waves on the shore; and well she knew also her companion's verbally unexpressed but intense devotion to herself which made any prospect of their separation a panic. So she waited and Pearl purred.

One Mr. Lugubrious Blue flits through the drawings of a certain famous cartoonist. Mr. Blue's mission is to take the joy out of life and Charlotte Whipp was his blood kin. The tip of her long nose was as chilly as his and her gloom was similarly chronic. Miss Upton was determined that she would not be the first to break in upon Pearl's solo.

Finally Charlotte spoke:

"Do the Barrys have a house to the port?"

"Yes, a real cottage. The rest of us have shelters, but you can't call 'em houses."

Mrs. Whipp looked up apprehensively. "Do you mean they let in the rain?"

"Sometimes in storms," returned Miss Upton cheerfully, "but we run around with pans and catch it."

Mrs. Whipp viewed her bread and butter gloomily, the down-drawn corner of her one-sided mouth unusually depressed.

Miss Mehitable felt a wild desire to laugh. She wished she could keep Ben Barry out of her mind during this important interview. Her kind heart administered a little comfort.

"You see, there isn't any lath and plaster to the cottage, but it's good and tight except in very bad weather," she said.

"It's a wonder you don't get rheumatics yourself," vouchsafed Charlotte.

"Nobody thinks of such a thing in that beautiful sun-soaked place," returned Miss Upton.

"Sun-stroke did you say?" asked Mrs. Whipp, looking up quickly.

"No." Miss Mehitable indulged in one frank laugh. "Sun-soaked."

"Sounds more like water-logged to me from your description," said the other sourly, returning to her dinner. "I don't see why you go there."

"For two reasons. First, because I love it better than any place on earth, and second, because it's good business. I do a better business there than I do here. You think it over, Charlotte, because I ought to let Nellie know."

"Well, you can let Nellie know that I'm goin'," replied Mrs. Whipp crossly. "What sense is there in your takin' a girl to the port to go in swimmin' while you work?"

"Nellie was a very good little helper," declared Miss Mehitable, again taking refuge in her teacup. When she set it down she continued: "If you think, Charlotte, that you can make up your mind to take the bitter with the sweet, the rain and the sun, the fog and the wind, why, come along; but it don't do a bit o' good to argue with Neptune. He'll stick his

fork right through you if you do."

Mrs. Whipp stared, but Miss Upton's eyes were twinkling so she suspected this was just one of her jokes.

"I never was one to shirk," she declared curtly.

"Then I can tell Nellie you want to go?"

That word "want" made Charlotte writhe and was probably accountable for the extra acidity of her reply:

"Yes, unless you're tongue-tied," she returned.

When dinner was over and the dishes washed and put away (Miss Upton's Sunday suit being enveloped in a huge gingham apron during the performance), Miss Mehitable watched solicitously to see if Charlotte manifested any symptoms of going out for a constitutional. She asked herself, with a good deal of severity, why she should dread to inform Mrs. Whipp of her own plan for the afternoon.

"I guess I'm free, white, and twenty-one," thought Miss Upton. But all the same she continued to cast furtive glances at Mrs. Whipp, who showed every sign of relapsing into a rocking-chair with Pearl in her lap.

"It's a real pleasant day, Charlotte," she said. "Ain't you goin' to walk?"

Mrs. Whipp yawned. "Dunno as I am."

"I've got to go out again," pursued Miss Mehitable intrepidly, but she felt the dull gaze that at once turned and fixed upon her. "I've got to see Ben Barry about some business that came up in the city yesterday."

"I knew you had something on your mind last night," returned Mrs. Whipp, triumphantly. "I notice you wouldn't tell *me*."

"You ain't a lawyer, Charlotte Whipp."

"Neither is that young whipper-snapper," rejoined the widow, "but then of course he's a Barry."

"You do try my patience dreadfully, Charlotte," declared Miss Mehitable, her plump cheeks scarlet. "If you didn't know when you came here that Mrs. Barry is one o' the best friends I've got in the world, I'll tell you so now. You needn't be throwin' 'em up to me just because they've got money. I'm goin' there whenever they ask me, and this afternoon's one o' the times."

She felt like a child who works its elbows to throw off some hampering annoyance. How her companion managed to hold her under the spell of domination which seemed merely a heavy weight of silent disapproval, she did not understand. It always meant jealousy, Miss Mehitable knew that, and usually her peace-loving, sunny nature pacified and coaxed the offended one, but occasionally she stood her ground. She knew that presently the Barry car would again draw up before her gate and she felt she must forestall Charlotte's sneers.

"How soon you goin'?" inquired the latter mildly.

"At three o'clock," returned Miss Upton bravely.

"Let me fix your collar," said Charlotte, rising; "your apron rumbled it all up."

"Why can't I remember to bully her oftener?" thought Miss Mehitable. "It always does her good just like medicine."

Promptly at three Ben Barry jumped out of his car before Miss Upton's Emporium, and Mrs. Whipp dodged behind the window-curtain and watched them drive away.

"I saw that cute Lottie looking after us," said Ben.

"Poor thing, I kind o' hate to leave her on a Sunday," said Miss Upton, sighing.

"The better the day, the better the deed," remarked her companion. "You've got me all het up about you and your umbrella. What's my part? To keep you out of the lock-up? Whom did you 'sault 'n' batter? When are you going to tell me?"

"You see that's one thing that's the matter with Charlotte," said Miss Mehitable. "She does hate to think I'm keepin' anything from her and she felt it in the air."

"Do you believe she'll visit you in prison? I'll address the jury myself. I maintain that one punishment's enough. You at least deserve a holiday. Say, Mehit, me dear, I've a big surprise for you, too. You know I told you I warned mother to

have no guests this afternoon."

"Yes, you said you wanted to write poetry--Ben"--the speaker suddenly grasped the driver's coat-sleeve--"I never thought of it till this minute, but, Ben Barry"--Miss Upton's voice expressed acute dismay--"are you in love?"

"Why, does it mean so much to you, little one?" responded Ben sentimentally.

"You wouldn't take near as much interest, not near as much if you've got a girl on your mind."

"One? Dozens, Mehit. I'm only human, dear."

"If it's dozens, it's all right," returned Miss Upton, relieved. "There's always room for one more in that case, but what is your surprise, then, Ben?"

"I didn't want to be alone to write poetry. I wanted to gloat, undisturbed. My dandy mother is giving me something I've been aching to have."

Miss Upton's face brightened. "Yes, I know. Something's being built way back o' your house. Folks are wonderin' what it is. It looks like some queer kind of a stable. What in the world can you want, Ben! You've got the cars and a motor-cycle, and a saddle-horse."

"Well"--confidentially--"don't tell, Mehit, but I wanted a zebra. Horses are too commonplace."

"But they can't be tamed, zebras can't," returned Miss Upton, much disturbed. "I've read about 'em. You'll be killed. I shall--"

"I *must* have a zebra and a striped riding-suit to be happy. While you're wearing the stripes in jail I'll come and ride up and down outside your barred window and cheer you up."

"I don't believe it's a zebra," declared Miss Mehitable; "but if it is I shall tell your mother you cannot have it, Ben Barry."

"And yet you expect me to sympathize with your umbrella--"

"Oh, how beautiful!" exclaimed Miss Upton suddenly; for now the tinted, pearly pink cloud of the Barrys' apple-orchard came in view.

The house was a brick structure with broad verandas, set back among well-kept lawns and drives, and its fine elm trees were noted. Mrs. Barry was reclining in a hammock-chair under one of them as the car drove in, and she rose and came to meet the guest. Miss Mehitable thought she looked like a queen as her erect, graceful figure moved across the lawn in the long silken cape that floated back and showed its violet lining.

"It's perfectly beautiful here to-day," she said as the hostess greeted her; "but, oh, Mrs. Barry, I suppose I'm a fool to ever believe Ben"--the speaker cast a glance around at her escort--"but you won't let him have a zebra, will you? They're the most dangerous animals. He says you're goin' to give him--"

"My dear Miss Upton," Mrs. Barry laughed, "I do need a scolding, I know. I've allowed myself to be talked into something crazy--crazy. It's much worse than a zebra, but you know what a big disappointment Ben had last year--flapping his wings and aching and longing to go across the sea while Uncle Sam obstinately refused to let him go over and end the War? All dressed up and no place to go! Poor Benny!" Mrs. Barry glanced at her son, laughing. "He did need some consolation prize, and anyway he persuaded me to let him have an aeroplane."

"Mrs.--Barry!" returned Miss Mehitable, and she gazed around at Ben with wide eyes.

"I'm such a bird, you see," he explained.

"Well," said the visitor after a pause, drawing her suspended breath, "I'm glad I can talk to you before you're killed."

"Oh, not so bad as that," said Mrs. Barry. "He is at home in the air, you know, and he assures me they will soon be quite common. Come up on the veranda, Miss Upton. I'm going to hide you and Ben in a corner where no one will disturb you."

"What a big place for you to live in all alone," observed Mehitable as they moved toward the house, and Ben drove the car to the garage.

"Yes, it is; but I'm so busy with my chickens and my bees I'm never lonely. I'm quite a farmer, Miss Upton. See how fine my orchard is this year? I tell Ben that so long as he doesn't light in my apple-trees we can be friends."

"I think you're awful venturesome, Mrs. Barry!"

That lady smiled as they moved up the steps to the veranda, the black and violet folds of her shimmering wrap blowing about her in lines of beauty that fascinated her companion.

"What else can the mother of a boy be?" she returned. "Ben has been training me in courage ever since he was born; apparently the prize-ring or the circus would have been his natural field of operations; so I have chained him down to the law and given him an aeroplane so he can work off his extra steam away from the publicity of earth."

At last the hostess withdrew, and Miss Upton found herself alone with her embryo lawyer in a sheltered corner of the porch where the vines were hastening to sprout their curtaining green, and a hammock, comfortable chairs, a table and books proclaimed the place an out-of-door sitting-room.

"Your mother is wonderful," she began when her companion had placed her satisfactorily and had stretched himself out in a listening attitude, his hands clasped behind his head and his eyes on hers.

What eyes they were, Miss Upton thought. Clear and light-brown, the color of water catching the light in a swift, sunny brook.

"She is a queen," he responded with conviction.

"A pity such a woman hasn't got a daughter," said Miss Mehitable tentatively.

"I'm going to give her one some day." A smile accompanied this.

"Is she picked out?"

Ben laughed at his companion's anxious tone. "You seem interested in my prospects. That's the second time you have seemed worried at the idea. No, she isn't picked out. I'm going to hunt for her in the stars. Why? Have you some one selected?"

"Law, no!" returned Miss Upton, flushing. "It is a--yes, it is a girl I've come to talk to you about, though." The visitor stammered and grew increasingly confused as she proceeded. "I thought--I didn't know--the girl needs somebody--yes, to--to look after her and I thought your mother bein'--bein' all alone and the house so big, she might have some use for a--young girl, you know, a kind of a helper; but Charlotte says the girl would fall in love with you and--and--" Miss Upton paused, drawing her handkerchief through and through her hands and looking anxiously at her companion who leaned his head back still farther and laughed aloud.

"Come, now, that's the most sensible speech that ever fell from Lottie's rosebud lips." He sat up and viewed his visitor, who, in spite of her crimson embarrassment, was gazing at him appealingly. "I don't believe, Mehit, my dear, that you've begun at the beginning, and you'll have to, you know, if you want legal advice."

"I never do, Ben; I am so stupid. I always do begin right in the middle, but now I'll go back. You know I went to the city yesterday."

"You and the umbrella."

"Yes, and I was mad at myself for luggin' it around all the mornin' when the weather turned out so pleasant and I had so many other things; but never *mind*"--the narrator tightened her lips impressively--"that umbrella was all *right*."

"Sure thing," put in Ben. "How could you have rescued the girl without it?"

Miss Upton's eyes widened. "How did you know I did?"

"The legal mind, you know, the legal mind."

"Oh, but I didn't rescue her near enough, not near enough," mourned Miss Mehitable. "I must go on. I got awful tired shoppin' and I went into a restaurant for lunch. I got set down to one table, but it was so draughty I moved to another where a young girl was sittin' alone. A man, a homely, long-necked critter made for that place too, but I got there first. I don't know whether I'm glad or sorry I did. Ben, she was the prettiest girl in this world."

Miss Upton paused to see if this solemn statement awakened an interest in her listener.

"Maybe," he replied placidly; "but then there are the stars, you know."

"She had lots of golden hair, and dark eyes and lashes, with kind o' long dark corners to 'em, and a sad little mouth the prettiest shape you ever saw. We got to talkin' and she told me about herself. It was like a story. She had a cruel

stepmother who didn't want her around, so kept her away at school, and a handsome, extravagant father without enough backbone to stand up for her; and on top of everything he died suddenly. Her stepmother had money and she put this poor child in a cheap lodgin'-house tellin' her to find a job, and she herself went calmly off travelin'. This poor lamb tried one place after another, but her beauty always stood in her way. I'm ashamed to speak of such things to you, Ben, but I've got to, to make you understand. She said she wondered if there were any good men in this world. She was in despair."

Ben's eyes twinkled, but his lips were serious as he returned his friend's valiant gaze.

"Her name is Geraldine Melody. Did you ever hear such a pretty name?" Miss Upton scrutinized her listener's face for some stir of interest.

"I never did. Your girl was a very complete story-teller. You blessed soul! and you've had all these thrills over that!" Ben leaned forward and took his companion's hand affectionately. "I didn't believe even you would fall for drug-store hair, darkened eyes, and that chestnut story. What did the fair Geraldine touch you for?"

Miss Upton returned his compassionate gaze with surprise and indignation. "She didn't touch me. What do you mean? Why shouldn't she if she wanted to? I tell you her eyes and her story were all the truth, Ben Barry. I ain't a fool."

"No, dear, no. Of course. But how much did you give her?"

"Give her what?"

"Money."

"I didn't give her any, poor lamb." Into Miss Mehitable's indignant eyes came a wild look. "I wonder if I'd ought to have. I wonder if it would have helped any."

Ben gave a low laugh. "I'll bet she had the disappointment of her young life: to tell you that yam, and tell it so convincingly, and yet dear old Mehit never rose to the bait!"

Miss Upton glared at him and pulled her hand away. He leaned back and resumed his former easy attitude. "When are you going to reach the umbrella?" he asked.

"I've passed it," snapped Miss Mehitable, angry and baffled. "I kept that long-necked, gawky man off with it, pretty near tripped him up so's I could get to the table with that poor child."

Ben shook his head slowly. "To think of it! That good old umbrella after a well-spent life to get you into a trap like that. All the same"--he looked admiringly at his companion--"there's no hay-seed in *your* hair. The dam-sell--pardon, Mehit, it's all right to say damsel, isn't it?--didn't think best to press things quite far enough to get into your pocket-book. You call it a rescue. Why do you? Geraldine might have got something out of the gawk."

Miss Upton's head swung from side to side on her short neck as she gazed at her friend for a space in defiant silence. His smile irritated her beyond words.

"Look here, Ben Barry," she said at last; "young folks think old folks are fools. Old folks *know* young folks are. Now I want to find that girl. I see you won't help me, but you can tell me where to get a detective."

Ben raised his eyebrows. "Hey-doddy-doddy, is it as serious as that? Geraldine is some actress. It would be a good thing if you could let well enough alone; but I suspect you'll have to find her before you can settle down and give Lottie that attention to which she has been accustomed. I will help you. We won't need any detective. You shall meet me in town next Saturday. We'll go to that restaurant and others. Ten to one we'll find her."

"She's left the city," announced Miss Upton curtly.

"She told you so?" the amused question was very gentle.

"That cat of a stepmother had a relative on a farm, some place so God-forsaken they couldn't keep help, so the cat kindly told the girl she was desertin' that if other jobs failed she could go there. I've told you why the other jobs did fail, and it's the truth whether you believe it or not, and at the time I met her the poor child had given up hope and decided to take that last resort."

Ben bit his lip. "Back to the farm, Geraldine!"

Miss Upton's head again swung from side to side and again she glared at her companion.

"It would surprise you very much if we were to meet her in town next Saturday, wouldn't it?" he added.

"I'd be so glad I'd hug her beautiful little head off," returned Miss Mehitable fervently.

"Do that, dear, if you must. It would be better than bringing her out here to be a companion to mother." Miss Upton's eyes were so fiery that Ben smothered his laugh. "I'm nearly sure that Miss Melody wouldn't suit mother as a companion."

"I wouldn't allow her to come anywhere near you," returned Miss Upton hotly. "I s'pose you think she didn't go to the farm. Well, I saw her go myself with that very gawk I tripped up with my umbrella."

"Of course you did," laughed Ben; "and pretty mad he was doubtless when she told him she hadn't got a rise out of you. Those people usually work in pairs. We'll probably see him, too."

Miss Upton clutched the iron table in front of her and swung herself to her feet with superhuman celerity.

"Ben Barry, you're entirely too smart for the law!" she said. "You'll never stoop to try a case. You'll know everything beforehand. You're a kind of a mixture of a clairvoyant and a Sherlock Holmes, you are. If you'd seen as I did that beautiful, touchin' young face turn to stone when that raw-boned, cross-eyed thing looked at her so--so hungry-like, and took possession of her as though he was only goin' to wait till they got home to eat her up--and I let 'em go!" Miss Upton reverted to her chief woe. "I let 'em go without findin' out *where*, when in all the world that poor child had nobody but me, a country jake she met in a restaurant, to care whether that Carder picked her bones after he got her to his cave."

"That what?"

"Carder, Rufus Carder. The one thing I have got is his hateful name. He lives 'way off on a farm somewheres, but knowin' his name, a detective ought to--"

Ben Barry leaned forward in his chair and his eyes ceased to twinkle.

"Rufus Carder? If it is the one I'm thinking of, he's one of the biggest reprobates in the country."

"That's him," returned Miss Upton with conviction. "At first I sized him up as just awkward and countrified; but the way he looked at the child and the way he spoke to her showed he wa'n't any weaklin'."

"I should say not. He's as clever as they make 'em and he has piles of money--other people's money. He can get out of the smallest loophole known to the law. He always manages to save his own skin while he takes the other fellow's. Rufus Carder." Ben frowned. "I wonder if it can be."

Miss Upton received his alert gaze and looked down on him in triumph.

"You're wakin' up, are you?" she said. "I guess I don't meet you in town next Saturday, do I? Oh, Ben"--casting her victory behind her--"do you mean to say you know where he lives?"

"I know some of the places."

"That farm"--eagerly--"do you know that?"

"Yes. Pretty nearly. I can find it."

"And you mean you will find it? You dear boy! And you'll take me with you, and we'll bring her back with us. I can make room for her at my house."

"Hold on, Mehitable. We're dealing with one of the biggest rascals on the top side of earth. If he wants to keep the girl it may not be simple to get her. At any rate, it's best for me to go alone first. You write a note to her and I'll take it and bring back news to you of the lay of the land."

Miss Upton gazed in speechless hope and gratitude at the young man as he rose and paced up and down the piazza in thought.

"Oh, Ben," she ejaculated, clasping her hands, "to think that I'm in time to get you to do this before you kill yourself in that aeroplane!"

"Nothing of the sort, my dear Mehit" he returned. "Remember that, unlike the zebra, they are tamable in captivity, you'll be soaring with me yet."

Miss Upton laughed in her relief. "If all they want is something heavier than air, I'm *it*," she returned.

CHAPTER V

THE NEW HELP

Geraldine, begging to be excused from supper on the night of her arrival, drank the glass of milk that Mrs. Carder gave her, and at an early hour laid an aching head on her pillow and slept fitfully through the night.

A heavy rain began to fall and continued in the morning. She still felt singularly numb toward the world and life in general. Her own room was bad enough, but outside it was the bare landscape, the desolate house, and its vulgar host.

Mrs. Carder, under orders from her son, presented herself early with a tray on which were coffee and toast, and the girl had more than a twinge of compunction at being waited on by the worn, wrinkled old woman.

"This is Sunday," she said. "I feel very tired. If you will let me stay here and be lazy until this afternoon, I should like it, but only on condition that you promise not to bring me anything more or take any trouble for me."

"Just as you say," responded the old woman; and she reported this request below stairs. Her son received it with a nod.

All the afternoon he hovered near the parlour with its horsehair furniture, and about four-thirty the young girl came downstairs. He greeted her effusively and she endeavored to pass him and go to the kitchen. The most lively sensation of which she was conscious now was compassion for the old woman who had brought up her breakfast.

"No, don't go out there," said Rufus decidedly. "Ma is giving the hands their supper. You'd only be in the way. Sit down and take it easy while you can."

The speaker established the reluctant guest in a slippery rocking-chair of ancient days. The atmosphere seemed to indicate that the room had awakened from a long sleep for her reception.

Rufus sat down near her. "We're a democratic bunch here," he said, eying his companion as if he could never drink in enough of her youth and beauty. "We usually eat all together, but distinguished company, you know," he smiled and winked at her while she listened to the clatter of knives and forks at the long table in the kitchen. "We'll have our supper when they get through."

"I should think the servants might relieve your mother of that work," said Geraldine.

"Servants! Hired girl, do you mean? Nice time we'd have tryin' to keep 'em here. Oh, Ma's pert as a cricket. She don't mind the work. That's real kindness, you know, to old folks," he continued. "All a mistake to put 'em on the shelf. They're lots happier doin' the work they're accustomed to."

"To-morrow I shall be helping her," said Geraldine mechanically, her whole soul shrinking from the gloating expression in her companion's face.

"Depends on how you do it," he responded protectingly. "I don't want those hands put in dishwater."

"I shall do whatever your mother will let me do," responded the girl quickly. "That is what I came for. I've come here to earn my living."

Rufus Carder laughed leniently, and leaning forward would have patted her hand, but she drew it away with a quick motion which warned him to proceed slowly. In her eyes was an indignant light.

"You can do about as you like with me, little girl," he said fondly. "If it's a dishwasher for Ma that you want, why, I'll have to get one, that's all."

"I heard that you have found it very difficult to get help out here."

"I always get whatever I go after," was the reply. And the guest had a fleeting consolation in the thought that she might make easier the lot of that wrinkled slave in the kitchen.

"You don't know yet all I can do for you," pursued Carder, and Geraldine writhed under the self-satisfied gaze which seemed to be taking stock of her person from head to foot; "nor what I intend to do," he added. "My wife was a plain sort of woman and I've been wrapped up in business. See that little buildin' down there side o' the road? That's my office. I can see everybody who comes in or goes out of the place and can keep my hand on everything that's doin' on the farm. I've held my nose pretty close to the grindstone and I've earned the right to let up a little. I know you find things very plain here, but I'm goin' to give you leave to do it all over. I intend you shall have just what you want, little

girl."

Every time Rufus Carder used that expression, "little girl," a strange sensation of nausea crept again around Geraldine's heart. It was as if he actually caressed her with those big-jointed and not over-clean hands. She still remembered the pleading of his mother not to make him angry.

"Your mother should be your first thought," she said.

"Well, that's all right," he returned. "Of course she's gettin' along and I put water in the kitchen for her this year; but it's legitimate for young folks to begin where old folks leave off. If it wa'n't so, how would there be any improvement in the world? You and I'll make lots o' trips to town until you get this old house to lookin' just the way you want it. I'm sorry Dick Melody can't come out and see us here."

Tears sprang to the girl's eyes. Tears of grief and an infinite resentment that this coarse creature could so familiarly name her father.

Mrs. Carder here appeared to announce that their supper was ready, so no more was said until in the next room they found a small table set for two.

"Have you eaten your supper, Mrs. Carder?" Geraldine asked of the harassed and heated little woman who was hurrying back and forth loaded with dishes.

"Yes, much as I ever do," was the reply. "I get my meals on the fly." Then, meeting her son's lowering expression, she hastened to add, "I get all I want that way, you know. It's the way I like the best."

"It isn't the way you must do while I'm here," responded Geraldine firmly. "You're tired out. Come and sit down with your son and let me wait on you while you rest."

"Don't that sound daughterly?" remarked Rufus exultantly. "Perhaps I didn't know how to pick out the right girl. What?" His mother, relieved by his returned complacency, became voluble with reassurances; and Geraldine, seeing that Rufus's hand was approaching her arm, hastily slid into her chair and he took the opposite place.

"Didn't I tell you we'd make up for the lunch that great porpoise cheated us out of yesterday?" he said in high good-humor.

Geraldine's desolate heart yearned after the kind friend so soon lost.

"That'll do, Ma. I guess the grub's all on the table. Go chase yourself. Miss Melody'll pour my coffee."

"Don't wash any of the dishes, Mrs. Carder, please, until I get out there," said Geraldine.

The old woman disappeared with one last glance at her son whom Geraldine eyed with sudden steadiness.

He smiled at her with semi-toothless fondness.

"Give me my coffee, little girl. I'm famished. Isn't this jolly--just you and me?"

Geraldine poured the coffee and handed him the cup; then she spoke impressively.

"Mr. Carder, this is the last time this must happen. I refuse to sit down and make a waitress of your old mother. If you insist on showing her no consideration, I shall go away from here at once."

Her companion laughed, quietly, but with genuine amusement and admiration.

"By ginger," he said, "when you're mad, you're the handsomest thing above ground. Go away! That's a good one. Don't I tell you, you can do anything with me?" The speaker paused to drink his coffee noisily, keeping his eyes on the exquisite, stiff little mouth opposite him. "I know I ain't any dandy to look at. I've been too busy rollin' up the money that's goin' to make you go on velvet the rest o' your days: you're welcome to change all that, too. Yes, indeed. Never fear. When we do over the house we're goin' to do over yours truly, too. I'll do exactly as you say and you can turn me out a fashion plate that'll be hard to beat."

"I'm not interested in turning you out a fashion plate," returned Geraldine coldly. "I'm interested in making the lot of your mother easier, that is all."

Rufus regarded her thoughtfully and nodded. It penetrated his brain that he had been going too fast with this disdainful beauty. He rather admired her for her disdain; it added zest to the certainty of her capitulation.

"Have it your own way, little girl," he said leniently. "I know you're tired, still. You're not eatin'. Eat a good supper and

to-night take another long sleep and to-morrow everything will look different."

Geraldine still regarded him with an unfaltering gaze. "We are strangers," she said. "I wish you not to call me 'little girl!'"

Rufus smiled at her admiringly. "It's hard for me to be formal with Dick Melody's girl," he said. "What shall I call you? My lady? That's all right, that's what you are. My lady. Another cup o' coffee please, my lady. It tastes extra good from your fair hands. We'll do away with this rocky tea-set, too. You're goin' to have eggshell China if you want it; and of course you do want it, you little princess."

His extreme air of proprietorship had several times during this interview convinced Geraldine that her host had been drinking. In spite of his odious frank admiration and the glimpses that he gave of some disquieting power, Geraldine scorned him too much to be afraid of him, and while she doubted increasingly that it would be possible for her to remain here, she determined to see what the morning would bring forth. The man's passion for acquisition, evidenced by his showmanship of his accumulations, might again absorb him after the first flush of her novelty wore off. She would enter into the work of the house, she would never again sit *tete-a-tete* with him, and he should find it impossible to see her alone. His mother had warned her that he was terrible when he was angry, and Geraldine suspected that the mother always felt the brunt of his wrath. She must be careful, therefore, not to make the lot of that mother harder while endeavoring to ease it.

As soon as she could, Geraldine escaped to the kitchen where she found Mrs. Carder at her wet sink.

"I asked you to wait for me, Mrs. Carder," she said.

The old woman looked up from her steaming pan, her countenance full of trouble.

"Now, Rufus don't want you to do anything like this, Miss Melody, and Pete's helpin' me, you see."

