

== FICTION ==

Fannie Hurst

Just Around the Corner

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

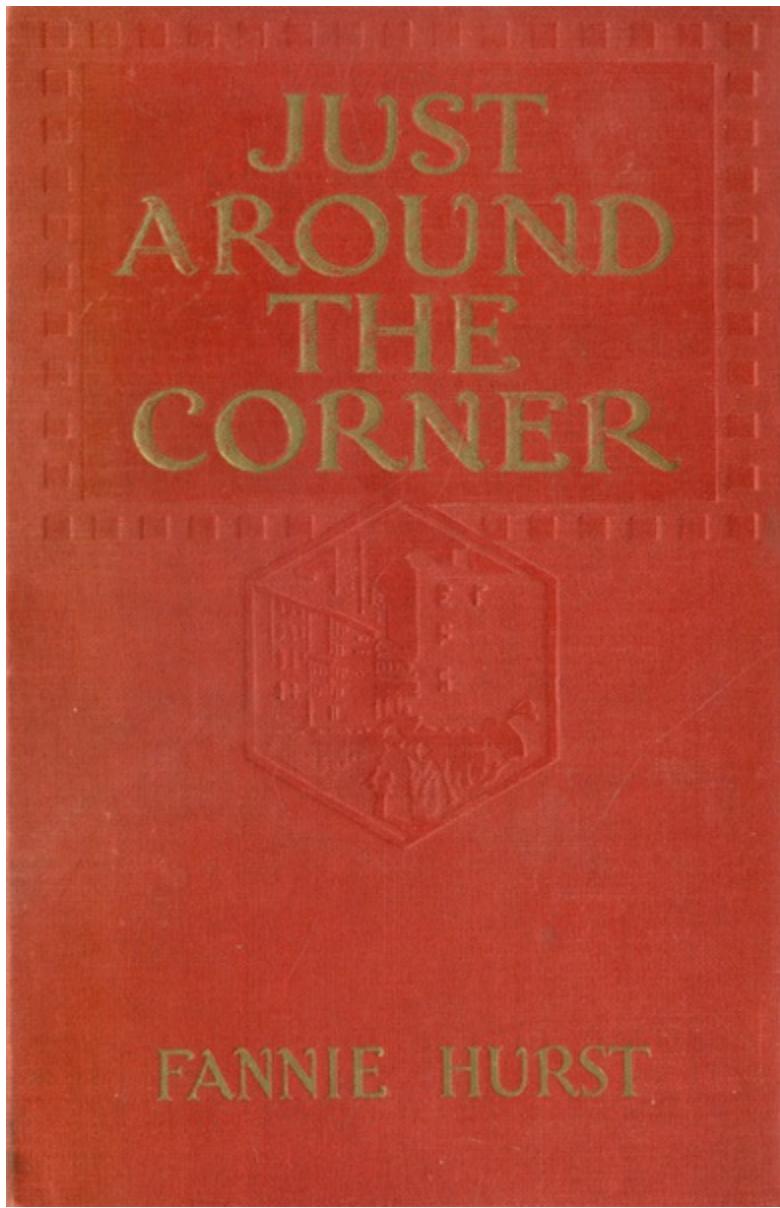
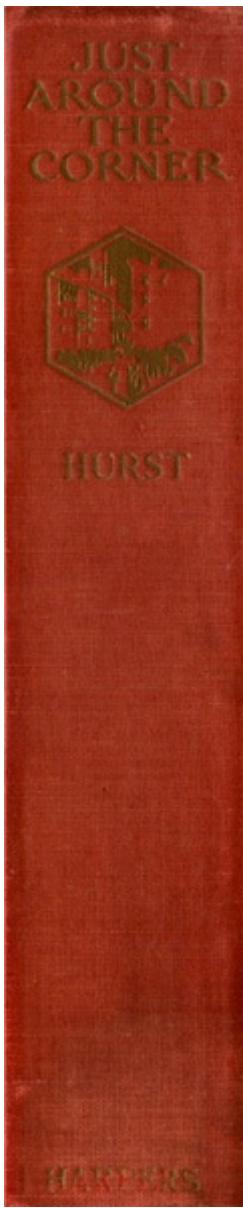
A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK



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JUST AROUND THE CORNER





"IT'S ALL RIGHT, DEAREST; THIS IS YOUR SURPRISE"

[[See page 28](#)

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ROMANCE *en casserole*

BY
FANNIE HURST

ILLUSTRATED



HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK AND LONDON
MCMXIV

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JUST AROUND THE CORNER

POWER AND HORSE-POWER

IN the Knockerbeck Hotel there are various parlors; Pompeian rooms lined in marble and pillared in chaste fluted columns; Louis Quinze corners, gold-leafed and pink-brocaded, principally furnished with a spindly-legged Vernis-

Martin cabinet and a large French clock in the form of a celestial sphere surmounted by a gold cupid.

There are high-ceilinged rendezvous rooms, with six arm and two straight chairs chased after the manner of Gouthiere, and a series of small inlaid writing-desks, generously equipped for an avidious public to whom the crest-embossed stationery of a four-dollar-a-day-up hotel suggests long-forgotten friends back home.