Geraldine turned and saw a boy who was carrying a heavy, steaming kettle from the stove to the sink, and she met his eyes fixed upon her. She recognized him at once as the driver of the motor in which she and her host had come from the station. As the chauffeur he had appeared like a boy of ordinary size, but now she saw that his arms were long and his legs short and bowed, and in height he would barely reach her shoulder.

The dwarf had a long, solemn, tanned face and a furtive, sullen eye. Geraldine remembered Rufus Carder's rough tone as he had summoned him at the station. He was perhaps a wretched, lonely creature like herself. She met his look with a smile that, directed toward his master, would have sent Rufus into the seventh heaven of complacency.

"I have met Pete already," she said, kindly. "He drove us up from the station. I'm glad you are helping Mrs. Carder, Pete. She seems to have too much to do."

The boy did not reply, but he appeared unable to remove his eyes from Geraldine's kind look, and careless of where he was going he stumbled against the sink.

"Look out, Pete!" exclaimed his mistress. "What makes you so clumsy? You nearly scalded me. I guess he's tired, too." The old woman sighed. "Everybody picks on Pete. They all find something for him to do."

"Then run away now," said Geraldine, still warming the boy's dull eyes with her entrancing smile, "and let me take your place. I can dry dishes as fast as anybody can wash them."

The dwarf slowly backed away, and disappeared into the woodshed, keeping his gaze to the last on the sunny-haired loveliness which had invaded the ugliness of that low-ceiled kitchen.

Geraldine seized a dish-towel, and Mrs. Carder, her hands in the suds, cast a troubled glance around at her.

"Rufus won't like it," she declared timorously.

"Why should you say anything so foolish? What did I come out here for?"

The old woman looked around at her with a brief, strange look.

"You couldn't get help," went on Geraldine, "and so as I needed a home I came."

"Is that what they told you?"

"Yes. That is what my stepmother told me, and I see it is true. You seem to have no one here but men."

"Yes," replied Mrs. Carder. "It--it hasn't been a healthy place for girls." She cast a glance toward the door as she spoke in a lowered voice.

"Dreadfully lonely, you mean?" inquired Geraldine, unpleasantly affected by the other's timidity. "The woman has no spirit," she added mentally with some impatience.

Mrs. Carder looked full in her eyes for a silent space; then: "Rufus can do anything he wants to--anything," she whispered.

Geraldine, in the act of wiping a coarse, thick dinner-plate, met the other's gaze with a little frown.

"Don't give in to him, my dear," went on the sharp whisper. "You are too beautiful, too young. He's crazy about you, so you be firm. Don't give in to him. Insist on his marrying you!"

The thick dinner-plate fell to the floor with a crash.

"Marrying him!" ejaculated Geraldine.

"Sh! Sh! Oh, Miss Melody, hush!"

Geraldine began to shiver from head to foot. The lover-like words and actions of her host seemed rushing back to memory with all the other repulsive experiences of past weeks.

The kitchen door opened and the master appeared.

"Who's smashing the crockery?" he inquired.

"It's your awkward help," rejoined Geraldine, her teeth chattering as she stooped to pick up the plate.

"I knew you weren't fit for this kind of thing," he said tenderly, approaching, to the girl's horror. "Where's that confounded Pete?"

"I sent him away," said Geraldine, indignant with herself for trembling. "I wanted to do this; it is what I came for. The plate didn't break."

The man regarded her flushed face with a gaze that scorched her.

"Break everything in the old shack if you want to--that is, all but one thing!"

He stood for half a minute more while his mother scalded a new pan full of dishes.

"What is that poem," he went on--"What's that about, 'Thou shalt not wash dishes nor yet feed the swine'? Well, well, we'll see later."

Geraldine's heart was pounding too hard to allow her to speak. She seized another plate in her towel, his mother, her wrinkled lips pursed, kept her eyes on her dishpan, so with a pleased smile at his own apt quotation the master reluctantly removed his presence from the room.

"I'm very sorry for you, Mrs. Carder," said Geraldine breathlessly, meanwhile holding her plate firmly lest another crash bring back the owner, "but I can't stay here. I must go away to-morrow."

Her companion gave a fleeting glance around at the girl, and her withered lips relaxed in a smile as she shook her head.

"Oh, no, you won't, my dear."

At the unexpected reply Geraldine's heart thumped harder.

"I certainly shall, Mrs. Carder. I'm sorry not to stay and help you, but it's impossible."

"It will be impossible for you to go," was the colorless reply. "Nobody goes away from here till Rufus is ready they should; then they leave whether they have any place to go to or not. It's goin' to be different with you. I can see that. You needn't be scared by what I said, a minute ago. You are safe. You've got a home for life. I only hope you won't let him send me away." The old woman again turned around to Geraldine and her tired old eyes filled with tears.

"Nothing should be too good for you with all your son's money," rejoined Geraldine hotly.

Her panic-stricken thought was centered now on one idea. Escape. The night was closing in. The clouds had cleared away. The stretches of fields in all directions, the lack of neighbors, the horrors of the old woman's implications, all weighed on the girl like a crushing nightmare. The dishes at last put away, she bade the weary old woman good-night, and apprehensively looking from side to side stole to the stairway without encountering anyone and mounting to her dreary chamber she locked the door.

She hurried to the window and looked out.

A half-moon in the sky showed her that the distance down was too far to jump. She might sprain or break one of those ankles which must go fast and far to-night.

Packing her belongings back in her bag she sat down to wait. Gradually all sounds about the house ceased. Still she waited. The minutes seemed hours, but not until her watch pointed to midnight did she put on her hat and jacket and slip off her shoes.

Then going to the door she gradually turned the key. The process was remarkably noiseless. If only the hinges were as friendly. Very, very slowly she turned the knob and very, very slowly opened the door. Not a sound.

When the opening was wide enough to admit her body she was gliding through, when her stockinged foot struck something soft. She thought it was a dog lying across the threshold, and only by heroic effort she controlled the cry that sprang to her lips. The dark mass half rose, and by the faint moonlight she could see two long, suddenly out-flung arms. "Pete," she whispered, "Pete, you *will* let me pass!"

"I'm sorry, lady. He'd kill me. He'd tear me to pieces," came back the whisper.

"Please, Pete," desperately, "I'll do anything for you. Please, *please!*"

For answer the long arms pushed her back through the open door. Another door opened and Rufus Carder's nasal voice sounded. "You there, Pete?"

A sonorous snore was the only answer. For a minute that other door remained open, but the rhythmical snoring continued, and at last the latch was heard to close.

Geraldine again cautiously opened her door a crack.

"Pete," she whispered.

The dwarf snored.

"Please talk to me, Pete. I'm sure you are a kind boy." The pleading whisper received no answer beyond the heavy breathing.

"I want to ask your advice. I want you to tell me what I can do. I'm sure you don't love your master."

A sort of snort interrupted the snoring which then went on rhythmically as before.

Geraldine closed her door noiselessly. She sat down white and unnerved. She was a prisoner, then. For a time her mind was in such a whirl that she was unable to form a plan.

She put her hand to her head.

"I must try to sleep if I can in this hideous place. Then to-morrow I may be able to think."

Locking the door, she drew the bureau against it; then she undressed and fell into bed. Her youth and exhaustion did the rest. She slept until morning.

CHAPTER VI

THE DWARF

"You, Pete," said his master, approaching the pump where the boy was performing his morning ablutions, "what was the noise I heard in Miss Melody's room last night?"

"Dunno," sullenly.

"Well, you'd better know. I'll skin you alive if anything happens to her."

"How--how could I help it if she jumps out the winder?"

Carder smiled. "You're thinkin' of somebody else. *She* went to the hospital. If Miss Melody hurts herself, we'll keep her here. She won't do that, though, and I hold you accountable for anything else she does. Night and day, remember. You've got to know where she is all the time. You understand?"

The dwarf grunted and combed his thick, tousled hair with his fingers.

"Watch yourself now. You'll pay if anything goes wrong. What was that noise I heard? Out with it!"

The dwarf grunted his reply. "She moved the furniture ag'in' the door, I guess."

"Oh, that was it."

Rufus laughed and turned toward the house.

The hired men had had their breakfast and gone to the fields and the drudge in the kitchen was prepared for the arrival of her son and his guest.

Geraldine came downstairs fresh from sleep and such a cold bath as was obtainable from the contents of a crockery pitcher. Rufus's eyes glittered as he beheld her.

"Well, my little--I mean my lady, you look wonderful. I guess there was some sleep in the little old bed after all; but you shall have down to sleep on if you want it."

Geraldine regarded him.

"I don't see how you expected I could sleep when you let a dog lie outside my door, a dog with the nightmare, I should judge, snoring and snorting. Be sure he is not there to-night. He frightened me."

"Too bad, too bad," returned Rufus; "but you see you slept, or you couldn't look like a fresh rosebud as you do this morning; and you'll get used to good old Sport. He's a splendid watchdog."

Geraldine turned to her hostess.

"I don't know what your hours are, Mrs. Carder--whether five, or six, or seven is over-sleeping, but I'm ashamed not to have been down here to help you get breakfast. It shan't happen again."

"Don't fret about that," said Rufus, "Sleep as long as you want to, little girl. It's good for your complexion."

Geraldine flatly refused to sit down to breakfast unless Mrs. Carder was also at the table, so the old woman wiped her hands on her apron and took her place between her son and the beautiful girl, and Geraldine jumped up and fetched and carried when anything was needed.

Rufus watched this proceeding discontentedly. "We've got to start in new, Ma," he said. "The Princess Geraldine and me are goin' to do this house over, and we'll get some help, too--help that knows how; the stylish kind, you know. Geraldine thinks the time has come for you to hold your hands the rest o' your days."

"Just as you say, Rufus," returned his mother meekly, nibbling away at the bacon on her plate and feeling vastly uncomfortable.

"What she says goes; eh, Ma?"

"Just as you say, Rufus," repeated the mother.

A light was glowing in Geraldine's eyes. It was day. She was young and strong. The world was wide. She laughed at her

fears of the night. The right moment to escape would present itself. Rufus would have to go to the city, and even if he refused to leave without her, once in town she could easily give him the slip. Perhaps that was going to prove the best solution after all.

"Your trunk came last night," he said, when at last the three rose from the breakfast-table. "You can show Pete where you want it put."

Geraldine tried not to betray the eagerness with which she received this permission.

The dwarf's strong arms carried her modest trunk up the stairs as easily as if it had been a hatbox. She feared Carder might follow them, but he did not.

"Pete," she said, low and excitedly, as soon as they reached her room and he had deposited his burden, "you *will* help me! I know you are going to be the one to help me get away from here."

The dwarf shook his head. "Then I'd be killed," he answered, but he gazed at her admiringly. "I've got the marks of his whip on me now."

"Why do you stay?" asked Geraldine indignantly.

"He says nobody else would give me work. I'm too ugly. He says I'd starve."

"That isn't so!" exclaimed the girl. "I will help you." The consciousness of the futility of the promise swept over her even as she made it. Who was she to give help to another!

The dwarf, gazing fascinated at her glowing face, saw her eyes suddenly fill. A heavy step sounded on the stair.

"Move it, move the trunk, Pete," she whispered, dragging at it herself.

Rufus Carder appeared at the door just as the dwarf was shoving the trunk to another part of the room.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Seems to me you take a long time about it."

"I'm always so undecided," said Geraldine. "I believe I will have it back under the window after all, Pete."

So back under the window the boy lifted the trunk, his master meanwhile looking suspiciously from one to the other. It was quite in the possibilities that his fair guest might try to corrupt that dog which at night lay outside her door; but the dog well knew that no corner of the earth could hide him from Rufus Carder if he played him false, and the master felt tolerably safe on that score.

All that day Geraldine watched to observe the habits of those around her. She found that the small yellow building near the drive which Carder had pointed out to her was the place where he spent most of his time: the cave of the ogre she named it. The driveway came in from a road which passed the farm and no one entered it except persons who had business with the owner.

Again the girl marveled at the character of the country surrounding the farmhouse. Not a tree provided a hiding-place or shade for man or beast. Stones had been removed and built into low walls that intersected the fields. Even in the lovely late spring with verdant crops growing there were no lines of beauty anywhere. The ugly yellow office building reared itself from a strip of grass where dandelions fought for their rights, but a wide cement walk led to its door.

"Come down and see my den," said Rufus late that afternoon. "The washing dishes and feeding swine can come later if you are determined to do it. It's a great little old office, that is. There's more business transacted there than you might suppose." He met Geraldine's grave gaze, and added: "Many a profitable half-hour your father has spent there. Yes, indeed, Dick Melody knew which side his bread was buttered on, and I'm in hopes of being as good a friend to his daughter as I was to him."

Geraldine yielded to the invitation in silence. She wished to discover every possible detail which could make her understand how her father, as popular with men as with women, and with every custom of good manners, had often sought this brute. Doubtless it was to obtain money. Probably her father had died in debt to the man. Probably it was that fact which gave her jailer his evident certainty that he had her in his power. Her father was dead. Was there anything in the law that could hold her, a girl, responsible for his debts? It was surely only a matter of days before she could make her escape and meanwhile she would try not to let disgust overpower her reason. She was not sorry to be asked to see the abode of the spider, in the center of which he sat and watched the approach from any direction of those who dragged themselves of necessity into his web. Let him tell what he would about her father. She wished to know anything concerning him, of which Carder had proof. She would not allow her poise to be shaken by lies.

It was bright day and the office was but a few hundred yards from the house. All the same, as they walked along, she was glad to hear a sharp metallic clicking a little distance behind them, and turning her head, to see Pete ambling along with his clumsy, bow-legged gait, dragging a lawn-mower. Little protection was this poor oaf with the scars of his master's whip upon him, but Geraldine had seen a doglike devotion light up the dull eyes in those few minutes up in her room, and in spite of the dwarf's hopeless words she felt that she had one friend in this place of desolation. She expected the master would drive the boy away when the mower began to behead the dandelions, but Rufus appeared unaware of the monotonous sound.

"Pretty ship-shape, eh?" he said when they were inside the office. He indicated the open desk with its orderly files of papers and well-filled pigeon-holes. Placing himself in the desk-chair he drew another close for his visitor.

Geraldine moved the chair back a little and sat down, her eyes fixed on the telephone at Carder's left. That instrument connecting with the outside world, the world of freedom, fascinated her. If she could but get ten minutes alone with it! She had some friends of her school days, and the pride which had hitherto prevented her from communicating with them was all gone, immersed in the flood of fear and repulsion which, despite all her reasoning, swept over her periodically like a paralysis. Rufus leaned back in his seat and surveyed his guest. She looked very young in the soft, pale-green dress she wore.

"Here I am, you see, master of all I survey, and of a good deal that I don't survey--except with my mind's eye." He shook his head impressively. "I can do a lot for anybody I care for." He pulled his check-book toward him. "I can draw my check for four figures, and I'll do it for you any time you say the word. How would you like to have a few thousands to play with?"

Geraldine removed her longing gaze from the telephone and looked at her hands. She could not meet the insupportable expression of his greedy eyes.

"Two figures would do," she said, "if you would allow me to go to town and spend it as I please."

"Why, my beauty," he laughed, "you can spend any amount, any way you please."

"Alone?" asked Geraldine, her suddenly eager eyes looking straight into his, but instantly shrinking away.

"Of course not," he returned cheerfully. "I ought to get something for my money, oughtn't I?"

She was silent, and he watched her as if making up his mind how to proceed.

"Look here," he said at last in a changed tone, "I don't know what I've got to gain by beating about the bush. I've shown you plain enough that I'm crazy about you and I've told you that I always get what I go after."

Geraldine's heart began to beat wildly. She kept her eyes on her folded hands and the extremity of her terror made her calm.

"I'm goin' to treat you as white as ever a girl was treated; but I want you, and I want you soon. I know we're more or less strangers, but you can get acquainted with me as well after marriage as before. I know all this ain't regulation. A girl expects to be courted, but I'll court you all your life, little girl."

The lawn-mower clicked through the silence in which Geraldine summoned the power to speak. Indignation helped to steady her voice. She looked up at her companion, who was leaning forward in his chair waiting for her first word.

"It is impossible for me to marry you, Mr. Carder," she said, trying to hold her voice steady, "and since your feeling for me is so extreme, I intend to leave here immediately. You speak as if you had bought me as you might have bought one of your farm implements, but these are modern days and I am a free agent."

Carder did not change his position, his elbows leaning on the arms of his chair, his fingers touching.

"I have bought you, Geraldine," he answered quietly.

She started up from her chair, her indignation bursting forth. "I knew it!" she exclaimed. "My father died owing you money and you have determined that I shall pay his debts in another coin! He would turn in his grave if he heard you make such a cruel demand."

The frank horror and repulsion in the girl's eyes made the blood rise to her companion's temples.

He pointed to her chair. "Sit down," he said. "You don't understand yet."

She obeyed trembling, for she could scarcely stand. His unmoved certainty was terrifying. "Your father was a very popular man. His vanity was his undoing. Juliet was too smart to let him throw away her money, so rather than lose his

reputation as a good sport, rather than not keep up his end, he looked elsewhere for the needful, and he came to me, not once, but many times. At last he wore out my patience and the Carder spring ran dry, so far as he was concerned; then, Geraldine"--the narrator paused, the girl's dilated eyes were fixed upon him--"then, my proud little lady, handsome Dick Melody fell. He began helping himself."

"What do you mean--helping himself?" The girl leaned forward and her hands tightened until the nails pressed into her flesh.

Rufus Carder slipped his fingers into an inside pocket and drew forth two checks which he held in such a way that she could read them.

"You don't know my signature," he went on, "but that is it. Large as life and twice as natural. Yes"--he regarded the checks--"twice as natural. I couldn't have done them better myself."

Geraldine's hands flew to her heart, her eyes spoke an anguished question.

"Yes," Rufus nodded, "Dick did those." The speaker paused and slipped the checks back into his pocket. "I breathed fire when I discovered it, and then very strangely something occurred which put the fire out." Again he leaned his elbows on the chair-arms, and bent toward the wide eyes and parted lips opposite. "I saw you sitting in the park one day," he went on slowly, "you got up and walked and laughed with a girl companion. I found out who you were. I went to your father, who was nearly crazy with apprehension at the time, and I told him there was no girl on earth for me but you, and that if he would give you to me I would forgive his crime. I didn't want a forger for a father-in-law. It was arranged that this month he should bring you out here and make his wishes known. His reputation was safe. Even Juliet suspected nothing. He is still mourned at his clubs as the prince of good fellows; but his sudden death prevented him from puttin' your hand in mine."

A silence followed, broken only by the rasping of the lawn-mower and Rufus Carder watched the girl's heaving breast.

"So you see," he went on at last, "all you have to do to save your father's name is to sit down in the lap of luxury; not a very hard thing to do, I should think. You'll find that I'll take--" The speaker paused, for another sound now broke in upon the click of the lawn-mower, an increasingly sharp noise which brought him to his feet and to one of the many windows which gave him a view in every direction.

A motor-cycle was speeding up the driveway.

"That's Sam Foster comin' to pay his rent," he said. "There'll be many a one on that errand along about now," he declared with satisfaction. "Cheer up," he added, turning back to the pale face and tremulous lips of the young girl. "Your father wasn't the first fine man to go wrong; but they don't all have somebody to stick by 'em and shield 'em as he did. The more you think it over, the more--"

The motor-cycle had stopped during this declaration, and the rider now stepped into the office-door. Geraldine, her hands still unconsciously on her heart, gazed at the newcomer. Could it be that Rufus Carder had a tenant like this youth? The well-born, the well-bred, showed in his erect bearing and in his sunny brown eyes, and the smile that matched them.

The owner started and scowled at sight of him.

"Mr. Carder, I believe," said the visitor.

Rufus's chair grated as he advanced to edge the stranger back through the door.

"Your business, sir," he said roughly. "Can't you see I'm in the midst of an interview?"

Ben's eyes never left those of the young girl, and hers clung to him with a desperate appeal impossible to mistake. She rose from her chair as if to go to him.

"Yes, Mr. Carder, and I won't interrupt you. I'll wait outside. I came to see Miss Melody with a message from one of her friends and I'm sure from the description that this is she." The young fellow bowed courteously toward Geraldine, who stood mute drinking in the inflections of his voice; the very pronunciation of his words were earmarks of the world of refinement from which she was exiled. In her distraction she was unconscious of the manner in which she was gazing at him above the tumult of grief at her father's double treachery. Her father had sold her, sold her in cold blood, and her life was ruined. Had the visitor in his youth and strength and grace been Sir Galahad himself, she could not have yearned more toward his protection.

To Ben she looked, as she stood there, like a lovely lily in a green calyx, and her expression made his hands tingle to

knock flat the scowling, middle-aged man with the unkempt hair and the missing tooth who was uneasily edging him farther and farther out the door.

"Miss Melody don't wish to receive calls at present and you can tell her friend so," said Rufus in the same rough tone. "She don't wear black, but she's in mourmin' all the same. Her father died recently. Ain't you in mourmin', Geraldine?" He turned toward the girl.

She had dropped her hands and seized the back of her chair for support.

"Yes," she breathed despairingly.

"Can't I see you for a few minutes, Miss Melody?" said Ben over the wrathful Carder's shoulder. "Miss Upton sent me to you. My name is Barry."

"No, you can't, and that's the end of it!" shouted Rufus.

Ben's smile had vanished. His eyes had sparks in them as he looked down at the shorter man.

"Not at all the end of it," he returned. "Miss Melody decides this. Can you give me a few minutes?"

As he addressed her he again met the wonderful, dark-lashed eyes that were beseeching him.

Rufus Carder looked around at the girl his thin lips twitching in ugly fashion.

"*You* can tell him, then, if he won't take it from me," he said, "and mind you're quick about it. We ain't ready here for guests. Miss Melody don't want to receive anybody. She's tired and she's recuperatin'. Tell him so, Geraldine."

The girl's lips moved at first without a sound; then she spoke:

"I'm very tired, Mr. Barry," she said faintly. "Please excuse me."

Rufus turned back to the guest.

"Good-day, sir," he ejaculated savagely.

Ben stood for a silent space undecided. His fists were clenched. Geraldine, meeting his glowing eyes, shook her head slowly. Her keen distress made him fear to make another move.

"At some other time, then, perhaps," he said, tingling with the increasing desire to knock down his host and catch this girl up in his arms.

"Yes, at some other time," said Rufus, speaking with a sneer. "Tell Miss Upton that Mrs. Carder may see her later."

A tide of crimson rushed over Ben's face. He saw that there must be a pressure here that he could not understand, and again Geraldine's fair head and wonderful eyes signaled him a warning. He could not risk increasing her suffering.

"Good-day, sir," repeated Rufus; and the visitor stepped down from the office-door in silence and out to his machine.

Carder turned back to Geraldine, who met his angry gaze with despairing eyes.

"What have I to hope for from you when you treat a stranger so inexcusably?" she said in a low, clear voice that had a sharp edge.





**"Tingling with the Increasing Desire to knock down
his Host and catch this Girl up in his Arms"**

"Let me run this," said Rufus with bravado. "You'll find out later what you'll get from me, and it will be nothin' to complain of when once you're Mrs. Carder. You can have that fat porpoise or any other woman come to see you, and when you're ridin' 'em around in the new car I'm goin' to get you, they'll be green with envy. You'll see. Let me run this."

His absorption in Geraldine had distracted Carder's attention from the fact that he was not hearing the departure of that most satirically named engine of misery, "The Silent Traveler."

He strode to a window and saw Ben Barry mounting his machine close to where Pete was mowing the grass.

He hurried to the door. "Come here, you damned coot!" he yelled. And Pete dropped the mower and ambled up to the office-door.

"What did that man want of you?" he asked furiously.

"Wanted to know the shortest road to Keefe," replied Pete in his usual sullen tone.

"You lie!" exclaimed Rufus. If Ben Barry had looked like a dusty Sir Galahad to Geraldine, he had looked dangerously attractive to Carder, who cursed the luck that had made him invite the girl to his office on this particular afternoon. "You lie!" he repeated, and stepping back to his desk he seized a whip which lay along one side of it.

Geraldine cried out, and springing forward grasped his arm. He paused at the first voluntary touch he had ever received from her.

"Don't you dare strike that boy!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

Carder looked down at the white horror in her face and in her shining eyes.

"I'm goin' to get the truth out of him," he said, his mouth twitching. "You go up to the house."

"I will not go up to the house! Put down that whip! If you strike Pete, I'll kill myself." She finished speaking, more slowly, and Rufus, looking down into her strangely changed look, became uneasy.

"I guess not," he said. "You go up to the house."

"I mean it," declared Geraldine in a low tone. "What have I to live for! My own father, the only one on earth I had to

love, has sold me to a man who has shown himself a ruffian. One thing you have no power over is my life, and what have I now to live for!"

Carder dropped the whip. There was no doubt of her sincerity.

"Now, Geraldine, calm down," he said, anxiety sounding through his bravado. "I'm sorry I had to give you that shock about Dick; but it was your own high-headed attitude that made it necessary. Calm down now. I won't touch Pete. What was it, boy," he went on, addressing the dwarf in his usual tone--"What did that man ask you?"

"The shortest way to Keefe," repeated the dwarf. His eyes were fixed dully on Geraldine, but his heart was thumping. She had said she would kill herself if his master struck him.

Rufus looked at him, unsatisfied.

"What did he give you?" he asked after a silence.

Pete put his hand in the pocket of his coarse blue shirt and drew out a half-dollar.

"Humph!" grunted Rufus. "You can go."

He turned back to Geraldine.

"Is one allowed to write letters from here?" she asked.

"Of course, of course," replied Rufus genially. "What a foolish question." His face had settled into its customary lines.

"Where do we take them? Out to the rural-delivery box? I should like to write to Miss Upton. She was very kind to me."

"No, don't mail anything there. It isn't safe. Right here is the place." He indicated a box on his desk. "Drop anything you want to have go right in here. I'll take care of it."

"Yes," thought Geraldine bitterly. He will take care of it.

Another motor-cycle now sped into the driveway and approached. This time it was the tenant Carder had expected, and Geraldine left the office and went back to the house. At the moment when she stepped out of the yellow building, Pete ceased mowing the grass. Looking back when she had traversed half the distance, she saw that he was following her, the mower clicking after him.

"Poor slaves," she thought heavily. "Poor slaves, he and I!"

CHAPTER VII

A MIDNIGHT MESSAGE

Sitting down at the supper table that evening was a severe ordeal. Geraldine had angered Carder, but she had also frightened him, and he was mild in manner and words and did not attempt to be either affectionate or jocose. Instead he dwelt on the good promise of the crops, and mentioned having extended the time of payment to a delinquent tenant.

Geraldine forced herself to eat something, and the host addressed most of his remarks to his mother, who was again compelled to sit at table and allow the young girl to do the serving.

"What do you think of throwin' out a wing or two or say a bay window to the house, Ma, while we're refurnishin'?" he asked pleasantly.

"Just as you say, Rufus," was her docile response. "I think, though, Miss Geraldine would like a bathroom better."

"Bathroom, eh?" returned Carder, regarding the girl's stiffly immobile face and downcast eyes. "It would mean a lot of expense, but what Geraldine says goes. I can stand the damage, I guess."

No word from Geraldine. Rufus was made thoroughly uneasy by her rigid pallor. He blamed himself for not having waited longer to produce his trump card and clinch his possession of her.

His own dreams were troubled that night and long in coming. Geraldine, as soon as the dishes were dried and put away, went up to her room and locked the door. She sat down to think, and strangely accompanying the paralyzing discovery of her father's downfall was the memory of the tall stranger with the dusty clothes and gallant bearing. She shut out the memory of his delightful speech, his speaking eyes, and the way he towered above Rufus and held himself in check for her sake.

"For my sake!" she repeated to herself bitterly. "They are all alike--men. He would be just the same as the other at close quarters. Some have no veneer like this boor, and some have the polish, but they are all the same underneath. Even Father, poor Father."

Geraldine felt hot, slow tears begin to scald her eyes. The last time she had cried she had been with Miss Upton and felt her hearty, motherly sympathy. That young man had come from her. Miss Upton was thinking of her. The tears came faster now under the memory of the kindness of her chance acquaintance on the day--it seemed months ago--that she had left the world and entered upon this living death.

Miss Upton's messenger would return to her and tell of his fruitless quest and describe Rufus Carder, and she knew how that kind heart would ache; but Mr. Barry would also tell her that her young friend had repulsed him and would discourage her from further effort. Geraldine knew that no letter from the outside would be allowed to reach her, nor would any be allowed to go out from her, until she had paid the ghastly price which her father's protection necessitated.

She did not know how long she sat on that hard chair in the ugly room that night. She only knew how valiantly she struggled to stifle the sobs that wrenched her slight body. Early in the evening she had heard a soft impact against her door, which she knew meant that the watchdog was in his place.

Her kerosene lamp was burning low, when again a slight sound against her door made her look that way apprehensively and wish that she had barricaded it as on the night before.

Something white caught her eye. It was paper being slowly pushed beneath the door and now an envelope was revealed. Geraldine started up and noiselessly crept toward it. Seizing it she carried it to the light. It was a letter addressed to herself:

Miss Geraldine Melody

And down in the left-hand corner were the words--"*Kindness of Mr. Barry.*" Across the face of the envelope was scrawled in another hand these words: "Courage. Walk in meadow. Wear white."

Geraldine stared at this with her swollen eyes, the aftermath of her wild weeping causing convulsive catches in her throat which she stifled automatically. Turning the envelope over she saw that it was sealed clumsily with red wax.

Running a hairpin through the flap she opened it and took out the letter with trembling hands. This is what she read:

DEAR MISS MELODY:

I can't help worrying about you, not knowing what you found when you got to the farm, and whether Mr. Carder and his mother turned out to be the kind you like to live with. I've wished a hundred times that I'd brought you home with me instead of letting you go, because, after all the hard experiences you went through, I wanted to be sure that you found care and protection where you was going. I'm poor and have only a small place, but I'd have found some way to take care of you.

I worried so much about it, and Mr. Carder, the little I saw of him that day at the hotel, acted so much as if he owned you, that I thought it would be just as well to hear what a lawyer would say; so I went to see Benjamin Barry. He's studying to be a lawyer and he's the young man who has consented to hunt up the Carder farm and take my letter to you. I know it ain't etiket to seal up a letter you send by hand, but I'm going to seal this with wax just so you'll know that Ben hasn't read it. After your experience with men it will be hard for you to trust any man, I'm pretty sure. So I just want to tell you that I've known Ben Barry from a baby and he's the cleanest, *finest* boy in the world. You can't always tell whether he's in fun or in earnest, because he's a great one to joke; but his folks are the finest that you could find anywhere. He's got good blood and he's been brought up with the greatest care and expense. If I had ten daughters I'd trust him with them all. He is the soul of honor about everything, so don't hesitate to tell him just how you're fixed. If you are happy and contented, that's all I want to know; but if you ain't I want to know that posthaste, for I shall want you to come right here to me at Keefe. Ben will tell you how to come and you can tell Mr. Carder that you have found a better position. Give him a week's notice; that's *honorable* and *long enough*. I shan't be easy in my mind till Ben gets back, and he's so good to go for me that I should love him for it all the rest of my life if I didn't already.

Now, good-bye, dear child, and be *perfectly frank* with Ben.

Your loving friend
MEHITABLE UPTON

In her utter despair and desolation this homely expression of affectionate solicitude went to Geraldine's heart like a message from heaven. She held the senseless paper to her breast, and her pulses beat fast as she read again those words scribbled across the face of the envelope.

They meant an understanding that she was not a free agent. They meant that the young knight had not given up. He could never know--kind Miss Upton must never know--what it was that compelled her, and why nothing that they might contrive could save her.

Good little Pete had risked brutal treatment to bring her this. Her heart welled with gratitude toward him. She felt that she could continue to protect him to a degree, for the infatuation of their master gave her power to that extent.

She was no longer pale. Her cheeks were flushed, her sobs ceased. There were hearts that cared for her. Some miracle might intervene to save her. The knight was a lawyer. The law was very wonderful. A sudden shudder passed over her. What it could have done to her father--still honored at his clubs as the prince of good fellows!

She reviewed her situation anew. It was established that she was a prisoner. Then in order to obey the message on the envelope she must follow the example of the more ambitious prisoners and become a trusty. Poor Geraldine, who had ceased to pray, began to feel that there might be a God after all; and when she was between the coarse, mended sheets of her bed she held Miss Upton's letter to her breast and thanked the unseen Power for a friend.

When she awoke, it was with the confused sense that some happiness was awaiting her. As her mind cleared, the mental atmosphere clouded.

Did not any hope which imagination held out mean the cruel revenge of her jailer? Could she betray her father as he had betrayed her?

She dressed and went downstairs to help Mrs. Carder. The precious letter was against her breast.

Pete was washing at the pump. She did not dare approach him to speak; but she soon found that as to that opportunities would be plentiful; for whenever she left the house she had a respectful shadow; never close, but always in the vicinity, and remembering yesterday and the lawn-mower she now realized that the watchdog who guarded her by night had orders to perform the same office by day.

Rufus felt some relief at seeing his guest appear this morning. His dreams would have been pleasanter had he been perfectly sure that she would not in her youthful horror and despair evade him in the one way possible. He bade her good-morning with an inoffensive commonplace. He had shot his bolt; now his policy must be soothing and unexacting until her fear of him had abated and custom had reconciled her to her new life. She was silent at breakfast,

speaking only when spoken to, and observant of his mother's needs; waiting upon him, too, when it was necessary.

"I must get one o' these reclinin'-chairs for you, Geraldine," he said, "and put it out under the elm tree. Your elm tree, we'll have to call it, because you've saved its life, you know."

"It is nice that there is one bit of shade here," she replied. "I suppose you hang a hammock there in summer for your mother."

Rufus grinned at his parent, who was vastly uncomfortable under the new regime of being waited upon by a golden-haired beauty.

"How about it, Ma?" he said. "Did you ever lie down in a hammock in your life? Got to do it now, you know. Bay windows and hammocks belong together. We got to be stylish now this little girl's goin' to boss us."

"It's a sightly day, Geraldine. How would you like to go for a drive and see somethin' of the country around here? It's mighty pretty. You seem stuck on trees. I'll show you a wood road that's a wonder."

Geraldine cringed, but controlled herself. Renewed contact with Rufus was inexorably crushing every reviving hope of the night.

"I think it would be a refreshing thing for your mother," she answered.

"No, no, indeed!" exclaimed the old woman, with an anxious look at her son. "I'm scared of autos. I don't want to go."

"Well, you're goin', Ma," declared Rufus, perceiving that Geraldine would as yet refuse to go alone with him, and considering that as ballast in the tonneau his mother's presence would be innocuous. "This little girl's got the reins. You and me are passengers. Don't forget that."

So later in the fresh, lovely spring day, Mrs. Carder, wrapped in an antiquated shawl and with a bonnet that had to be rescued from an unused shelf, was tucked into the back seat of the car.

Rufus held open the front door for Geraldine, and though she hesitated she decided not to anger him and stepped in to sit beside him. He did all the talking that was done, the girl replying in monosyllables and looking straight before her.

"I thought I'd stop to the village," he said, "and wire into town to have some help sent out. How would you word it?"

"I came as help," replied Geraldine. "I think we get along with the work pretty well. Pete is very handy for a boy. Your mother seems to dread servants. Don't send for anybody on my account."

The girl's voice was colorless, and she did not look at Rufus who regarded her uncertainly.

"All right," he said at last. "Perhaps it would be as well to wait till some day we're in town and you can talk to 'em. I'll wire for some eats anyway."

When they reached the village the car stopped before the telegraph-office. Carder left the car, and at the mere temporary relief of him Geraldine's heart lightened. A wild wish swept through her that she knew how to drive and could put on all the power and drive away, even kidnapping the shrunken, beshawled slave in the tonneau.

But the thought of the dusty knight intervened. If she were going to betray her father, let it be under his guidance whatever that might be. She could not do it, though. She could not!

A man loafing on the walk saw Mrs. Carder and, stopping, addressed her with some country greeting. Geraldine instantly turned to him.

"Where is Keefe?" she asked quickly.

"What?" he returned stupidly, with a curious gaze at her lovely, eager face.

"Keefe. The village of Keefe. Where is it?"

"Oh, that's yonder," said the man, pointing. "T'other side o' the mountain."

She turned to Mrs. Carder. "I have a friend who lives there, a very good friend whom I would like to see."

She made the explanation lest the old woman should tell her son of her eager question.

Rufus came out, nodded curtly to the man beside his machine, jumped in, and drove off.

Geraldine spoke. "I'm surprised this country seems so flat. I thought it would be hilly about here."

"Not so close to the sea," replied Carder. "There is what they call the mountain, though, over yonder." He jerked his head vaguely. "Pretty good-sized hill. Makes a water-shed that favors my farm."

Geraldine appeared to listen in silence to the monologue that followed concerning her companion's prowess as a self-made man and the cleverness with which he had seized every opportunity that came his way. Her mind was in a singular tumult. An incoming wave of thought--the reminder that she must be clever, too, and earn Carder's confidence in order that he might relax his espionage--was met by the counter-consideration that if she disappointed his desire he would blast her father's name. Just as happens in the meeting of the incoming and outgoing tide, her thoughts would be broken and fly up in a confusion as to what course she really wished to pursue. By the time she gained the privacy of her own room that night, she felt exhausted by the contradictions of her own beaten heart and she sat down again in the hard chair, too dulled to think.

At last she put her hand in her bosom and drew out her letter. She would feel the human touch of Miss Upton's kindness once again. Even if she gave "her body to be burned" and all life became a desert of ashes, one star would shine upon her sacrifice, the affectionate thought of this good woman who had made so much effort for her.

She closed her eyes to the exhortation scribbled on the envelope. Whatever plan the tall knight had in mind, it was certain that her escape was the end in view. Did she wish to escape? Did she? Could she pay the cost? What happiness would there be for her when all her life she would be hearing in fancy the amazement at her father's crime, the gossip and condemnation that would go the rounds of his associates.

She held the letter to her sick heart and gazing into space pictured the hateful future.

There was a slight stir outside her door. Something was again being pushed beneath it by slow degrees. Again it looked like an envelope, but this time the paper was not white. Geraldine regarded the small dusky square, scarcely discernible in the lamplight, and rising went toward it.

She picked up the much-soiled object by its extreme corner. It bore no address. She believed Pete must have written to her, and was greatly touched by the thought that the poor boy might wish to express to her his sympathy or his gratitude. It had been a brave soul who stood stolidly before Rufus Carder and refused to give up Miss Upton's letter. Moving cautiously and without a sound, she took the letter to the bureau, and holding down the bent and soiled envelope with the handle of her hairbrush, she again used the woman's universal utensil, opened the seal, and drew out a letter. Her heart suddenly leaped to her throat, for it was her father's handwriting that met her eye. Unfolding the sheet, and cold with dread, she began to read:

MY DEAR GERRIE:

If this letter ever reaches you I shall be dead. The heart attacks have been worse of late and it may be I shall go off suddenly. If I do, I want to get word to you which if I live it will not be necessary for you to read. I have not been a good father and I deserve nothing at your hands. The worst mistake of all those that I have made was marrying the woman who has shirked mothering you; and after I am gone I know you have nothing to expect from her. I am financially involved with Rufus Carder to an extent that gives me constant anxiety. He has happened to see you and taken a violent fancy to you, and this fact has made him withdraw the pressure that has made my nights miserable. He has been trying to persuade me to let you come out here. He knows that his cousin Juliet is not attached to you, and, since seeing me in one of my attacks of pain, he is constantly reminding me how precarious is my life and that if he had a daughter like you she should have every advantage money could buy. He is a rough specimen with a miserly reputation. I won't go into the occasions of weakness and need which have resulted in his power over me. Suffice it to say that he may bring cruel pressure to bear on you, and I want to warn you solemnly not to let any consideration of me or what people may say of me influence your actions. You are young and beautiful, and I pray that the rest of your life may have in it more happiness than your childhood has known. I have interceded with Carder for Pete several times, winning the poor fellow's devotion. He can't read writing and will not be tempted to open this. I'm sure he will hide it and manage to give it to you secretly if you come to this dreary place. My poor child! My selfishness all rises before me and the punishment is fearful. If there is a God, may He bless you and guard you, my innocent little girl.

Your unworthy

FATHER

Geraldine's hungry heart drank in the tender message. Again and again she kissed the letter while tears of grief ran down her cheeks. A tiny hope sprang in her breast. She read her father's words over and over, striving to glean from them a contradiction of the accusation that he had planned and carried out a deliberate crime.

Rufus Carder had promised her father to treat her as a daughter. How that assertion soothed the wound to her filial

affection, and warmed her heart with the assurance that her father had not sold her into the worst slavery!

She soon crept into bed, but not to sleep. Her father's exhortation seemed to give her permission to speculate on those words of the stranger knight:

"Courage. Walk in meadow. Wear white."



CHAPTER VIII

THE MEADOW

The knight was doubly dusty when, returning from his quest in the late twilight, he halted his noisy steed before Upton's Fancy Goods and Notions. He was confronted by a sign: "Closed. Taking account of stock."

The young man tried the door which resisted vigorous turns of its handle. Nothing daunted, he knocked peremptorily, then waited a space. Getting no response, he renewed his assaults with such force that at last the lock turned, the door opened, and an irate face with a one-sided slit of a mouth was projected at him threateningly.

"Can't you read, hey?" was the exasperated question, followed by an energetic effort to close the door which was foiled by the interposition of a masculine foot.

"Yes, Mrs. Whipp, I learned last year. I'm awfully sorry, but I have to come in." As he spoke the visitor opened the door in spite of the indignant resistance of Charlotte's whole body, and walked into the empty shop where kerosene lamps were already burning. "I have to see Miss Upton. Awfully sorry to disturb you like this," he added, smiling down at the angry, weazened face which gradually grew bewildered. "Why, it's Mr. Barry," she soliloquized aloud. "Just the same," she added, the sense of outrage holding over, "we'd ruther you'd 'a' come to-morrer."

Ben strode through the shop and out to the living-room, Mrs. Whipp following impotently, talking in a high, angry voice.

"T ain't my fault, Miss Upton. He would come in. Some folk'll do jest what they please, whatever breaks."

"Law, Ben Barry!" exclaimed Miss Mehitable with a start. "You've surely caught me in my regimentals!"

Miss Upton's regimentals consisted of ample and billowy apron effects over a short petticoat. Her hair was brushed straight off her round face and twisted in a knot as tight as Charlotte's own; and she wore large list slippers.

"Don't you care, Mehit. I look like a blackamoer myself. I had to see you"--the young fellow grasped his friend's hands, his eyes sparkling. "I'd kiss you if I was wearing a pint less dust. She's an angel, a star, a wonder!" he finished vehemently.

Miss Upton forgot her own appearance, her lips worked, and her eyes were eager. "Ain't she, ain't she?" she responded in excitement equal to his own. "Is she comin'? When?"

"Heaven knows. She's a prisoner, with that brute for a jailer."

Miss Upton, who had been standing by the late supper-table in the act of assisting Charlotte to carry off the wreck, fell into a chair, her mouth open.

"And you left her there!" she cried at last. "You didn't knock him down and carry her off!"

"Great Scott, how I wanted to!" replied Ben between his teeth, his fists clenched; "but she wouldn't let me. There's something there we've got to find out. She shook her head and signaled me to do nothing. He told her to bid me go away and she obeyed him. Oh, Miss Upton, how she looked! The most beautiful thing I ever saw in my life, but the most haunted, mournful, despairing face--"

"Ben, you're makin' me sick!" responded Miss Mehitable, her voice breaking. "Did you give the poor lamb my letter?"

"He wouldn't let me get near enough to do that; but I gave it to a stupid-looking dwarf who was mowing the grass near by. I'm not even sure he understood me. Perhaps he was deaf and dumb. I don't know; but it was the best I could do. She showed me so plainly that I was only making it harder for her by insisting on anything, there was nothing for me to do but to come away, boiling." Ben began striding up and down the living-room, his hands in his pockets, his restlessness causing Pearl to leap up, barely escaping his heavy shoe. Her arched back and her mistress's face both betokened an outraged bewilderment.

Mrs. Whipp's eyes and ears were stretched to the utmost. This autocratic young upstart had broken into the house and nearly stepped on her pet. All the same, if he hadn't done so, Miss Upton would still be keeping secrets from her. She had felt sure ever since Miss Mehitable's last trip to the city that there was something unusual in the air and that she was being defrauded of her rights in being shut out from participation therein. Had this young masculine hurricane not stormed in to-night, no telling how long she would have been kept in the dark; so she stopped, looked, and listened, with all her might.

"Well, what are you goin' to *do*, Ben?" asked Miss Upton, beseechingly. "You're not goin' to leave it so, are you?"

"I should say not. Carder is going to have me on his trail till that exquisite creature is out of his clutches. Never was there a sleuth with his heart in his business as mine will be. Oh!"--Ben, pausing not in the march which sent Pearl to the top of a bookcase, raised his gaze heavenward--"what eyes, Miss Upton! Those beautiful despairing eyes in that dreary, sordid den, cut off from the world!"

"Ben, you stop!" whimpered Miss Mehitable, using her handkerchief. "You're breakin' my heart. And to think how you scoffed at me on Sunday!"

"Wasting time like a fool!" ejaculated Ben. He suddenly stopped before the weeping Mehitable, nearly tripping over her roomy slippers. "Now, Miss Upton, this is what you are to do. I'm going to town the first thing in the morning and take steps to get on the trail of that sly fox. You go right up to see Mother and tell her all about Miss Melody." Again his gaze sought the ceiling. "Melody! What a perfect name for the most charming, graceful, exquisite human flower that ever bloomed!" Turning suddenly, the rapt speaker encountered Mrs. Whipp's twisted, acid, hungrily listening countenance. He emitted a burst of laughter and looked back at Miss Mehitable, who was wiping her eyes. "Tell Mother the whole story," he went on, "just as you did to me; and here's hoping my skepticism isn't inherited. And now, Mrs. Whipp"--addressing the faded listener who gave a surprised sniff--"I'll go home and wash my face. I know you'll approve of that. Good-night, Miss Upton; don't you cry. I'm going to put up a good fight and perhaps Geraldine--oh, what a lovely name!--perhaps she has the comfort of your letter by this time." Ben scowled with sudden introspection. "What hold has that rascal over her? That's what puzzles me. What hold *can* he have?"

Miss Mehitable blew her nose grievously. "Why, he's cousin to her rascal stepmother, you know. No tellin' what they cooked up between 'em."

Of course, after her emissary had departed Miss Upton had to face Mrs. Whipp and her injured sniffs and silent implications of maltreatment; but she sketched the story to her, eliciting the only question she dreaded.

"What did you say to the girl in your letter? Did you write her to come here?" Mrs. Whipp's manner was stony.

"Yes, I did," replied Miss Mehitable bravely.

"Then I s'pose I'd better be makin' other plans," said Charlotte, going to Pearl and picking her up as if preparing for instant departure.

Miss Upton's eyes shone with exasperation. "I wish you wouldn't drive me crazy, Charlotte Whipp. If you haven't any sympathy for a poor orphan in jail on a desolate farm, then I wouldn't own it, if I was you. You can see what chance she has o' comin' here. If the *law* has to settle it, she's likely to be toothless before she can make a move."

Mrs. Whipp was startled by the wrathful voice and manner of one usually so pacific.

"I didn't mean to make you mad, Miss Upton," she said with a meek change of manner; and there the matter dropped.

Now was a crucial time for Geraldine Melody. Her father's exhortation to her not to consider him and the doubt which his letter had raised as to his legal guilt, coupled with the memory of the vigorous young knight in knickerbockers, gave her the feeling that she might at least obey the latter's mysterious hint.

Rufus Carder was still in fear that he had pushed matters too fast, and the next morning, when his captive came downstairs to help get the breakfast, he contented himself with devouring her with his eyes. She felt that she must guard her every look lest he observe a vestige of her reviving hope and courage. She must return to the thought of becoming a "trusty." It would be difficult to steer a course between the docility that would encourage odious advances on the one hand, and on the other a too obvious repugnance which would put her jailer on his guard. Of course there were moments when the lines of her father's letter seemed to her to admit criminality, but at others the natural hopefulness of youth asserted itself, and she interpreted his words to indicate only his humiliation and disgraceful debts.

There was an innate loftiness, an ethereal quality, about the girl's personality which Carder always felt, in spite of himself, even at the very moments when he was obtruding his familiarities upon her. She was like a fine jewel which he had stolen, but which baffled his efforts to set it among his own possessions.

Already in the short time which had elapsed since bringing her to the farm, she had fallen away to an alarming delicacy of appearance. Her mental conflict and the blows she had received showed so plainly in her looks that Carder's whole mind became absorbed in the desire to build her up. She might slip away from him yet without any recourse to violence on her own part.

That morning, her father's letter in the same envelope with Miss Upton's and both treasures against her heart, she came downstairs and saw Pete washing at the pump. Rufus Carder was not in sight, and she moved swiftly toward the dwarf, who looked frightened at her approach.

"How can I thank you, Pete!" she exclaimed softly, and her smile transformed her pale face into something heavenly to look upon. Her eyes poured gratitude into his dull ones and his face crimsoned.

"Keep away," was all he said.

Carder appeared, as it seemed, up through the ground, and the dwarf rubbed his face and neck with a rough, grimy towel.

"Good-mornin'," said Rufus in his harsh voice.

Geraldine turned a lightless face toward him. "Good-morning," she said. "Is this well a spring?"

"Yes. Have you noticed how good the water is?"

"I was just coming for a drink when you startled me. I didn't see you."

"Allow me," said Rufus, picking up the half cocoanut shell which was chained to the wood. "Let's make a loving-cup of it. I'm thirsty, too."

He held the cup while Pete pumped the water over it, and finally shaking off the clinging drops offered it to the guest.

Geraldine made good her words. An inward fever of excitement was burning in her veins. The proximity of this man caused her always the same panic. Oh, what was meant by those written words of the sunny-eyed, upstanding young knight who had obeyed her so reluctantly? Now it was her turn to obey him, and she must see to it that no suspicion of Carder's should prevent her.

When she had drunk every drop, Rufus took a few sips--he had not much use for water--and they returned to the house together.

When Mrs. Carder and Pete had sent the hired men afield, the three sat down to breakfast as usual, and Rufus, moved by the guest's transparent appearance and downcast eyes, played unconsciously into her hands.

"This is great weather, Geraldine," he said. "You don't want to mope in the house. You want to spend a lot o' time outdoors. I'll take you out driving whenever you want to go."

Geraldine lifted her eyes to his--the eyes with the drooping, pensive corners deepened by dark lashes which Miss Upton had tried to describe.

"I think I'm not feeling very strong, Mr. Carder," she said listlessly. "Long drives tire me."

"Long walks will tire you more," he answered, instantly suspicious.

"Yes, I don't feel equal to them now," she answered, her grave glance dropping again to her plate.

He regarded her with a troubled frown.

"That hammock chair and a hammock will be out to-day," he said. "I'll put 'em under the elm you're so stuck on, and I guess we can scare up some books for you to read."

Geraldine's heart began to quicken and she put a guard upon her manner lest eagerness should crop out in spite of her.

"It is early for shade," she replied. "The sun is pleasant. Everything is so bare about here," she added wearily. "I wish I could find some flowers."

Then it was that Mrs. Carder, poor dumb automaton, volunteered a remark; and the most silver-tongued orator could not have better pleased Geraldine with eloquence.

"Used to be quite a lot grow down in the medder," she said.

Geraldine's heart beat like a little triphammer, but she did not look up from her plate, nor change her listless expression.

"I'd like to go and see if there are any," she said. "I love them. Where is the meadow?"

"Oh, it's just that swale to the right of the driveway," said Rufus. "It's low ground, and I s'pose the wild flowers do like it. I hope the cows haven't taken them all. You needn't be afraid o' the cows."

"No, I'm not," replied Geraldine. "Perhaps I'll go some time."

"Go to-day, go while the goin's good," urged Rufus. "Never can tell when the rain will keep you in. You shall have a flower garden, Geraldine. You tell me where you'd like it and I'll have the ground got ready right off."

"Thank you," she answered, "but I like the wild flowers best."

As soon as the dishes were dried, Geraldine went up to her room and delved into her little trunk. She brought out a white cotton dress. It had not been worn since the summer before, and though clean it was badly wrinkled. She took it down to the kitchen and ironed it.

"Goin' to put on a white dress?" asked Mrs. Carder. "Kind o' cool for that, ain't it?"

"I don't think so. I have very few dresses, and I get tired of wearing the same one."

Mrs. Carder sighed. "Rufus will buy you all the dresses you want if you'll only get strong. I can see he's dreadful worried because you look pale."

"Well, I am going to try to become sunburned to-day. I'm so glad you thought of the meadow, Mrs. Carder. Perhaps you like flowers, too."

The old woman sighed. "I used to. I've 'most forgot what they look like."

"I'll bring you some if there are any."

Geraldine's eyes held an excited light as she ironed away. After the eleven o'clock dinner she went up to her room to dress. Color came into her cheeks as she saw her reflection in the bit of mirror. What a strange thing she was doing. Supposing Miss Upton's paragon had already become absorbed in his own interests. How absurd she should feel wandering afield in the costume he had ordered, if he never came and she never heard from him again.

"Wear white."

What could it mean? What possible difference could the color of her gown make in any plan he might have concocted for her assistance? However, in the dearth of all hope, in her helplessness and poverty, and aching from the heart-wound Rufus Carder had given her, why should she not obey?

The color receded from her face, and again delving into her trunk she brought forth an old, white, embroidered crepe shawl with deep fringe which had belonged to her mother. This she wrapped about her and started downstairs. She feared that Carder would accompany her in her ramble. She could hear his rough voice speaking to some workmen in front of the house, and she moved noiselessly out to the kitchen.

Mrs. Carder looked up from the bread she was moulding and started, staring over her spectacles at the girl.

"You look like a bride," she said.

"I'll bring you some flowers," replied Geraldine, hastening out of the kitchen-door down the incline toward the yellow office.

"Hello, there," called the voice she loathed, and Carder came striding after her. She stood still and faced him. The long lines and deep, clinging fringe of the creamy white shawl draped her in statuesque folds. Carder gasped in admiration.

"You look perfectly beautiful!" he exclaimed.

The young girl reminded herself that she was working to become a trusty.

"What's the idea," he went on, "of makin' such a toilet for the benefit of the cows?" At the same time, the wish being father to the thought, the glorious suspicion assailed him that Geraldine was perhaps not unwilling to show him her beauty in a new light. It stood to reason that she must possess a normal girlish vanity.

She forced a faint smile. "It's just my mother's old shawl," she replied.

"Want me to help you find your flowers?" he asked.

"If you wish to," she answered, "but it isn't discourteous to like to be alone sometimes, is it, Mr. Carder? You were saying at dinner that I looked tired. I really don't feel very well. I thought I would like to roam about alone a while in the sunshine."

Her gentle humility brought forth a loud: "Oh, of course, of course, that's all right. Suit yourself and you'll suit me. Just

find some roses for your own cheeks while you're about it, that's all I ask."

"I'll try," she answered, and walked on. Carder accompanied her as far as his office, where he paused.

"Good-bye, bless your little sweet heart," he said, low and ardently, in the tone that always seemed to make the girl's very soul turn over.

"Good-bye," she answered, without meeting the hunger of his oblique gaze; and crossing the driveway she forced herself to move slowly down the grassy incline that led to the meadow where a number of cows were grazing.

Carder watched longingly her graceful, white figure crowned with gold. She was safe enough in the meadow. Even if she desired to go out of bounds, she would not invade any public way, hatless, and in clinging white crepe. The cows were excellent chaperones. Nevertheless--he snapped his fingers and Pete came out from behind the office.

Carder did not speak, but pointed after the white figure, and Pete, again dragging the mower, ambled across the driveway and followed on down the slope.

Geraldine heard the clicking and glanced around, sure of what she should see. She smiled a little and shook her head as she walked on.

"Poor little Pete. Good little Pete," she murmured. "I owe him every moment of comfort I've known in this place."

When she considered that she had gone far enough to be free from observation, she turned to let him catch up with her; but when she paused he did likewise and waited immovable.

"I want to talk to you, Pete. I'm so glad of the chance. I'm so thankful to you," she called softly.

The dwarf drank in the delicate radiance of her face with adoring eyes.

"Go on," he replied. "He is watching. He is always watching. You look like an angel, but the devil is at the window. Go on."

She turned back obediently and continued down the slope. When she reached the soft, spongy green of the meadow, the cows regarded her wonderingly. Pete began mowing the long grass on the edge, working so slowly that the sound did not mar the hush of the place; and sometimes he sank down at ease and pulled apart a jointed stem, his eyes feasting on his charge.

The cows had scomed certain blooms which grew lavishly and which Geraldine waited to gather until it should be time to return. Near a large clump of hazel-bushes she found a low rock, and she stretched out there in the sunshine and quiet, and tried to think.

There had been a little warm spot in her heart ever since that hour when she read Miss Upton's letter. She was no longer utterly friendless. If some miracle should give her back her freedom, this good woman would help her to find independence. She longed to see that village of Keefe. She wished never again to see a city. Did Benjamin Barry live in Keefe? Geraldine summoned his image only too easily. Despite Miss Upton's recommendation she did not wish to know him, or to trust him; but think about him she must since she was dressed to his order and in the spot of his selection. How absurd it all was! What dream could he have been indulging when he wrote those words?

The girl could not keep her eyes from the driveway nor banish the pulsing hope that she should see a motor-cycle again speeding up the road. She even rose from her reclining posture lest she should not be sufficiently conspicuous in the field; but the hours passed and nothing occurred beyond the cows' occasional cessation from browsing to regard her when she moved, and the occasional arising of Pete from the ground to push his mower idly along the turf.

The flat landscape, the broad sky, everything was laid bare to the windows of the yellow office. She felt certain that should the dusty knight reappear, he would be recognized from afar, and that Rufus Carder would circumvent any plan he might have. He would stop at nothing, that she knew. She wondered if the law would excuse a man for murdering an intruder who had once been warned off his premises. She did not doubt that Carder would be as ready with the shotgun she had noticed in his office as he was with the cruel whip. She covered her face with her hands as she recalled the sunny-eyed knight and shuddered at the thought of another meeting between the two. It had been plain that the visitor's youth, strength, and good looks had thrown Carder into a panic. He would stop at nothing. Nothing.

A lanky youth with trousers tucked in his boots at last appeared, slouching down toward the meadow to get the cows.

Geraldine came out of her apprehensive mental pictures with a sigh, and rose. She gathered her flowers, and moved slowly back toward the house.

She must appear to have enjoyed her outing, else it would not seem consistent for her to wish to come again to-morrow; and she must, she must come again! Her poor contradictory little heart found itself clinging to the one vague, absurd hope, despite its fears.



CHAPTER IX

THE BIRD OF PREY

Not until another sunny day had passed uneventfully did Geraldine realize how much hope she was hanging upon the knight of the motor-cycle. Despite his youth, his manner and voice had been those of one accustomed to exercising authority. He certainly had had something definite in mind when he wrote that message to her. She knew so well Pete's stupid demeanor, that, as she roamed in the meadow that second day, she meditated on the probability that the visitor had despaired of her receiving the message, and had concluded to abandon his idea, whatever it might have been.

It was at least a relief from odious pressure to be out in the field alone. The soft-eyed cows, an occasional bird flying overhead, and the intermittent clicking of Pete's lawn-mower as he kept his respectful distance were all peaceful. There was not a tree for a bird to light upon. Even birds fled from the Carder farm. The great elm could have sheltered many, but the feathered creatures seemed not to trust it. Perhaps a reason lay in the fact that numbers of cats lived under the barn and outhouses. Nearly always one might be seen crouching and crawling along the ground looking cautiously to the right and left. None was ever kept for a pet or allowed in the house or fed. They lived on rats, mice, birds, and the field mice, and were practically wild animals. In their frightened, suspicious actions at sight of a human being, Geraldine recognized a reflection of her own mental attitude; and she pitied the poor things even while they excited her repugnance.

Spring and no birds, she thought sadly, gathering her few wild flowers when the cows had gone home that second afternoon. She strained her eyes down the driveway, Blankness. Blankness everywhere. At the house, misery.

The old fairy tales came to her mind. Tales where the captive princess pines and hopes alternately.

"On the second day all happened as before," she murmured in quotation. It was always on the third day that something really came to pass, she remembered, and she scanned the sky for threatening clouds. Ah, if it should rain to-morrow and the leaden hours should drag by in that odious house! After having indulged a ray of hope, such a prospect seemed unbearable.

In her role of trusty she had constrained herself to civility. She had taken Mrs. Carder the flowers last night, and Rufus had put some tiny blooms in his buttonhole and caressed them at supper-time with significant glances at her.

When she awoke on the following day her first move was to the window with an anxious look at the sky. As soon as she was satisfied that it was not threatening, a reaction set in to her thought. She always hastened to dress in the morning, for her compassion for Mrs. Carder made her hurry to her assistance. Pete's eyes in this few days had taken on a seeing look and he worked with energy to follow every direction of his golden-haired goddess. In the kitchen he did not avoid her eyes, and the smiles he received from her were the only sunbeams that had ever come into his life.

She was in many minds that morning about going again to the meadow. It seemed so absurd, so humiliating to costume herself as for private theatricals, and to go repeatedly to keep a tryst which the other party, and that a man, had forgotten.

Would the princess in the fairy tale do so? she wondered; but then if she had not persisted the story could never have been written.

"Ain't you sick o' that meadow and the cows?" asked Rufus at the dinner-table. "Hadn't you better go drivin' to-day? I've got an errand to the village and just as lieve do it myself as send one o' the men if you'll go."

Geraldine, the two braids of her hair brought up around her head in a golden wreath that rested on fluffy waves, was looking more than usually appealing, he thought, and he congratulated himself on the restraint with which he was allowing her mind to work on the proposition he had made to her. She was evidently becoming more normal, finding herself as it were. Those flashes of red and white that had passed across her face in her intensity of feeling had ceased. Her voice was steady and civil.

"The meadow seems to agree with me," she answered. "Why should my not going with you prevent you from doing your errand at the village?"

Why, indeed? thought Carder, regarding her. She had no money, she was in a part of the world strange to her. If she again strolled forth arrayed in the white costume in which her girlish vanity seemed to revel, how could she do anything unsafe during the short time of his absence, especially with Pete to guard her? The dwarf had had it made perfectly clear to him that his life depended on Geraldine's presence.

However, it was Carder's policy never to take a very small chance of a very big misfortune. 'Safe bind, safe find,' was a favorite saying of his.

"As soon as you feel thoroughly rested, we must take a trip to town," he said, and he advanced a bony, ill-kept hand toward hers as if he would seize it. "I think Ma works too hard," he added diplomatically as Geraldine slid her hand off the table. "We must go and see if we can get the right kind of help. You'll know how to pick it out. Then what do you say to havin' an architect come out and look over the old shack here and see what he thinks he can do with it, regardless of expense?"

Geraldine felt that unnerving nausea again steal around her heart.

"It isn't too late for us to take a little flyer in to-day," he added eagerly, and the suggestion made the meadow and its cows look like a glimpse of paradise. Supposing *he* should come and she be gone! This was the great third day. "I--really--I"--stammered Geraldine--"I feel a little shaky yet."

"Oh, all right," Rufus laughed leniently. "Be it ever so humble and all that you know. *Home* for you, eh, Gerrie?"

She longed to rise and strike his ugly smile at the sound of her father's pet name, and she trembled from head to foot. "A trusty," she said to herself commandingly. "A trusty."

She did not hear another word that was said during dinner, and when she was free she flew up to her room and put on the poor little grass-stained dress and the rich crepe of her mother's heirloom.

"O God, send him!" she prayed, as her fingers worked on the fastenings. "O God, let him come"--then with tardy, desperate recollection, she added--"and O God, save his life!"

It seemed difficult for Rufus Carder to separate himself from her that day. When she emerged from the house, she found him watching for her and she reminded herself again that if she angered him he might prevent her from doing as she pleased. It seemed to her now so intensely vital that she should get to the meadow that she felt panic lest something happen to prevent it.

"You don't want to go down there again to-day," said Rufus coaxingly. "Let's take a walk up to the pond."

"Is there a pond?" asked Geraldine quickly. She had often wondered if there were any body of water about the place deep enough for a girl to be covered in it if she lay face down.

"Oh, yes, I have a cranberry bog with a dam. Makes a pretty decent pond part o' the year. How would you like it if I got you a canoe, Gerrie? Say! would you like that?" The interest that had come into the girl's face at mention of the pond encouraged him. "Come on, let's go. You've had enough o' the cows."

He grasped her arm and she set her teeth not to pull away.

"Would you mind waiting?" She put the question gently and even gave him a little smile, the first he had ever seen on her face. The exquisiteness of it, her pearly teeth, the Cupid's bow of her lips flushed him from head to foot. "I seem to be getting attached to that meadow," she added. "You'd better have one more buttonhole bouquet, don't you think?"

The delight of it rushed to Carder's head. He, too, had to put a strong restraint upon himself to let well enough alone. All was going so nicely. He must not make a false move.

"Well," he responded with a sort of gasping sigh, the blood in his face, "as I've always said, suit yourself and you'll suit me. Wind me right around your finger as you always have done and always will do."

He walked completely down the incline with her to-day.

She wondered if he had any sense of humor when she heard the clicking of Pete's lawn-mower behind them and knew that he was following. Carder did not seem to notice it; but he said: "I've a great mind to stay down here with you to-day and find out what the charm is."

"I suppose it is just peace," she answered, and she was so frightened lest he carry out this threat that she felt herself grow pale to the lips. "I've passed through a great deal of excitement," she added unsteadily. "The silence seems healing to me."

"Oh, well, little one," he replied good-humoredly, "if it's doing you good, that's the main thing. You have had it pretty hard, I know that. I'm goin' to make it up to you, Gerrie, I'm goin' to make it up to you. Don't you be afraid. You're safe to be the most envied girl in this county. You'll make some splash, let me tell you, when my plans are carried out." He patted her cringing shoulder, and with one more longing look turned and left her.

Her knees were still trembling and she sank down on her rock and watched Carder's round shoulders and ill-fitting clothes as he ascended the incline to the office.

Pete was using a sickle on the stubbly grass, too stiff and interspersed with stones for the mower.

The cows' big soft eyes were regarding Geraldine, as they always did for a time after her arrival.

She turned her tired, listless look back to them and wondered what they did here for comfort in the heat of summer. There was no shade, and no creek to walk into.

When Rufus Carder arrived at his office he found the telephone ringing. The message he received necessitated sending some word to a man out in the field.

He went to the window and looked down at the white spot which was Geraldine. He saw her rise and walk about. Perhaps she was picking flowers. The distance was too great for him to be certain.

"I shall be right here," he muttered. Then he went to the corner of the office and picked up a megaphone. Going outside the door he called to Pete. "Come up here!" he shouted. The boy dropped his sickle and began to amble up the hill as fast as his bow-legs would permit.

Geraldine heard the shout, and turning saw the dwarf obeying the summons.

"Nobody but you to guard me now," she said to the prettiest of the cows with whom she had made friends.

She watched Pete reach the summit of the incline and vanish into the yellow office.

Presently he came out again and started off in the direction of the fields.

"I think there is some one beside you to guard me now," went on Geraldine to the cow, who gave her an undivided attention mindful of the bunches of grass which the girl had often gathered for her. "I think the ogre has come out to the edge of his cave and is scarcely winking as he watches us down here. Oh, Bossy, I'm the most miserable girl in the whole world." Her breath caught in her throat, and winking back despairing tears she stooped to gather the expected thick handful of grass when a humming sound came faintly across the stillness of the field. She paused with listless curiosity and listened. The buzzing seemed suddenly to fill all the air. It increased, and her upturned face beheld an approaching aeroplane. Before she had time to connect its presence with herself it began diving toward the earth. On and on it came. It skimmed the ground, it ran along the meadow, the cows stampeded. She clasped her hands, and with dilated eyes saw the aviator jump out, pull something out of the cockpit and run toward her. She ran toward him. It was--it couldn't be--it was--he pushed back his helmet--it was her knight! Her excited eyes met his. "I've come for you," he called gayly, and her face glorified with amazed joy.

"He'll kill you!" she gasped in sudden terror. "Hurry!"

Ben was already taking off the crepe shawl and putting her arms into the sleeves of a leather coat. A shout came from the top of the hill. Rufus Carder appeared, yelling and running. His gun was in his hand. The men from the fields, who had heard and seen the aeroplane, and Pete, who had not yet had time to reach them, all came running in excitement to see the great bird which had alighted in such an unlikely spot.

"He'll kill you!" gasped Geraldine again. A shot rang out on the air.

Ben laughed as he pushed a helmet down over her head.

"It can't be done," he cried, as excited as she. He threw the shawl into the cockpit, lifted the girl in after it, buckled the safety belt across her, jumped in himself, and the great bird began to flit along the ground and quickly to rise.

Another wild shot rang out, and frightful oaths. Geraldine heard the former, though the latter were inaudible, and she became tense from her head to the little feet which pushed against the foot-board as if to hasten their flight. She clutched the side of the veering plane. With every rod they gained her relief grew. Ben, looking into her face for signs of fear, received a smile which made even his enviable life better worth living than ever before. No exultant conqueror ever experienced greater thrills. Up, up, up, they flew out of reach of bullets and all the sordidness of earth; and when the meadow became a blur Geraldine felt like a disembodied spirit, so great was her exaltation. Not a vestige of fear assailed the heart which had so recently wondered if the cranberry pond was deep enough to still its misery. She rejoiced to be near the low-lying, fleecy clouds which a little while ago had aroused her apprehensions for the morrow. Let come what would, she was safe from Rufus Carder and she was free. Her sentiment for her leather-coated deliverer was little short of adoration. Gratitude seemed too poor a term. He had taken her from hell, and it seemed to her as they went up, up, up, they must be nearing heaven. At last he began flying in a direct line.

Below was her former jailer, foaming at the mouth, and Pete, poor Pete, lying on the ground rolling in an agony of loss. "She's gone, she's gone," he moaned and sobbed, over and over; and even Carder saw that if there had been any plot afoot the dwarf had not been in it. So long as the plane was in sight, all the farm-workers stared open-mouthed. None of them loved the master, but none dared comment on his fury now or ask a question. His gun was in his hand and his eyes were bloodshot. His open mouth worked. They had all seen the beautiful girl who had now been snatched away so amazingly, and there was plenty to talk about and wonder about for months to come on the Carder farm. Rufus Carder, when the swift scout plane had become a speck, tore at his collar. The veins stood out in his neck and his forehead. He felt the curious gaze of his helpers and in impotent fury he turned and walked up to the house. His mother, still in the kitchen, saw him come in and started back with a cry. His collar and shirt flying open, his face crimson and distorted, his scowl, and his gun, terrified her almost to fainting. She sank into a chair. Her lips moved, but she could not make a sound.

"What did the girl tell you!" cried her son.

She clutched her breast, her lips moved, but no sound emerged.

Rufus saw that she was too frightened to speak.

"Don't be scared," he said roughly. "All you've got to do is to tell me the truth." He made a mighty effort to control his rasping voice. "Did you know Geraldine was goin' away?"

Mrs. Carder shook her head speechlessly.

"Sit up, Ma. Talk if you've got any sense. What did the girl tell you? Why was she dressin' up every day?"

"I--I thought"--stammered Mrs. Carder, "I thought she wanted to look pretty. I--I thought you were goin' to marry her. She never told me anything. Gone away?" Some curiosity struggled through the old woman's paralyzing fear. "How could she go away? She hadn't any hat on." She spoke tremulously.

"Come up to her room," said Rufus sternly.

He flung his gun into a corner and strode toward the stairs, the shaky old woman following him.

Up in Geraldine's chamber he stood still for a moment scowling and viewing its neatness, then strode to the closet and opened the door. Her shabby suit was hanging there, and the pale-green challie gown she had worn in his office. He grasped its soft folds in crushing fingers. The gingham dress in which she worked every morning was also hanging on its hook. Her hat was on the shelf. That was all. Her few toilet articles were neatly arranged on the shabby old bureau. He opened its drawers and tossed their meager contents ruthlessly, searching for some letter or scrap of paper to throw light on her exit. He went to the trunk which contained some sheets of music and a few books. These he scattered about searching, searching between their leaves.

His mother, trembling before him, spoke tremulously. "Did she have any money to go away?"

"No," he growled.

"You can see she didn't expect to go, Rufus," said the old woman timidly. "All her things are here. Why--why don't you take the car and--and go after her?"

"Because she went up in the air, that's why; and I'll kill him!" He shook his fists in impotent rage. "He'll find he didn't get away with it as neat as he thought."

He stormed out of the room, and lucky it was for Pete that that threshold could tell no tales.

The old woman stared after him in a new terror. Her son, the most important man in the county, had lost his mind, and all for the sake of that girl who had managed in some mysterious way to give him the slip. "Gone up in the air!" Poor Rufus. He had gone mad. She managed that night to get an interview in the woodshed with the grief-stricken Pete, and in spite of his incoherence and renewed sobs she learned what had happened. The dwarf believed that his goddess had been kidnapped. It never occurred to his dull brain to connect her disappearance with the letters he had conveyed to her.

The next day Carder was amazed to have the boy seek him. Never before had Pete ventured to volunteer a word to him. He was sitting in his den gnawing his nails and revolving in his mind some scheme for Geraldine's recovery when the dwarf appeared at the door. His shock of hair stood up as usual and his eyes were swollen.

"Can't we--can't we--look for her, master?" he asked beseechingly. "They may hurt her--the man that stole her. Can't you--find him, master?"

Carder's scowl bent upon the humble suppliant.

"I ought to have shot him the first time he came," he said savagely.

"Did the--the areoplane ever come before?" asked Pete, amazed, his heart's desire to see again and save his goddess supplying him with courage to speak. His dull eyes opened as wide as their puffiness would permit.

"No," snarled Carder; "but it was that damned fool on the motor-cycle without a doubt. I don't see how he got at her. No letter ever came."

The speaker went back to gnawing his nails in bitter meditation and forgot the mourner at his door whose slow wits began to remember--remember; and who, as he remembered, began to shake in his poor broken shoes and feel nailed to the ground. At last he ambled away, thankful that his master did not recur to the questioning of that other day. His dull wits received a novel sharpening.

Carder's few words had transformed the situation. His goddess had not been stolen. He recalled that first night when he had forced her back into her room to save his own life, unmoved by her pleading. Her sweetness had given him courage to risk concealing the tall visitor's letter and conveying it to her.

If Carder should suddenly revert to that day and cross-question him, he must have his denials ready. He must show no fear.

He fell now on the ground and rested his head on his long arms to think. It was so hard for him to think, and dry sobs kept choking him; but the wonderful fact slowly possessed him that he had served her. Pete, the stupid dwarf, butt of rough jokes and ridicule, had saved the bright being he adored. He understood now her fervent efforts to convey thanks to him. He felt dimly that the angel whose kindness had brightened his life for those few days had gone back to the skies she had left. The man of the motor-cycle had looked stern as he slipped the letter into his ragged blouse and said the few low words that imposed secrecy and the importance of the message.

"I'm sure you love her," the man had said. "I'm sure you want to help her."

The words had contained magic that worked; and Pete had helped her, and outwitted the man with the whip who owned him body and soul.

Henceforth the dwarf had a wonderful secret, a secret that warmed his heart with divine fire.

Remembering how his goddess had wanted to go out into the night alone to escape, he realized that she must have been as unhappy as himself. When he prevented her from departing, she had not hated him. Compassion was still in her eyes and voice when she spoke to him that next morning.

Now he had helped her. An angel had fallen into that smoky kitchen and toiled with her white hands. He had helped her back to heaven. Pete, the dwarf had done it: Pete.

He rolled over on his back and looked up at the sky. Clouds were gathering, but she had gone into the blue. She was there now, and it was through him. Perhaps she was looking at him at this moment. He knew how her face would glow. He knew how her voice would sound and her eyes would smile.

"Thank you, Pete. Thank you, good little Pete."

He gazed up at the scudding clouds and his troubled soul grew quiet.

CHAPTER X

THE PALACE

Ben, taking an occasional look around at his passenger, flew directly on toward a landing-field. Their destination had hardly yet interested Geraldine. The whole experience, in spite of the noise of the motor, seemed as yet unreal to her. In reaction from the frightful nightmare of the last few days, her whole being responded to the flight through the bright spring air, and had Ben seen fit to do a figure eight she would have accepted it as part of the reckless joyousness of the present dream.

As the plane began to descend and objects below came into view, she wondered for the first time where the great bird was coming to earth. Perhaps Miss Upton's ample and blessed figure would be waiting to greet her. Nothing, nothing was too good to be true.

The plane touched earth and flitted along to a standstill. They were in a field, just now deserted, and her escort, pushing back his helmet, smiled upon her radiantly.

"First time you've ever flown?" he asked.

"Yes, except in dreams," she answered. "This seems only one more."

"Were they happy dreams?"

"None so happy as this."

"You weren't afraid, then? You're a good sport."

"I think I shall never be afraid again. I've sounded the depths of fear in the last week."

The two sat looking into one another's eyes and the appeal in those long-lashed orbs of Geraldine continued the havoc that they had begun. Her lips were very grave as she recalled the precipice from which she had been snatched.

"I saw that he frightened you terribly that day he gave me such a warm welcome."

"He was going to marry me," explained Geraldine simply.

"How could he--the old ogre?"

"I was to consent in order to save my father's name. I'm going to tell you about it because you're a lawyer, aren't you, and the finest man in the world? I have it here."

Geraldine loosened her coat and felt inside her white blouse for Miss Upton's letter.

Ben laughed and blushed to his ears. "I haven't attained the former yet. The latter, of course, I can't deny."

Geraldine produced the letter, inside of which was folded that from her father.

"Miss Upton wrote me about you and--"

"You're not going to show it to me," interrupted Ben hastily. "I'm afraid the dear woman spread it on too thick for the victim to view."

"You see, she knew how I hate men," explained Geraldine, "and she knew how friendless I was and she wanted me to trust you."

"And do you?" asked Ben with ardor.

"Yes, perfectly. I have to, you know." She tucked back the rejected letter in its hiding-place.

"And you're not going to hate me?"

"I should think not," returned the girl with the same simple gravity; "not when you've done me the greatest kindness of my whole life!"

"I'm so glad I haven't named the plane yet," said Ben impulsively. "You shall name it."

"There's no name good enough," she replied--"unless--unless we name it for that carrier pigeon that was such a hero in the War. We might name it *Cher Ami*."

"Good," declared Ben. "It is surely a homing bird."

"And such a *cher ami* to me," added Geraldine fervently.

Ben wondered if this marvelous girl never smiled.

"You were going to tell me how the ogre was able to force you to marry him," he said.

"Yes; I don't like to tell you. It is very sad, and he crushed me with it." The girl's lips trembled for a silent moment, and Cupid alone knows how Ben longed to kiss them, close to him as they were.

"He said that my father forged two checks, and that he only refrained from prosecuting him because of me. He said my father had promised that he should have me."

Ben scowled, and the dark eyes fixed upon him brightened with sudden eagerness. "But that was a lie--about father giving me to him. I have Daddy's letter here." She felt again inside her blouse. "You will have to know everything--how my poor father was his own worst enemy and came to rely for money on that impossible man."

She took out the letter and gave it to Ben and he read it in silence.

"Probably it was a lie also about the checks," he said when he had finished.

"No, oh, no," she replied earnestly. "He showed me those. He said that my father was held in affectionate remembrance at his clubs and among his friends, and that he could ruin all that and hold him up to contempt as a criminal, unless--unless I married him." Geraldine's bosom heaved convulsively. "I have been wild with joy ever since you came," she declared. "If I ever go to heaven I can't be happier than I was flying up from that meadow where there seemed a curse even on the poor little wild flowers but you can see how it is going to keep coming over me in waves that perhaps I have done wrong. You see, Daddy tells me not to consider him; but should I not guard his name in spite of that? That is the question that will keep coming up to me. Nevertheless"--she made a gesture of despair--"if I went through with it--if I married Mr. Carder, I'm sure I should lose all control and kill myself. I'm sure of it."

Here Ben gave rein to the dastardly instinct which occasionally causes a poor mortal to fling all conscience to the winds when he sees an unexpected opportunity to attain a longed-for prize.

"For you to become his wife cannot be right," declared Ben, endeavoring to speak with mature and legal poise; "but as you say, that heartrending doubt of your duty may attack you at times. How would it be to put it beyond your power to yield to his wishes by marrying some one else--me, for instance?"

Geraldine regarded the speaker with grief and reproach. "Can you joke about my trouble?" She turned away and he suspected hurt tears.

"Miss Melody--Geraldine." What Ben had fondly hoped was the judicial manner disappeared in a whirlwind of words. "I'm in earnest! I've thought of nothing but you since the day I saw you with that cut-throat. It's my highest desire to guard you, to make you happy. Give me the right, and every day of my life will prove it. Of course, I saw that Carder had some hold over you. I've spent all my time ever since that day trying to ferret out facts that could give me some hold on him. I haven't found them. The fox has always left himself a loophole. Marry me to-day: now: before we go home. I'm well known in the town yonder. I can arrange it. Marry me, and whatever comes you will be safe from him. Geraldine!"

The girl's gaze was fixed on the flushed face and glowing eyes beside her and she leaned as far away from him as possible.

"You really mean it?" she said when he paused.

"As I never meant anything before in my life."

"Have you a mother?"

"The best on earth."

"And yet you would do this to her, just because I have nice eyes."

It was a frigid bucket of water, but Ben stood up under it.

"Yes, I could give her nothing better."

"You don't even know me," said Geraldine. "How strange men are."

"Yes, those you hate; but how about me? You said you liked me."

At this the girl did smile, and the effect was so wonderful that it knocked what little sense Ben Barry had left into oblivion.

"Love at first sight is a fact," he declared. "No one believes it till he's hit, but then there's no questioning. You looked that day as if you would have liked to speak to me--yes"--boldly--"as if to escape Carder you would have mounted that motor-cycle with me and we should have done that Tennyson act, you know--'beyond the earth's remotest rim the happy princess followed him'--or something like that. I don't know it exactly but I'm going to learn it from start to finish and read law afterward. I've dreamed of you all night and worked for you all day ever since and yet I haven't accomplished anything!"

"Haven't!" exclaimed Geraldine. "You've done the most wonderful thing in the world."

"Oh, well, *Cher Ami* did that. Tell me you'll let me take care of you always, and knock Carder's few remaining teeth down his throat if he ever comes in sight. Tell me you do--you like me a little."

Geraldine's entrancing smile was still lighting her pensive eyes.

"Oh, no, I don't like you. How can I? People don't like utter strangers. One feels worship, adoration for a creature that drops from the skies, and lifts a wretched helpless girl out of torturing captivity into the free sweet air of heaven."

"Well, that'll do," returned Ben, nodding. "Adoration and worship will do to begin with. Let us go over to the village and be married--*my beautiful darling*."

Geraldine colored vividly under this escape of her companion's ungovernable steam, but she did not change her expression.

"I certainly shall not do that," she answered quietly.

Ben relaxed his tense, appealing posture.

"Well, then," he said, drawing a long breath, "if you positively decline the trap--oh, it was a trap all right--if you are determined to postpone the wedding, I'll tell you that I really don't believe your father forged those checks."

"Oh, Mr. Barry--" the girl leaned toward him.

"Ben, or I won't go on."

"Ben, then. It is no sort of a name compared to the one I have been giving you. I've been calling you Sir Galahad."

Ben smiled at her blissfully. "Nice," he said. "I don't believe Miss Upton went beyond that."

"Oh, please go on, Mr. Barry--Ben--Sir Galahad."

"Why couldn't our cheerful friend have shown you any checks he drew to your father's name and claim that they were forged?"

Geraldine's eyes shone. "I never thought of that."

"Of course I cannot be sure of it. I would far rather get something definite on the old scamp."

Geraldine shuddered. "He is so cruel. He is so rough to that poor little fellow Pete. Think what I owe that boy! He managed to get your message to me even when threatened with his master's whip. Mr. Carder saw you speaking to him and questioned him."

"Oh, you mean that nut who took my letter?"

"The hero who took your letter. He had to lie outside my door every night to keep me from escaping, and he slipped your message under it. Where should I be now but for him? Poor child, he is as friendless as I am"--Geraldine interrupted herself with a grateful look at her companion--"as I was, I mean. He had to follow me and guard me wherever I went, always keeping at a distance, because he mustn't speak to me and the ogre was always watching. How I thank Heaven," added Geraldine fervently, "that Mr. Carder himself had called Pete off duty for the first time before the--the archangel swooped down from the sky."

"I'm getting on," said Ben. "If you keep on promoting me, I'll arrive first thing you know."

"I should honestly be wretched if I had to think Mr. Carder was blaming Pete for my escape. The boy did tell me his life depended on my safety."

"Well, I don't understand," said Ben with a puzzled frown. "Who lies in front of Pete's door? Why does he stay there? Why doesn't he light out some time between two days?"

"Oh, Mr. Carder has told him no one would employ him, that Pete would starve but for him. Did you notice how ragged and neglected he looked?"

"He looked like a nut. I was afraid he was so stupid that you would never receive the message." Ben looked thoughtful. "How long has he lived at the farm?"

"For years. Mrs. Carder took him from the orphan asylum when he was a child. She thought he would be more useful than a girl. They keep him as a slave. You saw how very bow-legged he is. He can't get about normally, but he drives the car and helps in the kitchen and does every sort of menial task. There was such a look in his eyes always when he saw me. Little as I could do for him, or even speak to him, I'm afraid he is missing me terribly." Geraldine's look suddenly grew misty. "See how faithful he was about Daddy's letter. Poor little Pete. Mr. Carder will be out of his mind at my flight. I hope he doesn't visit it on that poor boy."

"Well," said Ben, heroically refraining from putting his arms around her, "why don't we take him?"

"We? Take Pete? How wonderful!" she returned, her handkerchief pausing in mid-air.

"Sure thing, if you want him. Send him to the barber and have his hair mowed. Have some trousers cut out for him with a circular saw and fix him up to the queen's taste."

"Oh, Mr. Barry--Ben! You don't know what you're saying. It would give me more relief than I can express, for the boy's lot is so miserable and starved."

"Well, then, that is settled, my princess."

"But you can't get him. I can't help feeling that anyone who has lived there so long, and been so unconsidered and unnoticed, must know more than Mr. Carder wishes to have go to the outside world. His mother hinted some things." Geraldine gasped with reminiscent horror of that low-ceiled kitchen.

Her companion suddenly looked very alert. "Highly probable," he returned. "Why didn't you say that before? We certainly will take Pete in. What are his habits? You say he drives the car."

"Yes, he did until he was set to dog my movements. I often heard it referred to. Do you mean--you could never get him in this blessed chariot. He will probably never see the meadow again unless they send him to get the cows."

Ben shook his head. "No; I think he will have to be bagged some other way. What's the matter with my going back to the farm on my motor-cycle and engaging him, overbidding the ogre?"

Geraldine actually clasped her hands on the leathern arm beside her. "Promise me," she said fervently, looking into her companion's eyes--"promise me that you will never go back to that farm alone."

"You want to go with me?"

"Don't joke. Promise me solemnly."

Ben's lips took a grave line and he put one hand over the beseeching ones.

"Then what will you promise me?" he returned.

The blood mantled high over the girl's face. "You're taking me to Miss Upton, aren't you?" she returned irrelevantly.

"Yes, if you positively refuse still to go to the parson."

The expression of her anxious eyes grew inscrutable.

"I want your mother to love me," she said naively.

Ben lifted her hands and held them to his lips.

"You haven't promised," she said softly. "I know he suspects you now. I think he is a madman when he is angry."

"Very well, I promise." Ben released her hands and smiled down with adoring eyes. "Now, we will go home," he said.

Again the great bird rose and winged its way between heaven and earth.

Now it was not as before when Geraldine's whole being had seemed absorbed in flight and freedom. The earth was

before her and a new life. She had a lover. Wonderful, sweet, incredible fact. A good man, Miss Upton said. Could it be that never again desolation and fear should sicken her heart; that like the princess of the tales her great third day had come and brought her love as well as liberty? Happiness deluged her, flushed her cheeks, and shone in her eyes. She longed and dreaded to alight again upon that earth which had never shown her kindness. Could it be possible that she should reign queen in a good man's heart? For so many years she had been habitually in the background, kept there either by her stepmother's will or her own desire to hide her shabbiness, and when need had at last forced her to initiative, she had received such humiliating stabs from the greed of men--could it be that she was to walk surrounded by protection, and love, and *respect*?

She closed her eyes. Spring, sunlight, joy coursed through every vein. When at last they began again to dip toward earth, the question surged through her: "Shall I ever be so happy again?"

And now Miss Upton's figure loomed large and gracious in the foreground of her thoughts. She longed for the refuge of her kindly arms until she could gather herself together in the new era of safety and peace.

The plane touched the earth, ran a little way toward an arched building, and stopped.

Ben jumped out, and Geraldine exclaimed over the beauty of a rose-tinted cloud of blossoms.

"Yes. Pretty orchard, isn't it?" he said. He unstrapped her safety belt and lifted her out of the cockpit. Her eager eyes noted that they were at the back of a large brick dwelling.

"Is Miss Upton here?" she asked while her escort took off her leather coat and her helmet. The latter had been pushed on and off once too often. The wonder of her golden hair fell over the poor little white cotton gown and Ben repressed his gasp of admiration.

"Oh, this is dreadful," she said, putting her hands up helplessly.

"Don't touch it," exclaimed her companion quickly. "You can't do anything with it anyway. There isn't a hairpin in the hangar. Miss Upton will love to see it. She will take care of it."

"Oh, I can't. How can I!" exclaimed Geraldine.

"Certainly, that's all right," said Ben hastily. "Miss Upton is right here. She will take you into the house and make you comfy. Let me put this around you."

He took the crepe shawl and put it about her shoulders, lifting out the shining gold that fell over the fringes.

"I know it is very old-fashioned and queer," said Geraldine, pulling the wrap over the grass stains and looking up into his eyes with a childlike appeal that made him set his teeth. "It was my mother's and you said 'white.' It was all I had."

Miss Upton had come to Mrs. Barry's to receive her protegee provided Ben could bring her. The two ladies were sitting out under the trees waiting. Miss Mehitable had obeyed Ben, and some days since had given Mrs. Barry the young girl's story, and that lady had received it courteously and with the tempered sympathy which one bestows on the absolutely unknown.

Miss Upton's excitement when she heard the humming of the aeroplane and saw it approaching in the distance baffles description. She had been forcing herself to talk on other subjects, perceiving clearly that her hostess was what our English friends would term fed up on the subject of the girl with the fanciful name; but now she clasped her plump hands and caught her breath.

"Well, she ain't killed, anyway," she said. She longed to rush back to the landing-place, but instinctively felt that such action on the part of a guest would be indecorous. She hoped Mrs. Barry would suggest it, but such a move was evidently far from that lady's thought. She sat in her white silken gown, with sewing in her lap, the picture of unruffled calm.

Miss Upton swallowed and kept her eyes on the approaching plane. "She ain't killed, anyway," she repeated.

"Nor Ben either," remarked Mrs. Barry, drawing the fine needle in and out of her work. "He is of some importance, isn't he?"

"Oh, do you suppose he got her, Mrs. Barry?" gasped Miss Mehitable.

"Ben would be likely to," returned that lady, who had been somewhat tried by her son's preoccupation in the last few days and considered the adventure a rather annoying interlude in their ordered life.

"Why don't she say let's go and see! How can she just set there as cool as a cucumber!" thought Miss Mehitable,

squeezing the blood out of her hands.

The plane descended, the humming ceased. Miss Upton sat on the edge of her chair looking excitedly at the figure in white who embroidered serenely. Moments passed with the tableau undisturbed; then:

"Oh! Oh!" exclaimed Miss Mehitable, still holding a rein over herself, mindful that she was not the hostess.

Mrs. Barry looked up. She was a New Englander of the New Englanders, conservative to her finger tips. Ben was her only son, the light of her eyes. If what she saw was startling, it can hardly be wondered at.

There came through the pink cloud of the apple blossoms her aviator son looking handsomer than she had ever beheld him, leading a girl in white-fringed crepe that clung in soft folds to her slenderness. All about her shoulders fell a veil of golden hair, and her appealing eyes glowed in a face at once radiant and timid.

Mrs. Barry started up from her chair.

"Mother!" cried Ben as they approached, "I told you I should bring her from the stars."

The hostess advanced a step mechanically, Miss Mehitable followed close. Geraldine gazed fascinated at the tall, regal woman, whose habitually formal manner took on an additional stiffness.

"This is Miss Melody, I believe." Mrs. Barry held out her smooth, fair hand. "I hear you have passed through a very trying experience," she said with cold courtesy. "I am glad you are safe."

The light went out of the girl's eager eyes. The color fled from her face. She had endured too many extremes of emotion in one day. Miss Mehitable extended her arms to her with a yearning smile. Geraldine glided to her and quietly fainted away on that kindly breast.

"Poor lamb, poor lamb," murmured Miss Mehitable, and Ben, frowning, exclaimed: "Here, let me take her!"

He gathered her up in his arms and carried her into the house and laid her on a divan, Miss Upton panting after his long strides and his mother deliberately bringing up the rear. Mrs. Barry knew just what to do and she did it, while Miss Upton wrung her hands above the recumbent white figure. When the long eyelashes flickered on the pallid cheek, Ben spoke commandingly: "I'll take her upstairs. She must be put to bed."

Miss Mehitable came to herself with a rush. "Not here," she said decidedly. "If you'll let me have the car, Mrs. Barry, we'll be out of your way in five minutes."

Ben looked at his mother, who was still cool and unexcited; and the expression on his face was a new one for her to meet.

"She isn't fit to be moved, Mother, and Miss Upton hasn't room. Miss Melody is exhausted. She has had a frightful experience," he said sternly.

If he had appealed she might have been touched, but it is doubtful. The grass stains, the quaint shawl, the hair that was rippling down to the rug, were none of them part of her visions of a daughter-in-law, and, at any rate, Ben shouldn't look at her like that--at her! for the sake of a friendless waif whose existence he had not suspected one week ago.

Miss Upton, understanding the situation perfectly, saved the hostess the trouble of replying.

"It won't hurt her a bit to drive as far as my house after she's been caperin' all over the sky!" she exclaimed, seizing Geraldine's hands.

The girl heard the declaration and essayed to rise while her eyes fixed on the round face bending over her.

"I want to go with you," she said.

"And you're going, my lamb," returned Miss Mehitable.

"Certainly, you shall have the car," said Mrs. Barry suavely.

She wished to send word to the chauffeur, she wished to give Geraldine tea, she was entirely polite and sufficiently solicitous, but her heir looked terrible things, and, bringing around the car, himself drove the guests to Miss Upton's Fancy Goods and Notions.

Geraldine declined his help to walk to the door of the shop. Miss Upton had her arm around her, and though the girl was pale she gave her rescuer a look full of gratitude; and when he pressed her hand she answered the pressure and restored a portion of his equanimity.

"I never, never shall forget this happiest day of my life," she said.

"And don't forget we are going to get Pete," he responded eagerly, holding her hand close, "and everything is going to come out right."

"Yes"--she looked doubtful and frightened; "but if you get Pete don't let your mother see him. She is--she couldn't bear it."

"Don't judge her, Geraldine," he begged. "She is glorious. Ask Miss Upton. Just a little--a little shy at first, you know. Miss Upton, you explain, won't you?"

"Don't fret, Ben," said Miss Mehitable. "You're the best boy on earth, and I want to hear all about it, for I'm sure you did something wonderful to get her."

"Yes, wonderful, Miss Upton!" echoed Geraldine, with another heart-warming smile at her deliverer whose own smile lessened and died as he walked back to his car. By the time he entered it he was frowning, thinking of his "shy" mother.



CHAPTER XI

MOTHER AND SON

Miss Upton had looked upon the parting amenities of the two young people with beaming approval; and Geraldine's first words when they were alone astonished her.

As soon as they were inside the shop and the door closed, the young girl looked earnestly into her friend's eyes. Miss Mehitable returned her regard affectionately. The golden hair had been wound up and secured with Mrs. Barry's hairpins.

"I wish there were some way by which I need never see him again," she said.

"Why, Miss Melody, child, what do you mean? Every word I told you in my letter was true. Perhaps you never got it, but I told you that he is the *finest*--"

"Yes, yes, I believe it," was the hasty reply. "I did receive your letter, and some time I'll tell you how, and what a comfort it was to me. Oh, Miss Upton"--the girl threw her arms around the stout figure--"I can't tell you what it means to me for you to take me in; and this is your shop you told me of--" she released Miss Mehitable and looked about--"and I'm going to tend it for you and help you in every way I can. It is paradise--paradise to me, Miss Upton."

Her fervor brought a lump to her companion's throat, but she knew that Mrs. Whipp was listening from the sitting-room, and Miss Mehitable did love peace.

"Yes, yes, dear child; it'll all come out right," she said vaguely, patting the white shoulder. "I have another good helper and I want you to meet her. Come with me." She led the girl through the shop.

Mrs. Whipp had retreated violently from the front window when she saw the closed car drive up, and now she was standing, at bay as it were, with eyes fixed on the doorway through which her employer would bring the stranger. Pearl was placidly purring in the last rays of the sinking sun, her milk-white paws tucked under her soft breast, the only unexcited member of the family.

Mrs. Whipp had excuse for staring as the young girl came into view. Short wisps of golden hair waved about her face. Her beauty struck a sort of awe to the militant woman, who was standing on a mental fence in armed neutrality holding herself ready to spring down on that side which would regard the stranger as an interloper come to sponge on Miss Upton, or possibly she might descend upon the other side and endure the newcomer passively.

"This is our little girl, Charlotte," said Miss Mehitable; "our little girl to take care of, and who wants to take care of us. This is Mrs. Whipp, Geraldine."

Charlotte blinked as the newcomer's face relaxed in her appealing smile, and she came forward and took Mrs. Whipp's hard, unexpectant hand in her soft grasp. "Such a fortunate girl I am, Mrs. Whipp," she said, "I'm sure I shall inconvenience you at first (this fact had been too plainly legible on the weazened face to be ignored), but I will try to make up for it--try my very best, and it may not be for long."

Charlotte mumbled some inarticulate greeting, falling an instant victim to the young creature's humility and loveliness.

"I look very queer, I know," continued Geraldine, "but you see I just came down out of the sky."

"She really did," put in Miss Upton. "She came in Mr. Barry's areoplane."

"Shan't I die!" commented Mrs. Whipp, continuing to stare with a pertinacity equal to Rufus Carder's own. "I believe it. She looks like an angel," she thought. Miss Mehitable watched her melting mood with inward amusement.

"What a beautiful cat!" said Geraldine. "She's tame, isn't she? Will she let you touch her?"

"Well," said Charlotte with a broader smile than had been seen on her countenance for many a day, "I guess they don't have cats in the sky." She lifted Pearl and bestowed her in Geraldine's arms.

The girl met the lazy, golden eyes rather timorously, but she took her.

"All the cats where--where I was--were wild--and no one--no one fed them, you see."

"Well, this cat is named Pearl," said Miss Mehitable. "She's Charlotte's jewel and you can bet she does get fed. How about us, Charlotte?" She turned to the waiting table. "I want to give Miss Melody her supper and put her to bed, and

after she has slept twelve hours we'll get her to tell us how it feels to fly. Thank Heaven, she's here with no broken bones."

Meanwhile Ben Barry had reached home and made a rather formal toilet for the evening meal. Even before his mother saw it, she knew she was going to be disciplined. While the waitress remained in the room the young man's gravity and meticulous politeness would have intimidated most mothers with a conscience as guilty as Mrs. Barry's. She was forced to raise her napkin several times, not to dry tears, but to conceal smiles which would have been sure to add fuel to the flame.

She showed her temerity by soon dismissing the servant. Her son met her twinkling eyes coldly. She leaned across the table toward him and revealed the handsome teeth he had inherited.

"Now, Benny, don't be ridiculous," she said.

This beginning destroyed his completely. He arrived at his climax at once.

"How could you be so heartless!" he exclaimed. "She had told me she wanted you to love her. Your coldness shocked her."

This appeal, so pathetic to the speaker, caused Mrs. Barry again to raise her napkin to her rebellious lips.

"I tell you," went on Ben heatedly, "she has been through so much that the surprise and humiliation of your manner made her faint."

"Now, dear, be calm. Didn't I bring her to again? Didn't I do up her hair--it's beautiful, but I like it better wound up, in company--didn't I want to give her--"

"Do you suppose," interrupted Ben more hotly, "do you suppose she wasn't conscious, and hurt, too, by her unconventional appearance?"

He was arraigning his parent now with open severity.

"How about my shock, Ben? I'm old-fashioned, you know. You come, leading that odd little waif and displaying so much--well, enthusiasm, wasn't it--wasn't the whole thing a little extreme?"

"Yes, the situation was certainly very extreme. An old rascal had managed to capture that flower of a girl, and made her believe that to save her dead father's good name she must marry him. I come along with the Scout and pick her up out of a field where she was walking, he running, and yelling, and firing his gun at us. There was scarcely time for her to put on a traveling costume to accord with your ideas of decorum, was there?"

Mrs. Barry's eyes widened as they gazed into his accusing ones.

"How dreadful," she said.

"Yes; and even in all her relief at escaping, Miss Melody was in doubt as to whether she was not deserting her father's cause--torn, as the books say, with conflicting emotions. You may think it was all very pleasant."

"Benny, I think it was dreadful! Awfully hard for you, dear; and, oh, that wretch might have disabled the plane and hurt you! Why did I ever let you have it?"

"To save her! That's why you let me have it."

His mother regarded his glowing face. "What a wretched mess!" she was thinking. "What a bother that the girl is so pretty!"

"You remember the other evening when I came home from that motor-cycle trip, and the next day Miss Upton came and told you Miss Melody's story?"

"Yes, dear." Mrs. Barry added apologetically, "I'm afraid I didn't pay strict attention."

"Well, it is a pity that you did not, for I've known ever since that day that Geraldine Melody is the only girl I shall ever marry."

His mother's heart beat faster as she marked the expression in those steady, young eyes.

There was silence for a space between them. She was the first to speak, and she did so with a cool, unsmiling demeanor which reminded him of childhood days when he was in disgrace.

"Then you care nothing for what sort of mind and character are possessed by your future wife. The skin-deep part is all that interests you."

"That's what she said," he responded quickly. "I suggested that she put affairs in a shape where it would be of no use for an irritating conscience to try to make trouble. I urged her to marry me this afternoon before we came home."

Mrs. Barry's nonchalance deserted her with a rush. Her face became crimson.

"How--how criminal!" she ejaculated.

"That's what she said," returned Ben. "She asked if I hadn't a mother. I told her I had a glorious one; and she just looked at me and said: 'And you would do that to her just because I have nice eyes.'"

Mrs. Barry bit her lip and did not love the waif the more that she had been able to defend her.

"What is the use of being a mother!" she ejaculated. "What is the use of expending your whole heart's love on a boy for his lifetime, when he will desert you at the first temptation!"

"Well, she wouldn't let me, dear," said Ben more gently, flushing and feeling his first qualm. "I would stake my life that she is as beautiful within as without and that you would have a treasure as well as I. It wasn't deserting you. I was thinking of you. I felt she was worthy of you and no one else is."

"This is raving, Ben," said his mother, quiet again. "He has escaped," she thought, "and now nothing will come of it." She raised her drooping head and again regarded him deprecatingly. "Let us talk of something else," she added.

"No," he returned firmly; "not until you understand that I am entirely in earnest. You had your love-affair, now I am having mine, and I am going through with it, openly and in the sight of all men. I urged her a second time to marry me this afternoon, and she looked at me soberly with those glorious eyes and her only answer was: 'I want your mother to love me.'" Ben looked off reminiscently. "It encouraged me to hope that she cares for me a little that your coldness bowled her over so completely."

Mrs. Barry looked at him helplessly, and this time when she put up her napkin she touched a corner of her eye.

"We stopped at the landing-field at Townley and had our talk," he went on.

"And she seemed refined?" Mrs. Barry's voice was a little uncertain.

"Exquisite!" he exclaimed.

"You have standards, Ben," she said. "You couldn't be totally fooled by beauty."

He smiled upon her for the first time and a very warming light shone in his eyes. "The best," he replied, leaning toward her. "You."

She drew a long, quavering breath; but she scorned weeping women.

Ben watched her repressed emotion.

"Now you examine, Mother," he said gently. "Take your New England magnifying-glass along, and when she will see you, put her to the test."

"When she will see me? What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Barry quickly.

"Well"--Ben shrugged his shoulders--"we'll see. How much she was hurt, how long it will last, I don't know, of course. You can try."

"Try!" repeated the queen of Keefe, her handsome face coloring faintly above her white silken gown.

"Yes. Miss Upton will be a good go-between, when she is placated. You saw the partisan in her."

Of course, it was all very absurd, as Mrs. Barry told herself when they arose from the table; but there was no denying that her throne was tottering. Her boy was no longer all hers. Bitter, bitter discovery for most mothers to make even when the rival is not Miss Nobody from Nowhere.

The next morning betimes Ben presented himself at the Emporium. He drove up in his roadster and rushed in upon Miss Upton with an arm full of apple blossoms.

"How is she?" he inquired eagerly.

"Hush, hush! I think she's goin' to sleep again. She's had her breakfast."

"Mother sent her these," he went on, laying the fragrant mass on the counter behind which Miss Mehitable was piling up goods for packing.

She looked at him and the corners of her mouth drew down. "Ben Barry, what do you want to tell such a lie for?"

"Because I think it sounds nice," he returned, unabashed. "Really, I think she would if she dared, you know. We had it out last night. Now what are you going to do about Miss Melody's clothes?"

"Yes, what am I?" said Miss Upton. "Say, Ben"--she gave his arm a push and lowered her voice--"what do you s'pose Charlotte's doin'? She's out in the shed washin' and ironin' Geraldine's clothes." She lifted her plump shoulders and nudged Ben again. They both laughed.

"Good for Lottie!" remarked Ben.

"Oh, she's in love, just in love," said Miss Mehitable. "It's too funny to see her. She wants to wait on the child by inches; but clothes--Ben! You should have seen Geraldine in my--a--my--a wrapper last night!" Miss Mehitable gave vent to another stifled chuckle. "She was just lost in it, and we had to hunt for her and fish her out and put her into something of Charlotte's. Charlotte was tickled to death." Again the speaker's cushiony fist gave Ben's arm an emphatic nudge.

He smiled sympathetically. "I suppose so," he said; "but aren't you going to town to-day to buy her some things?"

"What with?" Miss Upton grew sober and extended both hands palms upward. "I've been thinkin' about it while I was workin' here. She's got to have clothes. I shouldn't wonder if some o' my customers had things they could let us have. Once your mother would 'a' been my first thought."

"Hand-me-downs?" said Ben, flushing. "Nothing doing. Surely you have credit at the stores."

"Yes, I have, but it's my habit to pay my bills," was the defiant reply, "and that girl needs everything. I can't buy 'em all."

Ben patted her arm. "Don't speak so loud, you'll wake the baby. You buy the things, Mehit. I'll see that they're paid for."

"How your mother'd love that!"

"My mother will have nothing to do with it."

"Why, you ain't even self-supportin' yet," declared Miss Upton bluntly. "'T ain't anything to your discredit, of course; you ain't ready," she added kindly.

Ben's steady eyes kept on looking into hers and his low voice replied: "My father died suddenly, you remember. He had destroyed one will and not yet made another. I have money of my own, quite a lot of it, to tell the truth. Now if you'd just let me fly you over to town--"

Miss Mehitable started. "Fly me over, you lunatic!"

"Well, let us go in the train, then. I'll go with you. I know in a general way just what she ought to wear. Soft silky things and a--a droopy hat."

"Ben Barry, you've taken leave o' your senses. Don't you know that everything I get her, that poor child will want to pay for--work, and earn the money? If I buy anything for her, it's goin' to be somethin' she can pay for before she's ninety."

Ben sighed. "All right, Mehit! have it your own way, only get a move. I can't take her out till she gets a hat."

"You haven't got to take her out," retorted Miss Upton decidedly. "She don't want to go out with you. It was only last night she was sayin' she wished she might never see you again."

"Huh!" ejaculated Ben. "Poor girl, I'm sorry for her, then. She is going to stumble over me every time she turns around. She is going to see me till she cries for mercy."

He smiled into Miss Upton's doubtful, questioning face for a silent space.

"Don't worry about that," he said at last. "Just go upstairs and put on your duds, like the dear thing you are, and get the next train." The speaker looked at his watch. "You can catch it all right."

"I never heard o' such a thing," said Miss Mehitable. She had made her semi-annual trip to the city. The idea of going back again with no preparation was startling--and also expensive.

Ben perceived that if there were to be any initiative here he would have to furnish it.

"You don't expect to open the shop again until you have moved, do you?"

"No," admitted Miss Upton reluctantly.

"Then you can take your time. Take these flowers upstairs, ask her what size things she wears, and hurry up and catch the train."

Miss Upton brought her gaze back from its far-away look and she appeared to come to herself. "Look here, Ben Barry, I'm not goin' to be crazy just because you are. Her clean clothes'll be all ready for her by night. I can buy her a sailor hat right here in the village and maybe a jacket. She's got to go to town with me. The idea of buyin' a lot of clothes and maybe not havin' 'em right."

"You're perfectly correct, Miss Upton."

The young man took out his pocket-book and handed his companion a bill. "This is for your fares," he said.

Miss Mehitable's troubled brow cleared even while she blushed, seeing that he had read her thoughts.

"I don't know as this is exactly proper, Ben," she said doubtfully.

"Take my word for it, it is," he replied. "Let me be your conscience for a few weeks. I may not see you for a day or two. I have another little job of kidnapping on hand; so I put you on your honor to do your part."

He was gone, and Miss Upton, placing the sturdy stems of the apple blossoms in a pitcher of water, carried them upstairs. She tiptoed into the room where Geraldine was in bed, but the girl was awake and gave an exclamation of delight.

"Have you an apple tree, too?" she asked.

"No, Mr. Barry brought these over."

The girl's face sobered as she buried it in the blooms Miss Upton offered. Miss Mehitable looked admiringly at the golden braids hanging over the pillows.

"Do you feel rested?" she asked.

"Perfectly, and I know I have taken your bed. To-night we will make me a nice nest on the floor."

Miss Upton smiled. "Oh, I've got a cot. We'll do all right. Do you s'pose there is any way we could get your clothes from that fiend on the farm?" she added.

Geraldine shrank and shook her head. "I wouldn't dare try," she replied.

"Then you and I've got to go to town to-morrow," said Miss Upton, "and get you something."

The girl returned her look seriously and caught her lip under her teeth for a silent space.

"Yes, I know what you're thinkin'," said Miss Mehitable cheerfully; "but the queerest thing and the nicest thing happened to me this mornin'. I got some money that I didn't expect. Just in the nick o' time, you see. We can go to town and--"

Geraldine reached up a hand and took that of her friend, her face growing eager.

"How splendid!" she exclaimed. "Then we will go and get me the very simplest things I can get along with and we'll keep account of every cent and I will pay it all back to you. Do you know I think this bed of yours is full of courage? At any rate, when I waked up this morning I found all my hopefulness had come back. I feel that I am going to make my living and not be a burden on anyone. It's wonderful to feel that way!"

"Of course you are, child." Miss Upton patted the hand that grasped hers. "But first off, you'll have to help me move. I've got a lot o' packin' to do, you understand. I'm movin' my shop to Keefeport. I always do summers."

For answer Geraldine, who had been leaning on her elbow, sat up quickly, evidently with every intention of rising.

"Get back there," laughed Miss Mehitable. "Your clothes ain't ironed yet. I'll move the apple blossoms up side of you--"

"

"Don't, please," said Geraldine, as she lay down reluctantly. "I think I'd rather they would keep their distance--like their owner."

"Now, child," said Miss Mehitable coaxingly. "Mrs. Barry's one o' the grandest women in the world. I felt pretty hot myself yesterday--I might as well own it--but that'll all smooth over. She didn't mean a thing except that she was surprised."

"We can't blame her for that," returned Geraldine, "but--but--I'm sorry he brought the flowers. I wonder if you couldn't make him understand--very kindly, you know, Miss Upton, that I want to be--just to be forgotten."

Miss Upton pursed her lips and her eyes laughed down into the earnest face. "I'm afraid, child, I don't know any language that could make him understand that."

Geraldine did not smile. She felt that in those intense hours of yesterday, freed from every convention of earth, they two had lived a lifetime. She would rather dwell on its memory henceforth than run the risk of any more shocks. Peace and forgetfulness. That is what she felt she needed from now on.

"He said he was goin' on another kidnappin' errand now," remarked Miss Upton.

The girl looked up quickly from her introspection. A startled look sprang into her eyes and she sat up in bed.

"Oh, Miss Upton, you know him!" she exclaimed, gazing at her friend. "Does he keep solemn promises?"

"I'm sure he does, child. What's the matter now?"

"He promised me--oh, he promised me, he wouldn't go back to that farm alone." The girl's eyes filled with tears that overflowed on her suddenly pale cheeks.

Miss Mehitable sat down on the edge of the bed and patted her, while Geraldine wiped the drops away with the long sleeve of Charlotte's unbleached nightgown. "Then he won't, dear, don't you worry," she said comfortingly. "Where's that courage you were talkin' about just now?"

"That was for myself," said the girl grievously, accepting the handkerchief Miss Upton gave her.

"Who else does he want out o' that God-forsaken place?" asked Miss Upton impatiently. "I wish to goodness that boy could stay put somewhere."

"It's a servant, a dwarf, a poor little friendless boy who was kind to me there. If it hadn't been for him I shouldn't be here now. I should be dying--there! Mr. Barry is going to get him and bring him away. Oh, why didn't I prevent him!" Geraldine broke down completely, weeping broken-heartedly into the handkerchief.

Miss Upton smiled over her head. She knew nothing of Rufus Carder's shot-gun, and she was thinking of Geraldine's earnest request that Ben Barry should forget her.

"Now, stop that right away, my child," she said, enjoying herself hugely. She had seen Ben Barry's heart in his eyes as he came walking under the apple blossoms yesterday and this revelation of Geraldine's was most pleasing.

"Stop cryin'," she said with authority. "Ben Barry's just as smart as he is brave. He ain't goin' to take any foolish risk now that you're safe. I don't know what he wants the boy for, but probably it's some good reason; and if you don't stop workin' yourself up, you won't be fit to go to town to-morrow. I want you should stay in bed all day. Now, you behave yourself, my lamb. Ben'll come back all right."

Geraldine flushed through her tears. It was heavenly to be scolded by someone who loved her.

She looked at the pitcher exiled to the bureau. "I--I think you might as well move the apple blossoms here," she said, wiping her eyes and speaking meekly.

"All right," said Miss Mehitable, beaming, and she proceeded to set a light stand beside the bed and placed the rosy mass upon it.

Toward night came a parcel-post package for Miss Geraldine Melody. Miss Upton and Charlotte both stood by with eager interest while the girl sat up in bed and opened it. None of the three had ever seen such a box of bon-bons as was disclosed. It was a revelation of dainty richness, and the older women exclaimed while Geraldine bowed her fair head over this new evidence of thoughtfulness. The long sleeves of Charlotte's nightgown, the patchwork quilt of the bed, the homely surroundings, all made the contrast of the gift more striking. There was a card upon it. Ben Barry's

card: Geraldine turned it over and read: "Is the princess happy?"

She was back among the clouds, the bright spring air flowing past her, each breath a wonderful memory.

The two women looked at one another. They saw her close her hand on the card. She lifted the box to them, and raised her pensive eyes.

"It is for us all," she said softly; but her ardent thought was repeating:

"He would--he *will* take care of himself, for me!"

CHAPTER XII

THE TRANSFORMATION

Into the village nearest the Carder farm rolled Ben Barry's roadster. He stopped at the inn which made some pretension to furnishing entertainment to the motorists who found it on their route, and after a luncheon put up his car and walked to the village center to the post-office and grocery store. He had most hope of the latter as a bureau of information.

After buying some cigarettes and chocolate, and exchanging comments on the weather with the proprietor, he introduced his subject.

"I believe Rufus Carder lives near here," he remarked.

"Yus, oh, yus," agreed the man, who was in his shirt-sleeves, and who here patronized the cuspidor.

"He's pretty well-to-do, I understand. I should suppose if he is public-spirited his being in the neighborhood would be a great advantage to the village."

"Yus, *if*," returned the grocer, scornfully. "The bark on a tree ain't a circumstance to him. Queer now, ain't it?" he went on argumentatively. "Carder's a rich man, and so many o' these-here rich men, they act as if they wasn't ever goin' to die. Where's the satisfaction in not usin' their money? You know him?" The speaker cocked an eye up at the handsome young stranger.

"I--I've met him," returned Ben.

"You might be interested, then, to hear about what happened out to the farm yisterday. P'raps it'll be in the paper to-night. A young girl visitin' the Carders was kidnapped right out o' the field by an areoplane. Yes, sir, slick as a whistle." Ben's look of interest and amazement rewarded the narrator. "One o' the hands from the farm come in last night and told about it, but the editor o' the paper thought't was a hoax and he didn't dare to work on it last night. Lots of us saw the plane, but the feller's story did sound fishy, and if the *Sunburst*--that's our paper--should print a lot o' stuff about Carder shootin' guns and foam'in' at the mouth when he saw the girl he was goin' to marry fly up into the sky *and't wa'n't so*--ye see, 't would go mighty hard with our editor."

"Why didn't he send somebody right out to the farm to inquire?" asked Ben.

The grocer smiled, looked off, and shook his head.

"You say you've met Rufus Carder? Well, ye don't know him or else ye wouldn't ask that. Don't monkey with the buzz-saw is a pretty good motter where he's concerned. I'm lookin' fer Pete now. This is his day to come in an' stock up. He's so stupid he couldn't make up anything, and we'll know fer sure if there's any truth at all in the story."

"Who is Pete--a son?" Ben put the question calmly, considering his elation at his good luck. He had made up his mind that he might have to spend days in this soporific hamlet.

The grocer looked at him quickly from under his bushy eyebrows.

"What made ye ask that? Some folks say he is. Say, are you one o' these here detectives? Be you after Carder? Pete's a boy they took out of an asylum, and if he'd ever had any care he wouldn't be bandy-legged and undersized, but don't you say I've told ye anything, 'cause I haven't."

Ben smiled into the startled, suspicious face. "Not a bit of it," he answered. "I'm just motoring about these parts on a little vacation, and I got out of cigarettes, so I called on you."

"There's Pete now!" exclaimed the grocer eagerly, hurrying out from behind the counter and to the door.

Other of the neighbors recognized the Carder car and came out to question the boy, who by the time he entered the grocery found himself confronting an audience who all asked questions at once. Pete's shock of hair stood up as usual like a scrubbing-brush; he wore no hat, and his dull eyes looked about from one to another eager face. Ben had strolled back of a tall pile of starch-boxes.

"Is it true an areoplane come down in Mr. Carder's field yisterday?" The question volleyed at the dwarf from a dozen directions.

He stared at them all dumbly, and they cried at him the more, one woman shaking him by the shoulder.

"Look here, shut up, all of you!" said the proprietor; "let the boy do his business first. Ye'll put it all out of his head. What d'ye want, Pete?"

The dwarf drew a list out of his pocket and handed it to the grocer upon which the bystanders all fell upon him again.

As Ben regarded the dwarf, he felt some reflection of Geraldine's compassion for the forlorn little object in his ragged clothes, and he realized that it was a wonder that the poor, stultified brain had possessed enough initiative to carry out the important part he had played in their lives.

While the grocer's clerk was putting up the packages the man himself laid his hand on Pete's shoulder.

"Now then, boy," he said kindly, "an areoplane dived down out o' the sky into your medder yisterday and picked up a homely, stupid girl and flew off with her."

"She was an angel!" exclaimed the dwarf. His dull eyes brightened and looked away. "She was more beautiful than flowers."

"She was, eh?" returned the grocer, and the crowd listened breathlessly. "They say your master was goin' to marry her? That a fact?"

The light went out of Pete's face and his lips closed.

The grocer shook him gently by the shoulder. "Speak up, boy. Was there any shootin'? Did the air turn blue 'round there?"

Pete's lips did not open for a moment. "Master told me not to talk," he said at last.

A burst of excited laughter came from the crowd. "Then it's true, it's true!" they cried.

The grocer kept his hand on the dwarf's shoulder. "Ye might as well tell," he said, "'cause Hiram Jones come in last night and told us all about it."

Pete's lips remained closed.

"Give ye a big lump o' chocolate if ye'll tell us," said one woman.

"Master told me not to talk," was all the boy would say.

The grocer's clerk went out to the auto with a basket and packed the purchases into it.

Ben came from behind the starch boxes, went out the door, and accosted him.

"Do you want to make five dollars?" he asked.

"Do I?" drawled the boy, winking at him. "Ain't I got a girl?"

"Then jump in and drive this car out to the Carder farm. I want to talk to Pete."

"Eh-h-h! You're a reporter!" cried the boy. "Less see the money."

Ben promptly produced it. "In with you now."

"Sure, I'll have to speak to Pete," the boy demurred. "He can't walk out to the farm with them phony legs."

"In with you," repeated the tall stranger firmly. "Go now or not at all." He held the bill before the boy's eyes. "I have my car at the inn. I'll take care of Pete."

The boy looked eagerly at the money. "Can't I tell the boss?"

"I'll fix it with the boss. Here's your money. In with you."

The next minute the car was rattling down the street and Ben went back into the store where Pete was still being badgered by a laughing crowd persisting in questions about the angel.

As Pete caught sight of him, the obstinate expression in his dull eyes did not at first change, but in a minute something familiar in the look of the stranger impressed him, and suddenly he knew.

"Was it you? Was it you?" the boy blurted out, elbowing the others aside and approaching Ben eagerly.

The bystanders looked curiously at the stranger and at the excited boy.

"I want to have a little talk with you, Pete," said Ben. The dwarf's staring eyes had filled.

"Is she here? Has she come down again?" he cried, unmindful of the gaping listeners.

"Be quiet," returned Ben. Then he turned to the grocer. "I've sent your boy on an errand," he said, and he handed the man a bill. "Will that pay you for his time? I've paid him."

He put his hand on Pete's shoulder and led him through the crowd out to the street.

"Master's car has gone," cried the dwarf, looking wildly up and down the street.

"I have taken care of it," said Ben quietly.

"But I must find it," declared Pete, beginning to shake.

Ben saw his abject terror.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Pete, nothing any more," said Ben. "Do you want to see Miss Melody?"

"Oh, Master!" exclaimed the boy, looking up and meeting a kindly look.

"Then come with me. Let us hurry." Reaching the inn, Ben paid his bill while Pete's eyes roved about in all directions for his goddess.

Leading the boy out to the garage he bade him enter the machine. Even here Pete hesitated, his weight of terrifying responsibility still hanging over him.

"Master's car!" he gasped, looking imploringly up into Ben's face.

"It has gone home, back to the farm," said Ben. "Don't worry. There's nothing to worry about."

Pete was trembling as he entered the roadster. He wondered if he were dreaming. All this couldn't be real. Nothing had ever happened to him before except his goddess.

Ben put on speed and the car flew out of the village and along the highroad. They entered another village, but halted not. Through it they sped and again out into the open country.

Pete felt dazed, but the man of the motor-cycle, Master had said, was the man of the aeroplane. He was here beside him, big, powerful. The dwarf felt that he was risking his own life on the hope of seeing his goddess, for what would Rufus Carder say to him when he finally returned to the farm, a deserter from his duty.

Silently they sped on. Just once Pete spoke, for his heart had sunk.

"Shall we see her, Master?" he asked unsteadily.

Ben turned and smiled at him cheerfully.

"Sure thing," he answered. "She is well and she wants to see you."

Pete had had no practice in smiling, but a joyful reassurance pervaded him. Let Rufus Carder kill him, if it must be. This would come first.

Darkness had fallen when they finally entered a town and drove to a hotel. Ben looked rather ruefully at the poor little scarecrow beside him with his hatless scrubbing-brush of a head, but the keeper of the garage consented to give the boy a place to sleep.

"At least," thought Ben, "it will be more comfortable than the boards outside Geraldine's door."

He saw to it that the dwarf should have a good supper, after which Pete presented himself at Ben's room as he had been ordered to do. Never before in his life had he had all the meat and potato he wanted, and still marveling at the wonderful things happening to him he was conducted to Ben, and stood before him with questioning eyes.

"Is she here, Master?" he asked.

"No, but we shall see her to-morrow."

"When--when do I go back to the farm?" asked the boy.

"Never," replied Ben calmly.

"Master!" exclaimed the dwarf, and could say no more. His tanned face grew darker with the rush of crimson.

"You're my servant now," said Ben, and his good-humored expression shone upon an eager face that worked pitifully.

"What--what can I do?" stammered Pete, his rough hands with their broken nails working together.

"You can get into the bathtub."

"Wha--what, Master?"

Ben threw open the door of his bathroom.

"Draw that tub full of water and use up all the soap on yourself. Make yourself clean for to-morrow. Understand?"

Pete didn't understand anything. He was in a blissful daze. He had never seen faucets except the one in the Carder kitchen. Ben had to draw the water for him, showing him the hot and the cold; finally making him understand that he was not to get in with his clothes on, and that he was to use any and all of those fresh white towels, the like of which the boy had never seen; then his new master came out, closed the door, and laughing to himself sat down to wait and read a magazine.

There was a mighty splashing in the bathroom.

"Clean to see her. Clean to see her," Pete kept saying to himself. He was going to be able to speak to her with no one to object. He was going to work for this god who could fly down out of the sky. Rufus Carder might come to find him later and kill him, but that was no matter.

When finally the bathroom door opened and again arrayed in his disreputable clothes the dwarf appeared, Ben spoke without looking up from his magazine.

"Did you let the water out of the tub?"

"No, Master. I didn't know."

Ben got up, and Pete followed him, eager for the lesson. Ben viewed the color of the water frothing with suds.

"I think you must be clean," he remarked dryly, as he opened the waste-pipe, "or at least you will be after a few more ducks."

"Yes, Master, to see her."

He showed the boy how to wash out the tub which the little fellow did with a will.

"Now, then, to bed with you, and we'll have an early breakfast, for we have a busy day to-morrow. Good-night."

Pete ambled away to the garage so happy that he still felt himself in a dream. To see his goddess, and never to go back to Rufus Carder! Those two facts chased each other around a rosy circle in his brain until he fell asleep.

When Ben Barry came out of his room the next morning he found Pete squatting outside his door. He regarded the broken, earth-stained shoes and the ragged coat and trousers, which if they had ever been of a distinct color were of none now, and the thick mop of hair. The eyes raised to his met a gay smile.

"Hello, there," said Ben. "Did you think I might get away?"

The dwarf rose. "I--I didn't--didn't know how much--much was a dream," he stammered.

"I hope you had a real breakfast," said Ben.

The dwarf smiled. It was a dreary, unaccustomed sort of crack in his weather-beaten face. "I had coffee, too," he replied in an awestruck tone.

Ben laughed. "Good enough. You go out to the car and wait till I come. I'm going to my breakfast now."

In less than an hour they were on their way. Pete's eyes had lost their dullness.

Ben drove to a department store, on a small scale such as the cities boast. He parked his car, and when he told Pete to get out the boy began looking about at once for Geraldine.

"Is she here, Master?" he asked as they entered the store.

"No, we shall see her to-night," was the reply.

Then more miracles began to happen to Pete. He was taken from one section to another in the store and when he emerged again into the street, he hardly knew himself. He was wearing new underclothes, stockings, shoes, coat, vest; even the phony legs had been cared for in the trousers, cut off to suit the little fellow's peculiar needs, and his eyes seemed to have grown larger in the process. Under his arm he carried a box containing more underwear.

Next they drove to a barber's where Pete's hair was properly cut; then to a hat store and he was fitted to a hat.

When they came out, Ben regarded his work whimsically. The boy was not a bad-looking boy. He liked the direct manner of the dwarf's grateful, almost reverent, gaze up into his own merry eyes. There was nothing shifty there.

When they reentered the roadster, Ben spoke to him before he started the car.

"Do you know why I have done all this, Pete?"

The boy shook his head. "Because you came down out of the sky?" he questioned.

"No, it is just because you took care of Miss Melody; because you put those letters underneath her door."

Pete's face crimsoned with happiness. "I helped her--I--I helped her get away," he said.

"Yes, and she will never forget it, and neither will I."

"You--you--asked me if I loved her," said Pete, his mind returning to the day of the motor-cycle visit.

"Yes, and you did, didn't you?"

"Yes, and--and when she was gone up to--to heaven, I wanted to die till I--I remembered that she--she wanted to go."

"Yes, wanted to go just as much as you did, and more. Now *that* life is all over, Pete. Just as much gone as those old clothes of yours that we left to be burned. You've been a faithful, brave boy, and Miss Melody and I are going to look after you henceforth."

Pete couldn't speak. Ben saw him bite his lip to control himself. The roadster started and moving slowly out of the town sped again along a country road.



CHAPTER XIII

THE GODDESS

On the same day Geraldine and Miss Upton were patronizing the department stores in the city and getting such clothing as was absolutely necessary for the girl. Geraldine's purchases were rigidly simple.

"I think you're downright stingy, child," commented Miss Upton when the girl had overruled certain suggestions Miss Mehitable had made with the fear of Ben Barry before her eyes.

"No, indeed. Don't you see how it's counting up?" rejoined Geraldine earnestly. "All these things on your bill, and no telling how soon I can pay for them."

Miss Upton noticed how the salesgirls appreciated the beauty they had to deal with, and she was in sympathy with their efforts to dress Geraldine as she deserved.

There were some shops into which the girl refused to enter, and it was plain to her companion that these had been the scenes of some of her repulsive experiences.

Also they shunned the restaurant where they had met; and every minute that they were on the street Geraldine held tight to Miss Upton's substantial arm.

"I shall be so glad when we get home," she said repeatedly.

"Now, look here," said Miss Upton, "there's one thing you've got to accept from me as a present. You're my little girl and I've a right to give you one thing, I hope."

"I'd much rather you wouldn't," returned Geraldine anxiously--"not until I've paid for these."

She had changed the white dress she wore into town for a dark-blue skirt and jacket which formed the chief item of her purchases, and on her head she had a black sailor hat which Miss Upton had procured in Keefe.

"I want to give you," said Miss Upton--"I want to give you a--a droopy hat!"

Geraldine laughed. "What in the world for, you dear? What do I need of droopy hats?"

"To wear with your light things--your white dress, and--and everything."

"Miss Upton, how absurd! I don't need it at all. Don't think of such a thing. I shan't go anywhere."

"I don't believe you know what you'll do," returned Miss Mehitable. "Just come and try one on, anyway. I want to see you in it."

So, coaxing, while the girl demurred, she led her to the millinery section of the store they were in. Of course, putting hats on Geraldine was a very fascinating game, which everybody enjoyed except the girl herself. There was one hat especially in which Miss Upton reveled, mentally considering its devastating effect upon Ben Barry. It was very simple, and at the most depressed point of the brim nestled one soft, loose-leaved pink rose with a little foliage. Miss Upton's eyes glistened and she drew the saleslady aside.

"I've bought it," she said triumphantly when she came back.

"It isn't right," replied Geraldine, although it must be admitted that she herself had thought of Ben when she first saw the reflection of it in the glass.

"Don't you want me to have any fun?" returned Miss Mehitable, quite excited, for the price of the hat caused the matter to be portentous.

"Let him pay for it," she considered recklessly. "What's the harm as long as he and I are the only ones who know it, and wild horses couldn't drag it out of me?"

So, Geraldine carrying the large hatbox, they at last pursued their way to the railway station and with mutual sighs of relief stowed themselves into the train for Keefe.

"What you thinkin' about, child?" demanded Miss Mehitable after a long period of silence.

Geraldine met her regard wistfully. "I was wondering if anybody is ever perfectly happy. Isn't there always some

drawback, some 'if that has to be met?"

"Was you thinkin' about Mrs. Barry, Geraldine? I'm sorry she had one o' her haughty spells that day--"

"No, I was not thinking of her; it is Mr. Barry--Ben. He went on a very dangerous errand yesterday."

"You don't say so! Why, he came in as gay as a lark with those apple blossoms and he went out to his machine whistlin'. He couldn't have had much on his mind. You know I told you yesterday he's as sensible as he is brave."

"What good is bravery against a madman with a gun--still he promised, he promised me he would not go to the farm alone."

"Then he'll abide by it. You do give me a turn, Geraldine, talkin' about madmen and guns."

The girl sighed.

"I haven't had anything but 'turns' ever since I first saw the Carder farm; but it is unkind to draw you into it. Sometimes I wish I had never mentioned Pete to Mr. Barry, yet it seems disloyal to leave the boy there when I owe him so much."

And then Geraldine told her friend in detail the part the dwarf had played in her life.

Mrs. Barry was, of course, able to think of little else than the new element which had come so suddenly into her calm, well-ordered life. She shrank fastidiously from anything undignified, and she felt that through no fault of her own she was now in an undignified position. In her son's eyes she was a culprit. Even her humble friend, Mehitable Upton, had revealed plainly an indignation at her attitude. When Ben left yesterday telling her that he might be gone several days, without explaining why or where, she felt the barrier between them even while he kissed her good-bye. He had made a vigorous declaration of independence that night at dinner, and now he had gone away to let her think it over, not even noticing that her eyes were heavy from a sleepless night.

All that day, as she moved about her customary occupations, the thought of Geraldine haunted her; the way the girl had avoided her eyes after their first encounter, how she had clung to Miss Upton, and how eagerly she had urged departure.

"So silly," thought Mrs. Barry while she fed her pigeons. "How absurd of her to expect anything different from a civil reception."

Side by side with this condemnation, however, ran the consideration of how Ben had probably flung himself at her feet so far as the Scout plane would allow, and how he had even urged immediate matrimony. That hurt too much! Mrs. Barry saw the pigeons through a veil of quick tears. One more night she slept or waked over the problem, and as her thought adjusted itself more to Geraldine, the practical side of the girl's situation unfolded to her consideration. There would seem to be no question of returning to the irate farmer to get her clothing, yet that might be the very thing Ben was doing now; risking his precious life again for this stranger who was nothing to them. The more Mrs. Barry thought about it, the more restless she became. At last there was no question any longer but that her only peace lay in going to Miss Melody. After all, it was merely courteous to inquire how the girl had borne the excitement of her escape; but in the back of Mrs. Barry's mind was the hope that she might discover where her boy had gone now.

She made a hasty toilet, jumped into her electric, and drove to Upton's Fancy Goods and Notions. The shades were drawn. The taking-account-of-stock notice was still on the door which resisted all effort to open it.

Knocking availed nothing. Mrs. Barry's lips took a line of firmness equal to her son's. Walking around to the back door, she found it open and entered the kitchen. It was empty.

She moved through the house into the shop. There was Mrs. Whipp, her head tied up in a handkerchief, bending over a packing-box. She started at a sound, raised her head, and stood amazed at the visitor's identity.

"I knocked, but you didn't seem to hear me," said Mrs. Barry with dignity.

"Yes'm, I did hear a knock," returned Charlotte, "but they pound there all day, and o' course I didn't know't was you. I tell Miss Upton if we kept the door locked and the shades down all the time, we'd do a drivin' business. Folks seem jest possessed to come in and buy somethin' 'cause they can't. Did you want somethin' special, Mrs. Barry?"

"I came to see Miss Melody. I wished to inquire if she has recovered from her excitement."

A softened expression stole over Charlotte's weazened face.

"She ain't here. They've gone to the city."

"Who--who did you say has gone?"

Mrs. Barry controlled her own start. Visions of two in that roadster swept over her. Perhaps, she herself having forfeited her right to consideration--there was no telling what might have happened by this time. Mrs. Whipp's smile was frightfully complacent.

"Miss Upton and her went together," was the reply. "Of course, all the girl's clo'es was in the den o' that fiend she got away from, and she had to git some more."

Mrs. Barry breathed freer.

"Miss Upton callated to get some things from her customers and fix 'em over, but Mr. Barry, he wouldn't have it so."

"Are you referring to my son?"

"Yes, Miss Upton said he turned up his nose at hand-me-downs, so she had to jest brace up and git 'em new."

Mrs. Whipp's eyes seemed to see far away and her expression under the protecting towel was one quite novel.

Mrs. Barry cleared her throat.

"My son was here, then, before he went away on his--his little trip."

"Yes," replied Mrs. Whipp, appearing to perceive Dan Cupid over her visitor's shoulder. "He come in to bring the apple blossoms and ask how Geraldine was, and that night sech a box o' candy as he sent her! You'd ought to 'a' seen it, Mis' Barry. P'raps you did see it." Charlotte met the lady's steady eyes eagerly.

"No, I did not see it."

"Well, that poor little girl she couldn't half enjoy them bon-bons, 'cause she was so scared somethin' was goin' to happen to Mr. Barry."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, she was afraid he'd gone back to that farm where they murder folks as quick as look at 'em." Charlotte sniffed a sniff of excited enjoyment.

"What would he go there for?" demanded Mrs. Barry. "Surely not to get those foolish clothes!"

"I don't know. I only know Geraldine cried. Miss Upton said so; but she told her how Mr. Barry was jest as smart as he was brave and she took her to the city to git her mind off."

Charlotte smiled with as soft an expression as the unaccustomed lips could reveal, and nothing but stamping her aristocratic foot could have expressed Mrs. Barry's exasperation.

"I am quite sure my son would not take any absurd and unnecessary step," she said, with such hauteur that Mrs. Whipp came out of her day-dream and realized that the great lady's eyes were flashing. Without another word the visitor turned and left the shop, her black and violet cape sweeping through living-room and kitchen and back into her machine.

The rest of the day was spent by the lady in alternations of scom, vexation, and anxiety.

Late in the afternoon she heard a motor enter the grounds, and hurrying to the door saw with a happy leap of the heart that it was Ben's roadster. Her relief drove her to forgive and forget and to hurry out to the piazza. The machine came on and she saw that her son was not alone. A boy sat beside him.

The roadster stopped. Ben jumped out and kissed his mother, then beckoned to Pete, who obediently drew near and stood on his curved legs, his hat in his hand. He looked up at the queenly lady, and his eyes which had ceased to wonder were still seeking.

"Is she here, Master?" he asked.

"No, but near by," replied Ben.

"Mother, I've engaged a new boy. His name is Pete. He is here for general utility. He is very willing."

Mrs. Barry gazed in disapproval at the quaint, clean figure in his brand-new clothes. Pete's rough hands constantly twirled his straw hat.

"You should have asked me," she said. "We don't need any more help."

Ben put his arm around her and drew her close to him. "Yes, we do," he replied cheerfully, "down at Keefeport. Pete will go there and keep things in shape. You will wonder how you ever got along without him; but I need him first. He was one of the hands at the Carder farm--has been there from a child and he knows more about his master's devilment than anybody else."

"Ben!" His mother looked up reproachfully into the young fellow's happy eyes. "Why did you need to risk your life again--"

"Oh, not a bit of that," laughed Ben. "I picked Pete out of a grocery store--"

"Where is she, Master?" The voice of the boy was pleading again.

"Pete was a good friend to Miss Melody, the only one she had, and now his reward is going to be to see her."

"You don't mean," exclaimed Mrs. Barry, "that you have spent a couple of days to get this boy and dress him up in order to allow him to see Miss Melody?"

"No, not exactly. I kidnapped him as an information bureau."

"Why can't you let that disgusting farmer alone?" asked the lady despairingly.

"Because if I do, he won't let us alone," returned Ben shortly. "Well, now, we've shown ourselves to you and we'll be off to keep my word to Pete. Hop in, boy."

Miss Upton and Geraldine had reached home, hatbox and all, and were in the dismantled shop answering Charlotte's questions when they heard an automobile stop before the door and a cheery whistle sounded. The repellent shades were still down at the windows.

"That's Ben Barry!" exclaimed Miss Mehitable. "Don't you dare to touch that hat!" she added severely to Geraldine, whose cheeks flushed deeply as a tattoo began on the locked door.

So the girl was standing in the middle of the room wearing the droopy hat when Ben came in, followed by the dwarf at whom Miss Mehitable and Charlotte stared.

Geraldine forgot her hat, and Ben Barry--forgot everything but the eager adoration in the face of the transformed slave. "Why, Pete, Pete!" she cried joyously, running to meet him.

The boy bit his lips to keep back the tears and his clumsy fingers worked nervously as his goddess rested both her hands on his shoulders. He couldn't speak, but gazed and gazed up into the eyes under the droopy hat.

Ben Barry, his arms folded, looked on at the tableau while Geraldine murmured welcome and reassurance.

"Aren't we the happiest people in the world, Pete?" she finished softly.

He choked. "Yes, and I'm not going back," he was able to say at last.

"I should say not," put in Ben. "I've brought somebody to help you move, Mehit," he added. Miss Upton was still staring at the dwarf's legs.

"That's fine," said Geraldine. "Pete is just the right one for us."

The boy kept his eyes on hers.

"He can't ever get you again," he said, with trembling eagerness, "'cause I know all about the girls he had there before you, and how one jumped out the winder, and I know what hospital they took her to, for I drove, and I'm goin' there with Mr. Barry, and he's goin' to--"

"Never mind, Pete," interrupted Ben quietly. "We're going to take care of that without troubling Miss Melody."

The dwarf dropped back as Ben advanced. Charlotte said afterward that it gave her a turn to see the manner in which

the young man took both the girl's hands and scanned her changed appearance.

"It looks perfectly absurd with this tailor suit," she said, blushing and laughing. "Miss Upton *would* give it to me. So extravagant!"

The elaborate wink which Miss Mehitable bestowed on Ben as he glanced at her over his love's head was intended to warn him that he had a bill to pay.

"Miss Upton has been your good fairy all along, hasn't she?" His look was so intense and he spoke so seriously that Geraldine glanced up at him half timidly and down again.

Charlotte pulled Miss Upton's dress and motioned with her head toward the living-room; but, as Miss Mehitable said afterward, "What was the good of *their* goin' and leavin' that critter there?"

"Thank you for the candy, Mr. Barry," said Geraldine, meeting his eyes again steadily, "but please don't. You have put me under everlasting obligation, but will you do me one more favor? Will you let me help these dear women and--and stay away, and--don't send me anything?"

Miss Mehitable understood this prayer, and she had a qualm as she thought of the price of the bewitching hat which was at the present moment doing its worst.

"Yes, for a little while," replied Ben. "Pete will get you moved and settled at the Port and then he and I will take a trip. I don't know how long we shall be away; but when we return you will understand that the ogre's teeth have been extracted, the tiger's claws cut, and the spider's web rent. How's that?" He smiled down into the girl's grave eyes, still holding her hands close.

"If I could only find out what my father's debt to him really is, I would consecrate my life to paying it," she said in a low tone.

Miss Mehitable felt that the atmosphere was getting very warm.

"Come here, Pete," she said. "I want to show you my kitchen." The dwarf walked slowly backward to the door, his eyes on the young couple, as if he feared to let them out of his sight lest they vanish and he waken. "Come on, Charlotte."

The three disappeared, Miss Mehitable urging Pete by the shoulder.

"I'll try to find out," returned Ben; "and if it is possible to do that, the debt shall be paid."

Geraldine caught her lip under her teeth and swallowed the rising lump.

"Oh, Mr. Barry--Ben," she said at last, "of course I have no words to thank you--"

"I don't wish to be thanked in words."

"You're too generous."

"Not in the least," returned Ben quietly. "I want to be thanked. I want each of us to thank the other all our lives. I to be grateful to you for existing, and you to thank me for spending my days with the paramount thought of your happiness."

They looked at each other for a long silent minute.

"Mrs. Whipp says your mother came to call on me to-day," said Geraldine at last. "She described her manner so well that it is evident she came at the point of your bayonet. I understand the situation entirely. I've already heard that she is the great lady of the town. You are her only son. Do you suppose I blame her when out of a clear sky you produced me and made your feeling plain to her? Is it any wonder that she made hers plain to me? I should think"--Geraldine gave an appealing pressure to the hands holding hers--"I should think you could be generous enough to--to let me alone."

Her eyes pleaded with him seriously.

"What am I doing?" asked Ben. "What do you suppose is the reason that I'm wasting all these minutes when I might be holding you in my arms!" He had to stop here himself and swallow manfully. "If you knew how you look at this moment--and I don't kiss you--just because I'm giving Mother a little time, so that you will be satisfied--"

"Then you'll promise--will you promise--you kept your promise about the farm?"

"Yes; I found Pete in the village."

"Then you do keep promises! Tell me solemnly that you will leave your mother in freedom. If you don't, Ben--Sir Galahad--I'll run away. I really will--"

In her earnestness she lifted her face toward his, her eyes were irresistible, and in an instant he had swept her into his arms and was kissing her tenderly, fervently, to the utter undoing of the droopy hat which fell unnoticed to the floor.

Voices approaching made him release her.

Very flushed, very grave, both of them, they looked into each other's eyes, and Geraldine, being a woman, put both hands up to her ruffled hair.

"I do promise you, Geraldine," he said, low and earnestly. "Whatever my mother does after this you may know is of her own volition."

Pete burst into the room wild-eyed, followed by Miss Mehitable, who was talking and laughing.

"He was afraid you'd go away without him," she said--"Mercy's sakes, Geraldine Melody, look at your hat!" She darted upon it and snapped some dust off its chiffon. "You'd better be careful how you throw this around. We can't buy a hat like this every day."

"Oh, do forgive me, Miss Upton!" murmured the girl, her eyes very bright. "It was her present to me," she added to Ben. "I'm so sorry!" She went to Miss Mehitable and laid her cheek against hers, and Miss Upton bestowed another prodigious wink upon the purchaser of the hat.

It did not break his gravity; a gravity which Miss Upton but just now noticed.

"Come, Pete, we'll be going," said Ben, and his flushed, serious face worried Miss Mehitable's kind heart, especially as no sign of his merry carelessness returned in his brief leave-taking.

When they were gone and the door had closed after them, she looked at the girl accusingly.

"Something has happened," she said, in a low tone not to attract Charlotte.

"Don't be cross with me about the hat," said the girl, nestling up close to her again. "I just love it--much better even than I did in the store."

Miss Mehitable put an arm around her, not because at the moment she loved her, but because she was there.

"I wonder," she said, "if there's anything in this world that can make anything but a fool out of a girl before it's too late. I know you're just as crazy about him as he is about you! If you wasn't, would you have been snivellin' around because he might get hurt to the farm? And yet jest 'cause o' your silly, foolish pride you've gone and refused him. It's as plain as the nose on his splendid face. As if in the long run it mattered if Mrs. Barry was a little cantankerous. She's run everything around here so long that she forgets her boy's a man with a mind of his own. It's awful narrow of you, Geraldine, awful narrow!"

Upon this the girl lifted her head and smiled faintly into the accusing face.

"Won't it be nice to have Pete help us move," she said innocently.

Miss Upton's lips tightened. She dropped her arm, moved away, and put the droopy hat back in its box.

"You're heartless!" she exclaimed. There was such a peachy bloom on the girl's face. "I won't waste my breath."

"I love *you*," said Geraldine, meekly and defensively.

"Ho!" snorted her good fairy, unappeased.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MERMAID SHOP

For the next few days Miss Mehitable had no time to worry over love-affairs. No matter how early she arose in the morning she found Pete arrayed in overalls sitting on the stone step of Upton's Fancy Goods and Notions, and when by the evening of the third day all her goods, wares, and chattels were deposited in the little shop at Keefeport, she wondered how she had ever got on without him.

On that very day Ben Barry received a threatening letter from Rufus Carder demanding the return of Pete, and he knew that no more time must be lost. He flew over to the Port that afternoon, and alighting on the landing-field which had been prepared near his cottage walked to the little shop near the wharf. Here he found Pete industriously obeying Miss Upton's orders in company with his idol, the whole quartet gay amid their chaos. Even Mrs. Whipp had postponed the fear of rheumatism and had learned how to laugh.

They had formed a line and were passing the articles from boxes to shelves when the leather-coated, helmeted figure stood suddenly before them.

The effect of the apparition upon Geraldine with its associations was so extreme as to make her feel faint for a minute, and Ben saw her face change as she leaned against the counter.

Miss Mehitable saw it too. "Aha!" she thought triumphantly. "Aha! It isn't so funny to break a body's heart, after all."

"Well, Ben Barry," she said aloud, "why didn't you wait till we got settled?"

The aviator stood in the doorway, but came no farther.

"Because I have to take Pete away. I've had a *billet doux* from Rufus Carder and he wants him."

The dwarf rushed to his new master on quaking legs. "Oh, Master! I won't go! I can't go." He looked off wildly on the big billows rolling in. "I'll throw myself in the sea."

Ben put a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Of course you won't go," he said; "but you want to brighten up your wits now and remember everything that will help us. We're going to the city to-night and begin at once to settle that gentleman's affairs." He gave Geraldine a reassuring look. "I should like to take your father's letter with me," he added quietly.

"But we mustn't get Pete into trouble," she replied doubtfully.

"I'm not intending to show it. I want to familiarize myself with his handwriting. I expect to have an interview and perhaps there will be notes to examine."

"But not at the farm," protested the girl quickly. "You'll not go near the meadow?"

"No; the cows have nothing to fear from us this time."

"And you'll"--Geraldine swallowed--"you'll be careful?"

Ben nodded. "All my promises hold," he replied, looking straight into her eyes with only the ghost of his old smile, as Miss Upton noticed.

Geraldine ran upstairs, brought down her father's letter, and gave it to him.

He took it with a nod of thanks. "How do you think you will like to fly, Pete?" he asked. "You can go home with me, or, if you prefer it, in the trolley."

"Anywhere with you, Master," returned the boy. He felt certain that Rufus Carder would not be met among the clouds, but who could be sure that he would not pop up in a trolley car.

"Very well, then. Good-bye, everybody, and expect us when you see us."

"Good-bye, you dear boy," cried Miss Mehitable. *Somebody* should call him "dear." She was determined on that. "Always workin' for others," she continued loudly, "and riskin' your life the way you are." She moved to the door, and raised her voice still higher as the strangely assorted pair moved away up the road. "I hope you'll get your reward sometime!" she shouted; then she turned back and glared at Geraldine.

The girl put her hand on her heart. "It startled me so to see him--just as he looked on that--that--dreadful day," she was going to say, but how could she so characterize the day of her full joy and wonder? So her voice died to silence, and Miss Upton began slamming articles up on the shelves with unnecessary violence, while Geraldine, smiling into the packing-boxes, meekly set about helping her.

Pete, like Geraldine before him, was in such terror of his former master and so full of trust in his present one, that he swallowed his fears as the plane rose for its short trip, and he found the experience enjoyable. Ben, when they reached the house, sought his mother. She was walking on the piazza.

"You didn't tell me you were off for a flight," she said in an annoyed tone.

"Well, it was now you see me and now you don't this time, wasn't it? You had hardly time to miss me. I flew over to the Port to get Pete. We have to go to the city to-night. I'll be gone a few days, Mother, perhaps a week."

"On some disgusting business connected with that unspeakable man, I suppose."

"Verily I believe it will be very disgusting; but it has to be gone through with."

"Why does it?" His mother stood before him and spoke desperately. "Why can't you let it alone?"

"I've told you--because it affects the happiness of my future wife."

Mrs. Barry's eyes were hard, though her cheeks grew crimson. "You haven't announced your engagement to me. Don't you think I should be one of the first to know?" she said.

"I'm not engaged." Ben smiled into her angry, hurt eyes. "Something stands in the way as yet."

"What?"

"Can't you guess?"

They continued to exchange a steady gaze. She spoke first.

"Do you mean to say that anyone concerned in the affair still considers *me*?"

Her boy's smile became a laugh at the deliberate manner of her sarcasm.

"Oh, cut it out, Mother mine," he said. And though she tried to hold stiffly away from him, he hugged her and kissed her and pulled her down beside him on a wicker seat.

She could not get away from his encircling arm and probably she did not wish to.

"Ben, I've had a most disagreeable day," she declared. "Everybody within fifteen miles knows that you flew into the village with a strange girl."

"They said she was pretty, didn't they?"

"I can't leave the house without somebody stopping me and asking me about it, and I'll have to order the telephone taken out if this goes on. I can hardly bear to answer it any more. I called on Miss Melody, but she had gone to town, and that hopeless Mrs. Whipp babbled about your attentions. I don't want you to break the apple blossoms anyway."

"All right, honey, I won't. They're nearly gone; but I shall always love apple blossoms. They're fragrant like her spirit, pink and white like her, wholesome like her, modest like her. You see she has always been kept in the background. No one has taken the bloom from her freshness. She has had blows, has come in contact with some of the world's mud, but it washed away and disappeared under her own purity."

Mrs. Barry looked into the speaker's flashing eyes. "My poor boy," she said at last. "I wonder whether you're crazy or whether you're right. What am I going to do!"

"Of course I don't know what you're going to do," he returned, his lips and voice suddenly serious. "It depends largely upon whether you want my future wife to hand out ice-cream cones to the trippers at Keefeport."

"What do you mean now?" Mrs. Barry asked it severely.

"Why, the little girl is going to try to earn her living, of course, and she will be slow to leave Miss Upton's protection, for she has proved, that a girl's beauty may be her worst enemy. Miss Upton will do a bigger business than ever, that is easily prophesied. The hilarious, rowdy parties that come over in motor-boats will pass the word along that there is something worth seeing at Upton's this year. They will crack their jokes, and Miss Melody will be loyal to her employer."

She won't want to discourage trade. They will make longer visits than usual and the phonograph will work overtime."

Mrs. Barry had risen slowly during this harangue and now looked down upon her son with haughty, displeased eyes.

"I shall speak to Miss Upton," she said.

"I advise you not to," returned Ben dryly, crossing one leg over the other and embracing his knee. "I don't think you are in any position to dictate. I left a merry party down there just now. Mrs. Whipp cracking the air with chuckles, Mehitable rocking the store with her activities, Miss Melody enveloped in a gigantic apron and with a large smudge across her cheek, having the time of her life unpacking boxes. I was sorry to bereave them of Pete, but it won't take them long now to be ready for business."

Mrs. Barry did not speak. A catbird sang in an apple tree, a call to vespers.

"This won't do for me," said Ben, suddenly rising. "I'll go up and throw a few things into my bag. Give us a bite to eat, Mother dear, and tell Lawson to bring the car around. We must get the seven-thirty."

After her boy and his humble lieutenant had left for the train, the mother sat a long time on the piazza thinking. The telephone rang at last. She sighed, went to its corner, and sat down to stop its annoying peremptoriness. For days it had reminded her of an inescapable, buzzing gnat, a thousand times magnified.

"Oh, Mrs. Barry," came a girlish voice across the wire. "Don't think me too inquisitive, but we're all dying to know if that beautiful girl, Miss Melody, is going to live with Miss Upton? Mrs. Whipp said they were going to take her to Keefeport with them, and somebody said they did move to-day and that she did go with them. We thought she was visiting you and I wanted to ask when we might come to call. We're all dying to meet her. You know Ben has been a sort of brother to us all, and we're simply crazy to know this girl and hear about her rescue."

While this speech gushed into Mrs. Barry's unwilling ear, her martyred look was fixed upon the wall and her wits were working. It was Adele Hastings talking. She had always liked Adele. In fact this young girl had been her secret choice for Ben in those innocent days when she supposed she would have some voice in the most important affair of his life. She could not turn Adele off as she had other questioners.

"I suppose this is Adele Hastings speaking."

"Oh, didn't I say? I do beg your pardon. I just saw Ben on the station platform with the queerest little bow-legged boy. Ben looked like a giant beside him. I just flew home to the telephone to ask how you were and--and--about everything."

"That is just a servant Ben has picked up." ("A member of our new menagerie," Mrs. Barry felt like adding, but held her peace and continued to look at the wall.)

"Well, Mother wanted me to say to you that if you were house cleaning, or there was any other reason why it was inconvenient for you to have Miss Melody with you, she would be so glad to have her come to us till you are ready. I told Mother she had probably gone to Keefeport to recuperate in the quiet before the season really begins. I haven't seen Miss Upton or that cross thing that tends store for her, but some people have, and we've heard such fairy tales about that lovely creature--I saw her on the train with Miss Upton--about her being shut up with a madman and Ben literally flying to her rescue and carrying her off under the creature's nose. Why, it's perfectly wonderful! I can hardly wait to hear the truth about it. Talk about the prince on a milk-white steed that always rescued the princess--Ben in his aeroplane makes *him* look like thirty cents."

"Tut, tut," said Mrs. Barry; "you know I don't like slang."

The girlish voice laughed. "But, dear Mrs. Barry, 'marry come up' and 'ods bodikins' were probably slang in the day of the spear and shield. When may I see you and hear about it?"

This direct question forced Mrs. Barry to a decision. The impossible Charlotte Whipp, who had not hesitated to tell her regal self of her son's attentions to the waif, had doubtless poured enough of the yeast of gossip into eager ears to set the whole village to swelling with curiosity, and her dignity as well as Ben's depended on the attitude she took at the present moment.

Her rather stiff and formal voice took on a more confidential tone. "I'm going to ask you to wait a few days, Adele. We have been passing through rather stirring times. I thank your mother very much for her kind offer, but it seemed best for Miss Melody to go to the sea, at least for a few days. You know what an excellent soul Miss Upton is. Miss Melody knew her before, and as the girl was a good deal upset by some exciting experiences, and as I was a complete stranger, Miss Upton stepped into the breach. Please don't believe the exaggerated stories that may be going about. Ben was able to do the young lady a favor, that is all. As you say, she is very charming to look upon. We shall all know her

better after a while."

"Well, just one thing before you hang up, dear Mrs. Barry. I know you will excuse my asking it, because I know your standards, and you have been an even stronger influence upon me socially than my own mother; but is--is Miss Melody the sort of girl you will entertain as an--an equal? or does she--it sounds horrid to ask it--or does she belong more in good Miss Upton's class?"

Mrs. Barry ground her teeth together, and luckily the wall of her reception room was of tough stuff or her look would have withered it. She had a mental flashlight of Geraldine serving trippers with ice-cream cones behind Miss Upton's counter.

"My dear," she said suavely, "do you sound a little bit snobbish?"

"No more than you have taught me to be," was the prompt reply. "I want to behave toward Miss Melody just as you wish me to. It looks to us all, of course, as if she were Miss Upton's friend and not yours."

Mrs. Barry's cheeks flamed. This dreadful youngster was forcing her, hurrying her, and she would be spokesman to the village. Ben's infatuation left her no choice.

"Oh, quite in ours, quite, I judge," she said graciously. "Ben thinks her quite exceptional."

The girlish voice laughed again: not so gleefully as Mrs. Barry could have wished. She hoped they were not sister-sufferers!

"I should judge so, from what Mrs. Whipp has told people. Well, I will be patient, Mrs. Barry. We want to show all courtesy to Ben's friend when the right time comes. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," replied Mrs. Barry, and hung up the receiver.

She sat a few minutes more without moving, deep in thought.

"I have no choice," she said to herself at last. "I have no choice."

The next day she moved about restlessly amid her accustomed occupations and by evening had come to a conclusion and made a plan which on the following afternoon she carried out.

After an early luncheon she set forth in her motor for Keefeport. Miss Upton's little establishment was in nice order by this time and the sign had been hung up over the door: "The Mermaid Shop." By the time Mrs. Barry's car stopped before it, the three residents had eaten their dinner and the dishes were set away.

"There's so few folks here yet, there's hardly anything to do in the store," said Miss Mehitable to Geraldine. "Now's the time for you to go out and walk around and see the handsome cottages and the grand rocky shore. This wharf ain't anything to see."

"Do you think Pearl would like to go to walk?" said the girl, picking up the handsome cat, while Charlotte looked on approvingly.

"Pearl does hate this movin' business," she said. "It'll be weeks before she'll find a spot in the house where she can really settle down."

Geraldine was burying her face in the soft fur when the motor flashed up to the grassy path before the shop, and stopped.

"For the land's sake!" said Miss Mehitable. "It's the Barry car." She hurried forward, and Geraldine, still holding the cat against her cheek, saw the chauffeur open the door and Mrs. Barry emerge.

Ben's assurance flashed into her thought. "Whatever she may do hereafter, remember it is of her own volition."

The lady came in, and, smiling a return to Miss Mehitable's welcome, looked at the girl in the blue dress. She liked the self-possessed manner with which Geraldine greeted her.

"I'm trying to make Pearl feel at home, you see," said the girl. "Mrs. Whipp says it is very hard for her to move."

"Yes, I know that is a pussy's nature. I like cats, but I like birds better, so I don't keep any. How nice you look here. Oh, what charming roses!" going to the nodding beauties standing in a vase on the counter. "Are those for sale? If so they're going home to Keefe."

"No, Mrs. Barry, they ain't for sale," replied Miss Mehitable. "I'm so proud of 'em I can hardly stand it. Ben sent 'em to

me. Wasn't he the dear boy to give the Mermaid such a send-off?"

"He is a nice boy, isn't he, Miss Upton?" returned the visitor graciously. "I'm glad to see you looking so well, Miss Melody."

Geraldine certainly had plenty of color and she held to the cat as an embarrassed actor does to a prop. "I tried to see you one day at Keefe, but you were out."

"Yes, I was dressin' the doll that day," said Miss Mehitable, smiling. She discerned friendliness in the air and was elated.

"The result is very nice," said Mrs. Barry graciously.

"Yes, I think blue serges are about the best thing at the seaside. I wanted to get her one o' these here real snappy sailor dresses, but she kept holdin' me back, holdin' me back, till it's a wonder we got any clothes at all!" Miss Upton laughed, and as Geraldine turned toward her with a smile, Mrs. Barry was conscious of a faint echo of that smile's effect upon her son.

Charlotte stood at the back of the shop looking on and reflectively picking her teeth with a pin. "She's a real good worker, Geraldine is," she remarked with a sniff, "I'll say that for her."

An angry flash leaped up Mrs. Barry's spine. That settled it. This exquisite creature must not stay where that charwoman could speak of her so familiarly.

"Certainly there has been a lot of good work done here," she said, looking about, "but it is a little early to come down yet. I have a lot of curtains to make for my cottage. Miss Melody"--turning to the girl with her most winning look--"you have these people all settled, don't you want to come home with me and help me make my curtains?"

Geraldine's heart leaped in her throat. Although she had put up a brave front she was terribly afraid of the queen of Keefe.

"Why, that would be fine!" exclaimed Miss Mehitable, her optimistic spirit at once seeing her clouds roll away and disperse in mist.

"I don't think everything is done here," said Geraldine; "I don't think you can spare me."

"Of course I can," returned Miss Mehitable vehemently. "You can go just as well as not." She perceived that this was not at all the answer the girl wanted, but she was determined to override all objections and even Geraldine's own feelings.

The latter looked at Mrs. Barry with a faint smile. She only hoped that Miss Upton's mental processes were not such an open book to the visitor as they were to herself. She saw plainly that if it came to the necessity Miss Mehitable would throw her into the motor with her own hands.

"She is not very complimentary, is she?" she remarked. "I thought I was so important."

"She hain't seen the Port yet either. Have you, Gerrie?" came from the back of the store.

Miss Mehitable turned on the speaker. "As if there was any hurry about that!" she said, so fiercely that Charlotte evaporated through the back door of the shop into the regions beyond.

"I'm sure you were important," said Mrs. Barry, "but it is I who need you now."

"I'll help you get your things," said Miss Upton, moving to the stairs with alacrity.

Geraldine dropped Pearl. She could not defend her any longer.

"Wait, Miss Upton," said Mrs. Barry. "How would it be for you to pack Miss Melody's trunk and express it after we are gone?"

Miss Mehitable's face was one broad beam. A trunk!

"She hasn't got any," she replied. "Of course hers was left in that No Man's Land and we just brought things down here in suit-cases and boxes."

"Very well, then, we can take them with us."

"But I shan't need--" began Geraldine.

Mrs. Barry interrupted her. "It is always hard to foresee just what one will need even in a week's time. We may as well take everything."

"Such a small everything," added Geraldine.

A little pulse was beating in her throat. She dreaded to find herself alone with this *grande dame*. She believed that Ben had kept his promise and that this move of his mother was being made of her own volition, but in what capacity was she being invited? Was it a case of giving a piece of employment to a needy girl in her son's absence, or was she being asked on the footing of a friend? In any case, she knew her lover would wish her to go, and as for Miss Upton she would use violence if necessary.

She went upstairs and came down wearing the black sailor hat of the Keefe brand, and carrying a suit-case. Miss Mehitable followed with sundry boxes which she took to the motor. Lamson jumped out and came to the shop to get the suit-case.

"One moment more, please," said Miss Upton, and vanished upstairs. She returned bearing a large hatbox.

"Oh, no, Miss Upton!" exclaimed Geraldine as Miss Mehitable had known she would. "Keep that till I come back. It's a seashore hat."

"It is not," said Miss Mehitable defiantly. "It is a town hat. She got the present of a beautiful hat, Mrs. Barry--"

"Dear Miss Upton doesn't say that she gave it to me herself," put in Geraldine.

No, dear Miss Upton did not; for she had a New England conscience; but she continued firmly:

"She may want to wear it; she's got a white dress."

Geraldine colored. Mrs. Barry had seen her white dress.

"By all means let us take the hat," said that lady, and Lamson bore off the box.

"*Au revoir*, then," said Geraldine, trying to speak lightly, and kissing Miss Mehitable. "I'll let you know what day I am coming back. Say good-bye to Mrs. Whipp for me."

Mrs. Barry's face became inscrutable as Geraldine spoke. She had seen the counter, and the phonograph, and in fancy she could see the impending excursionists.

"Good-bye, Miss Upton." And the shining motor started. "To Rockcrest, Lamson."

Miss Mehitable went back into the house. She suspected she should find Charlotte weeping, and she did.

"I s'pose I can't never say anything right," sniffed the injured one upon her employer's entrance.

"Never mind *us*, Charlotte," responded Miss Upton. "That's a very big thing that's just happened. I'm so tickled I'd dance if I thought the house would stand it."

"I don't see anything so wonderful in that stuck-up woman givin' the girl a job o' sewin'," returned Mrs. Whipp, blowing her nose. "When will Gerrie come back? How we'll miss her!"

"I think," said Miss Upton, impressively--"I think it is very safe to say--Never!"

"Why, what do you mean!"

"I mean Mrs. Barry ain't goin' to let that girl stand behind my counter this summer." Miss Mehitable gave a sudden, sly laugh. "I wasn't goin' to let her anyway," she added, in a low tone as if the walls might have ears, "but Mrs. Barry don't know that, and I'm glad she don't."

Miss Upton sat down and laughed and rocked, and rocked and laughed until Mrs. Whipp began to worry.

"Thumbscrews," said Miss Mehitable, between each burst, "thumbscrews!"

"Where shall I git 'em?" asked Charlotte, rising and staring about her vaguely.

"Nevermind. Let's have some tea," said Miss Mehitable, wiping her eyes.

CHAPTER XV

THE CLOUDS DISPERSE

And so with the entrance into that automobile began still another chapter in Geraldine Melody's life. While they drove through the attractive avenues of the resort and Mrs. Barry pointed out the cottages belonging to well-known people, the young girl was making an effort for her own self-possession. To be alone with the mother of her knight was exciting, and her determination was not to allow any emotion to be observable in her manner. She did not yet know whether she was present as a seamstress or as a guest. She felt that in either case she had been summoned for inspection, for of course Ben had left his mother in no doubt as to his sentiments. Mrs. Barry evinced no embarrassment. Her smooth monologue flowed on without a question. Perhaps she suspected the tumult in the fluttering heart beside her, and was giving the young girl time. At all events, nothing that she said required an answer, and Geraldine obediently looked, unseeing, at every object she pointed out.

The motor rolled across a bridge. "Here you see Keefeport even boasts a little river," said Mrs. Barry. "The young people can enjoy a mild canoe trip as well as their exciting yachting. I am going to stop at my cottage and give a few orders, so long as I am here."

Another five minutes of swift riding brought them to the driveway leading to a cottage placed on a rocky height close to the sea. "We have a rather wonderful view, you see," Mrs. Barry's calm voice went on. "Perhaps you would like to get out and walk about the piazza while I speak with the caretaker."

Geraldine followed her out of the luxurious car, feeling very small and insignificant and resenting the sensation made upon her by the imposing surroundings. She wished herself back with Miss Upton and the cat; but she mounted the steps and stood on the wide porch looking on the jagged rocks beneath. The sea came hissing in among them, flinging up spray and dragging back noisily in the strong wind to make ready for another onslaught. The vast view was superb and suggested all the poems she had ever read about the sea. Mrs. Barry had gone into the house and now came out with the caretakers, a man and wife, with whom she examined the progress of flowers and vines growing in sheltered nooks. Geraldine resolutely shut out memories of her knight. The girls whose summers were spent among these scenes were his friends, and among them his mother had doubtless selected some fastidious maiden who had never encountered disgraceful moments.

"I belong to myself," thought Geraldine proudly, forcing back some stinging drops, salt as the vast waters before her. "I don't need anybody, I don't." She fought down again the memory of her lover's embraces. Ever afterward she remembered those few minutes alone on the piazza at Rockcrest, overwhelmed by the sensation of contrast between herself on sufferance in her cheap raiment, and the indications all about her of the opposite extreme of luxury--remembered those moments as affording her a poignant unhappiness.

"I won't ask you to come into the cottage," said Mrs. Barry, approaching at the close of her interview. "The rugs haven't been unrolled yet, and it is all in disorder. Isn't that a superb show of sky and sea, and never twice alike?"

"Superb," echoed Geraldine.

"You are shivering," said her hostess. "It is many degrees colder here than over in the sheltered place where Miss Upton has her shop. I have quite finished. Let us go back."

They went down to the car and were soon speeding toward Keefe. Beside Lamson sat the imposing hatbox. Somehow it added to Geraldine's unhappiness, as if jeering at her for an effort to appear what she was not.

She must talk. Her regal companion would suspect her wretchedness.

"What are you going to make your curtains of, Mrs. Barry?" she asked.

The commonplace proved a most felicitous question. The lady described material, took her measurements out of her purse, and discussed ruffles and tucks and described location and size of windows, during which talk the young girl was able to throw off the spell that had held her mute.

She did not suspect how her companion was listening with discriminating ears to her speech, and the very tones of her voice, and watching with discriminating eyes her manner and expression. Ben had told his mother to take her magnifying glass and she had begun to use it.

When the motor entered the home grounds at Keefe, Geraldine resisted the associations of her last arrival there. A faint mist of apple blossoms still clung in spots to the orchard.

Lamson carried her poor little effects and the hateful, grandiose hatbox into the living-room where one day she had regained her scattered senses.

"You may take these things up to the blue room," Mrs. Barry said to the maid who appeared, "and you will give Miss Melody any assistance she requires."

Geraldine followed the girl upstairs to the charming room assigned to her. Every dainty convenience was within its walls. The pleasant maid's manner was all alacrity. It was safe to believe that she knew more than her mistress about Geraldine, and the attitude toward her of the young master of the house. The guest looked about her and recalled her room at the Carder farm, the patchwork quilt at the Upton Emporium, and her last shakedown under the eaves of the Keefeport shell house.

Between the filmy white curtains at these windows she could see the rosy vestiges of the orchard bloom. The furniture of the room was apparently ivory, the bathroom silver and porcelain. Azure and white coloring were in all the decorations. The maid was unpacking her boxes. Geraldine was ashamed of her own mortification in allowing her to see the contents.

"I think I'd rather do that myself," she said hastily.

"Some ladies do," returned the girl.

"Especially," rejoined Geraldine, "when they are not used to being waited upon!"

She accompanied this with a look of such frank sweetness that she counted one more victim to her charms.

"She isn't one bit stuck-up," the maid reported downstairs, "and I never saw such hair and eyes in all my life."

"They've done for Mr. Ben all right," remarked the chauffeur. "I guess Madam thought it was about time to get acquainted."

When Geraldine came downstairs an hour later, she was arrayed in the cheap little green-and-white house dress which had been one of her purchases with Miss Upton, and was intended for summer use in the shop. As she wandered into the living-room, Mrs. Barry walking on the piazza perceived her through the long, open windows and came to join her.

"Did you find everything quite comfortable?" she asked solicitously.

"Perfectly," replied Geraldine. "It is quite wonderful after one has been leading a camping-out life."

Mrs. Barry continued to approve her intonation and manner.

"You certainly have passed through strange vicissitudes," she replied. "Sometime you must tell me your story-book adventures."

"They are not very pleasant reminiscences," said Geraldine.

"Very well, then, you shall not be made to rehearse them."

A maid appeared and announced dinner.

Geraldine's repressed excitement took away her appetite for the perfectly served repast. Mrs. Barry's regal personality seemed to pervade the whole establishment. One could not imagine any detail venturing to go wrong; any food to be underdone or overdone; any servant to venture to make trouble. The machinery of the household moved on oiled wheels. A delicate cleanliness, quietness, order, pervaded the home and all its surroundings.

Mrs. Barry made no comment on her guest's lack of appetite. When they had finished, she led her out to the porch where their coffee was served.

"Now, isn't this an improvement on Rockcrest?" she asked as they sat listening to the sleepy, closing evening songs of the thrushes. "Imagine trying to drink our coffee on that piazza where we were this afternoon. There is a more sheltered portion, a part that I have enclosed in glass; but my son likes the front to be all open to the elements."

"It is very beautiful here," said Geraldine. "It must be hard for you to tear yourself away even later in the season."

"That is what does it," returned Mrs. Barry, waving her hand toward a large thermometer affixed to one of the columns. "When you come down some morning and find the mercury trying to go over the top, you are ready to flit where there are no great trees to seem to hold in the air." The speaker paused, regarding the young girl for a moment in silence. An appreciation of her had been growing ever since they left Keefeport, and now for the first time she allowed herself a

pleasure in Geraldine's beauty. It was wonderful camouflage if it was nothing more. "Do you enjoy music, Miss Melody?" she asked suddenly.

The girl gave her a faint smile.

"Foolish question, isn't it?" she added. "I usually play awhile in the evening." She set down her cup and rose.

Geraldine rose also, looked pleased and eager.

"I'm so glad," she replied. "I have no accomplishments myself."

A vague memory of having heard something about a cruel stepmother assailed the hostess. She smiled kindly at the girl. "Some people have gifts instead," she said. "Stay here. I will go in and try to give you some happy thoughts."

Geraldine sank back in her chair, her eyes fixed on the graceful elms and the vivid streaks across a sunset sky.

As the strains of Chopin, Schumann, and Brahms came through the open window it necessitated some effort not to have too happy thoughts. The skillful musician modulated from one number to another, and Geraldine, all ignorant in her art-starved life, of what she was hearing, gave herself up to the loveliness of sight and sound.

When Mrs. Barry reappeared, the girl's eyelids were red, and as she started up to meet her she put out her hands impulsively, and the musician laughed a little as she accepted their grasp, well pleased with the eloquent speechlessness.

When Geraldine waked the next morning her first vague thought was that she must shake off sleep and help Mrs. Carder. That troubling sense faded into another, also troubling. She was to spend a whole day, perhaps several whole days, with the rather fearful splendor of the mother of her knight. That in itself would not be so bad, Mrs. Barry had shown a kind intention, but the knight himself might return at any hour. Why had she come? Yet how refuse when her previous hostess had so energetically thrown her out of the nest?

The sun had gone behind clouds. She rose, closed her windows, and made her toilet, then descended to the hall where Mrs. Barry met her with a pleasant greeting and they went in to breakfast.

"We're going to catch some rain, it seems," she said. "It is nice Miss Upton is moved and settled."

"Yes," rejoined Geraldine, "and curtain-making can go on just as well in the rain."

"You had a good sleep, I'm sure," said the hostess, regarding her freshness.

"Yes, I am ready and full of energy to begin," said the girl. "I feel that I am going to do the work quickly and go back sooner than Miss Upton expects. It is nice for them to have some young hands and feet to call upon."

"I hope you don't feel in haste," returned Mrs. Barry politely. She was so courteous, so gracious, so powerful, and such leagues away from her, Geraldine longed to get at the work, and know what to do with her hands and her eyes.

Very soon the curtain material was produced. Mrs. Barry had the sewing machine moved into the living-room where there was plenty of space for the billowy white stuff, and they began their measuring.

The air was sultry preceding the storm, and a distant rumbling of thunder was heard. The house door was left open as well as the long French windows which gave upon the piazza.

The guest had slept late, delaying the breakfast hour, and the two had been working at the curtains only a short time when a man, strange to Mrs. Barry, walked into the living-room. Approaching on the footpath to the house, Geraldine only had been visible to him through the window. He believed her to be alone in the room, and the house door standing open he had dispensed with the formality of ringing and walked in.

Something in the wildness of the intruder's look startled the hostess and she pressed a button in the wall.

She saw Geraldine's face blanch and her eyes dilate with terror as the man approached her, but no sound escaped her lips. The stranger put out his hand. The girl shrank back. The queen of Keefe stepped forward.

"What do you mean by this?" she exclaimed sternly. "What do you wish?"

The man turned and faced her. "I've come on important business with this girl. My name is Rufus Carder--you may have heard of it. Geraldine Melody belongs to me. Her father gave her to me." He turned back quickly to the girl, for Mrs. Barry's face warned him that his time was short.

"You may have gone away against your will, Gerrie," he said. "It ain't too late to save your father. Come back with me

now and there won't be a word said. Refuse to come, and to-morrow all his pals shall know what he was."



"Geraldine Melody belongs to me. Her Father gave her to me"

Geraldine straightened her slight body. Terror was in every line of her delicate face, but Mrs. Barry saw her control it. The details of the stories she had heard came back to her vividly. She realized the suffering and the fate from which her boy had delivered the captive. Geraldine was exquisite to look at now as she faced her jailer. That ethereal quality which was hers gave her spirituelle face a wonderful appeal.

"Ben was right," thought Mrs. Barry with a thrill of pride. "She is a thoroughbred."

"Mr. Carder," she said, approaching still nearer, her peremptory tone forcing him to turn his long, twitching face toward her, "Miss Melody is about to marry my son. He will attend to any business you may have with her."

"Huh! That's it, is it? You don't look like the kind of woman who will enjoy having a forger in the family."

The girl's eyes closed under the stab.

"Geraldine, I should like you to go upstairs, dear," said Mrs. Barry gently. The girl moved slowly toward the door, Carder's eyes following her full of a fierce, baffled hunger.

He turned on Mrs. Barry with the ugliest look she had ever beheld in a human countenance.

"Your son has stolen my boy, too, my servant, and I've come after him," he said. "The law'll teach that fellow whether he can take other people's property. That boy was bound to me out o' the asylum and I won't stand such impudence, I warn you. Where is he? Where is Pete? I've got a few things to teach him." The furious man was breathing heavily.

"I understand that you have taught him a few things already," replied Mrs. Barry, her eyes as steady as her voice. "I think, as you say, the law may take a hand in your affairs. My son and Pete have gone to the city now, and I fancy it is on your business."

"What business?" ejaculated Carder, fumbling his hat, his rage appearing to feel a check.

"That I don't know, really. I was not interested; but I seem to remember hearing my son use your name.--Lamson, is that you?" she added in the same tone.

The chauffeur was standing at the door. "Yes, Mrs. Barry, you rang."

"Show this man the way to the station, Lamson."

Rufus Carder gave her one parting, vindictive look, and strode to the door.

"Out of my way!" he said savagely, as he pushed by the chauffeur and proceeded out of doors and down the path like one in haste. Mrs. Barry believed he was, indeed, in haste and driven by fear.

She proceeded upstairs to Geraldine's room and found the girl pacing the floor. She paused and gazed at her hostess, her eyes dry and bright. Mrs. Barry approached and took her in her arms. At the affectionate embrace a sob rose in the girl's throat.

"When he says it, it seems true again," she said brokenly. "Ben says it is probably a lie, but I don't know, I don't know."

"That wretch declaring it makes it likely to be untrue. Ben tells me you have lost your father, and if no proceedings were taken against him in his lifetime, I should not fear now. My son hints at disreputable things committed by this man, and if he can prove them, which he has gone to do, and Pete promises that they can do, then the culprit will not want to draw attention to himself by starting any scandal, not even for the joy of revenge on you. Forget it all, Geraldine." The addition was made so tenderly that the girl's desperate composure gave way and she trembled in the enfolding arms.

Mrs. Barry loved her for struggling not to weep. She kissed her cheek as she gently released her. "You are safe, and beloved, and entering a new world. You are young to have endured so many sorrows, but youth is elastic and the future is bright."

Geraldine's breast heaved, she bit her lip, and no eyes ever expressed more than the speaking orbs into which the queen of Keefe was looking.

"I know all that you are thinking," said Mrs. Barry. "I know all that you would like to say. Don't try now. You have had enough excitement. I have always wanted a daughter. I hope you will love me, too."

She kissed the girl again, on the lips this time, and there was fervor in the return.

The next day Mrs. Barry telephoned to half a dozen of her son's girl friends and invited them to come to a sewing-bee and help with the curtains for her cottage. She said that Miss Melody was visiting her and that she would like them to know her. So they all came, wild with curiosity to see the girl that their own Ben had kidnapped and who was going to make him forget them; and Geraldine won them all by her modesty and naturalness. The fact that Ben's mother had accepted her gave her courage in the face of this bevy who had grown up with her lover from childhood. They were too uncertain of the exact status of affairs between the beautiful stranger and their old friend to speak openly of him to her, but almost every reminiscence or subject of which they talked led up to Ben. Of course, some among the six pairs of eyes leveled at Geraldine had a green tinge, and there were some girlish heartaches; and when the chattering flock had had their tea and cakes and left for home, there were certain ones who discussed the impossibility of there being anything serious in the wind.

Ben was not even at home. Would he have gone away for an indefinite time as his mother said he had done, if he was as engrossed in the girl as gossip had said? Had not that very gossip proceeded from the humble walls of Miss Upton's shop where the stranger had apparently found her level? The Barrys had always held such a fine position, etc., etc., etc.

"Oh, but," said Adele Hastings, "that girl is a lady. Every movement and word proves it."

"Besides," added another maiden, "her being humble wouldn't have anything to do with it. It never has, from the time of King Cophetua on."

"Well," put in the poor little girl with the greenest eyes of all, "I think it is very significant that Ben has gone away. You notice Mrs. Barry didn't invite her to come until he had gone, and that common Mrs. Whipp called her by her first name. I heard her myself."

On the whole, Geraldine had scored, and really, although she was at peace with the whole world, the fact of Mrs. Barry's approval dwarfed every other opinion and event; for it meant that no longer need she set up a mental warning and barrier against thoughts of her lover.

A few days afterward Ben telephoned to have Lamson at the station at a certain hour, and he and Pete returned from

their strange quest. Little he dreamed of the stir that telephone message caused in his home.

All the way out to Keefe on the train he was planning interviews with his mother and wondering whether the seed he had dropped into her mind before leaving had borne fruit. He had promised Geraldine not to coerce her, and the girl's pride he knew would not submit to opposing his mother's wish. Therefore, when Mrs. Barry walked out on the piazza to meet him, it was a very serious son that she encountered.

"What is the matter, Benny?" she asked as she kissed him. "Have you failed?"

"No, indeed. I have succeeded triumphantly. I've got Carder in a box, and, believe me, he won't try to lift up the lid and let anybody see him."

"He was here soon after you left," said Mrs. Barry calmly.

Ben looked surprised and alert.

"What did he want?"

"Pete; and he was going to have him or put you in the lock-up. Also he wanted Miss Melody. He's a wretch, Ben. I'm glad you went after him."

"He'll not trouble her any more," said the young fellow, walking into the house with his mother clinging to his arm. "Carder is going to have ample leisure to think over the game he has played. Isn't it a strange satire of fate that should make insignificant little Pete the boomerang to turn back and floor him? Pete's an ideal witness. He sees what he sees and he knows what he knows, and nothing can shake him because he doesn't know anything else. Great Scott! when I located the facts at that hospital and linked them together and brought an accusation against Carder, it was like opening a door to a swarm of hornets. He has made so many people hate him that when the timid ones found it would be safe to loosen up, they were ready to fall upon him and sting him to death. He's safe to get a long sentence, and it will be time enough when he comes out to talk to him about Mr. Melody's debts--if Geraldine wishes it."

Ben looked around suddenly at his mother.

"Have you been to Keefeport to see Geraldine?"

She returned his gaze smiling, and feigned to tremble. "I'm so glad I have, Ben. You look so severe."

"And did you take that magnifying glass?"

"Yes."

"Wasn't I right?" asked Ben with some relief.

"You were. I like the girl. I feel we are going to be friends."

"Well, then, how about her being a clerk for Miss Upton?"

Ben asked the question frowning, and flung himself down beside his mother where she had seated herself on a divan. Why couldn't her blood run as fast as his? Why must she be so cold and deliberate at a crucial time? "Going to be friends!" What an utterly inadequate speech!

"I want to talk to you about that," rejoined his mother. "Will you please go into my study and bring me a letter you'll find on the table?"

Without a word, and still with the dissatisfied line in his forehead, the young man rose and moved away toward the closed door of the sanctum.

He opened it and there was a moment of dead silence. Mrs. Barry could visualize Geraldine as she looked standing there, radiantly expectant, mischievously blissful. The door slammed, and all was silence.

The mother laughed softly over the bit of sewing she had picked up. For a minute she could not see very plainly, but she wiped her eyes and it passed.

CHAPTER XVI

APPLE BLOSSOMS

Of course Ben wanted to be married at once, and whatever he wanted Geraldine wanted, but Mrs. Barry overruled this.

"I hope you will go back to school, Ben, and get your sheepskin," she said. "I want you to live in the city, too, and leave Geraldine with me. I would like to have some happiness with a daughter before she is engrossed in being your wife. Wait for your wedding until the orchard blooms again."

Ecstatic as Ben was, he could see sense in this; but vacation came first and Geraldine was a belle at Keefeport that summer. Her beauty blossomed, and all the repressed vivacity of her nature came to the surface. Her room at Rockcrest commanded the ocean, and every night before she slept she knelt before her window and gave thanks for a happiness which seemed as illimitable as the waters rolling to the horizon. She yachted, and danced, and canoed, and flew, all that summer. She gained the hearts of the women by her unspoiled modesty and consideration, while Ben was the envy of every bachelor at the resort. Nor did Geraldine forget Miss Upton. Every few days she called at the shop, and the two women there were never tired of admiring and exclaiming over the charming costumes in which Mrs. Barry dressed her child, and many a gift the girl brought to them, never forgetting what she owed to her good fairy.

Pete was a happy general utility man and Miss Upton borrowed him at times; but he liked best working on the yacht, where he was never through polishing and cleaning, keeping it spick and span. He was given a blue suit and a yachting cap and rolled around the deck the jolliest of jolly little tars.

When autumn came, Ben Barry took rooms in the city, coming to Keefe for the week-ends. Geraldine, who had had the usual school-girl fragments of music and languages, studied hard, and Mrs. Barry took her to town for one month instead of the three which she usually spent there. It was best not to divert Ben too much.

So the winter wore away, and the snow melted and the crocuses peeped up again. The robins returned, and Ben understood at last why their insistent, joyous cry was always of *Geraldine, Geraldine, Geraldine!*

The orchard was under solicitous surveillance this spring, and though it takes the watched pot so long to boil, at last the rosy clouds drifting in the sky seemed to catch in the apple boughs and rest there, and then the wedding day was set.

The spacious rooms of the old house were cleared for dancing, for the ceremony was to take place out under the trees at noon. Miss Upton had a new black silk dress given her by the bridegroom with a note over which she wept, for it acknowledged so affectionately all that he owed to his bride's good fairy from the day when she so effectively waved her umbrella wand in the city. One of her gowns was made over for Mrs. Whipp, who on the great day stood with the maids and watched the wedding party as it filed out over the lawn to the rosy bower of the orchard. The six bridesmaids wore pale-green and white, and, as Miss Upton viewed with satisfaction, "droopy hats." She scanned the half-dozen of Ben's men friends who supported him on the occasion and mentally noted their inferiority to her hero.

Geraldine--but who could describe Geraldine in her beautiful happiness and her happy beauty! Look over your fairy tales and find a princess in clinging, lacy robes, her veil fastened with apple blossoms, and the golden sheen of her hair shining through. Her bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley showered down before her and clung to her filmy gown as she stepped, and the sweet gravity of her eyes never left the face of the good old minister who had baptized Ben in his babyhood, until he came to the words: "Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" Mrs. Barry stepped forward, took the hands of her children and placed them together. Mehitable Upton was not the only one in the large gathering who dissolved at the look on those three faces.

In a minute it was over. The two were made one, and a soft, happy confusion of tongues ensued. After the kissing and the congratulations, a breakfast was served on the wide piazzas, and the orchestra behind the screen of palms began its strains of gay music.

After Geraldine had cut the bride's cake and disappeared to put on her going-away gown, one of the waiters brought out the rice.

Mrs. Barry begged the company not to be too generous with it. "Just a pinch apiece," she said. "Don't embarrass them."

Adele Hastings, the maid of honor, laughed with her maids. She had come very close to Geraldine in the last weeks, and she had managed to get both umbrellas of bride and groom and put as much rice into them as the slim fastenings would

permit. She believed the bridal pair were going to take a water trip, and she felt that the effect of opening the umbrellas on a sunny deck some day would be exhilarating.

Mrs. Barry, as serene as ever, and very handsome in her lavender satin, disappeared upstairs for a few minutes. When she returned, Lamson was driving the automobile around to the front of the house.

"Now, be merciful to those poor youngsters," she said again, as, armed with rice, they ranged themselves on the piazza and steps, making an aisle for the hero and heroine to pass through. They waited, talking and laughing, when suddenly there was a burst of sound. Over the house-top came an increasing whirr, and an aeroplane suddenly flew over their heads. An excited cry arose from the cheated crowd. Laughter and shrieks burst from every upturned face. *Cher Ami* circled around the house, flew away and returned, the young people below shouting messages that were never heard. At last down through the laughter-rent air came the bridal bouquet, and scrambling and more shrieks ensued. The little girl with the greenest eyes of all—one of the bridesmaids she was—secured it. We'll hope it was a comfort to her.

Lamson was demurely driving the car back to the garage, and Mrs. Barry, her dignity for once all forgotten, was laughing gayly. The wedding party fell upon her with reproaches while the orchestra gave a spirited rendition of "Going Up," the aviation operetta of the day.

They all watched the flight for a time, but the music invited, and soon the couples were disappearing through the windows into the house and gliding over the floor.

Mrs. Barry and Miss Upton stood together, still following the swiftly receding aeroplane.

Mrs. Barry shook her head and sighed, smiling. "Young America! Young America!" she murmured.

"Yes," said Miss Upton, "what would our grandfathers have thought of it? Talk about fairy tales! Do any of the old stories come up to that?"

"No," returned Mrs. Barry, "but there is one feature of them that is ever new. It is the best part of all and no story is complete without it."

"Yes, I know," said Miss Mehitable, nodding. They were both looking now at a small dark point vanishing into a pearly cloud. "I know," she repeated. "'And they lived happily ever afterward!'"

THE END

By Clara Louise Burnham

IN APPLE-BLOSSOM TIME. Illustrated.
HEARTS' HAVEN. Illustrated by Helen Mason Grose.
INSTEAD OF THE THORN. With frontispiece.
THE RIGHT TRACK. With frontispiece in color.
THE GOLDEN DOG. Illustrated in color.
THE INNER FLAME. With frontispiece in color.
CLEVER BETSY. Illustrated.
FLUTTERFLY. Illustrated.
THE LEAVEN OF LOVE. With frontispiece in color.
THE QUEST FLOWER. Illustrated.
THE OPENED SHUTTERS. With frontispiece in color.
JEWEL: A CHAPTER IN HER LIFE. Illustrated.
JEWEL'S STORYBOOK. Illustrated.
THE RIGHT PRINCESS.
MISS PRITCHARD'S WEDDING TRIP.
YOUNG MAIDS AND OLD.
DEARLY BOUGHT.
NO GENTLEMEN.
A SANE LUNATIC.
NEXT DOOR.
THE MISTRESS OF BEECH KNOLL.
MISS BAGG'S SECRETARY.

DR. LATIMER.
SWEET CLOVER. A Romance of the White City.
THE WISE WOMAN.
MISS ARCHER ARCHER.
A GREAT LOVE. A Novel.
A WEST POINT WOOING, and Other Stories.

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON AND NEW YORK