Just off the lobby is the Oriental room, thick with arabesque hangings and incense and distinguished by the famous pair of Chinese famille rose mandarin jars, fifty-three inches high and enameled with Hoho birds and flowers. In careful contrast the adjoining room, a Colonial parlor paneled in black walnut and designed by a notorious architect, is ten degrees lower in temperature and lighted by large rectangular windows, through whose leaded panes a checkered patch of sunshine filters across the floor for half an hour each forenoon.

Then there is the manicure parlor, done in white tile, and stationary wash-stands by the Herman Casky Hygienic Company, Eighth Avenue.

The oracle of this particular Delphi was Miss Gertrude Sprunt, white-shirtwaisted, smooth-haired, and cool-fingered. Miss Sprunt could tell, almost as soon as you stepped out of the elevator opposite the parlors, the shortest cut to your hand and heart; she could glance at a pair of cuffs and give the finger-nails a correspondingly high or domestic finish, and could cater to the manicurial whims of Fifth Avenue and Four Corners alike. After one digital treat at her clever hands you enlisted as one of Miss Sprunt's regulars.

This fact was not lost upon her sister worker, Miss Ethyl Mooney. "Say, Gertie"--Miss Mooney tied a perky little apron about her trim waist and patted a bow into place--"is there ever a mornin' that you ain't booked clear through the day?"

Miss Sprunt hung her flat sailor hat and blue jacket behind the door, placed her hands on her hips, glanced down the length of her svelte figure, yawned, and patted her mouth with her hand.

"Not so you could notice it," she replied, in gapey tones. "I'm booked from nine to quitting just six days of the week; and, believe me, it's not like taking the rest cure."

"I guess if I was a jollier like you, Gert, I'd have a waitin'-list, too, I wish I could get on to your system."

"Maybe I give tradin'-stamps," observed Miss Sprunt, flippantly.

"You give 'em some sort of laughing-gas; but me, I'm of a retiring disposition, and I never could force myself on nobody."

Miss Gertrude flecked at herself with a whisk-broom.

"Don't feel bad about it, Ethyl; just keep on trying."

Miss Ethyl flushed angrily.

"Smarty!" she said.

"I wasn't trying to be nasty, Ethyl--you're welcome to an appointment every twenty minutes so far as I'm concerned."

Miss Ethyl appeared appeased.

"You know yourself, Gert, you gotta way about you. A dollar tip ain't nothin' for you. But look at me--I've forgot there's anything bigger'n a quarter in circulation."

"There's a great deal in knowing human nature. Why, I can almost tell a fellow's first name by looking at his half-moons."

"Believe me, Gert, it ain't your glossy finish that makes the hit; it's a way you've got of making a fellow think he's the whole show."

"*I do* try to make myself agreeable," admitted Miss Sprunt.

"Agreeable! You can look at a guy with that Oh-I-could-just-listen-to-you-talk-for-ever expression, and by the time you're through with him he'll want to take his tens out of the water and sign over his insurance to you."

"Manicuring is a business like anything else," said Miss Sprunt, by no means displeased. "You sure do have to cater to the trade."

"Well, believe me--" began Miss Ethyl.

But Miss Gertrude suddenly straightened, smiled, and turned toward her table.

Across the hall Mr. James Barker, the rubbed-down, clean-shaven result of a Russian bath, a Swedish massage, and a bountiful American breakfast, stepped out of a French-gold elevator and entered the parlor.

Miss Sprunt placed the backs of her hands on her hips and cocked her head at the clock.

"Good morning, Mr. Barker; you're on time to the minute."

Mr. Barker removed his black-and-white checked cap, deposited three morning editions of evening papers atop a small glass case devoted to the display of Madame Dupont's beautifying cold-creams and marvelous cocoa-butters, and rubbed his hands swiftly together as if generating a spark. A large diamond mounted in a cruelly stretched lion's mouth glinted on Mr. Barker's left hand; a sister stone glowed like an acetylene lamp from his scarf.

"On time, eh! Leave it to your Uncle Fuller to be on time for the big show--a pretty goil can drag me from the hay quicker'n anything I know of."

Miss Gertrude quirked the corner of one eye at Miss Ethyl in a scarcely perceptible wink and filled a glass bowl with warm water.

"That's one thing I will say for my regular customers--they never keep me waiting; that is the beauty of having a high-class trade."

She glanced at Mr. Barker with pleasing insinuation, and they seated themselves *vis-a-vis* at the little table.

Miss Sprunt surrounded herself with the implements of her craft--small porcelain jars of pink and white cold-creams, cakes of powder in varying degrees of pinkness, vials of opaque liquids, graduated series of files and scissors, large and small chamois-covered buffers, and last the round glass bowl of tepid water cloudy with melting soap.

Mr. Barker extended his large hand upon the little cushion and sighed in satisfaction.

"Go to it, sis--gimme a shine like a wind-shield."

She rested his four heavy fingers lightly in her palm.

"You really don't need a manicure, Mr. Barker; your hands keep the shine better than most."

"Well, I'll be hanged--tryin' to learn your Uncle Fuller when to have his own hands polished! Can you beat it?" Mr. Barker's steel-blue shaved face widened to a broad grin. "Say, you're a goil after my own heart--a regular little sixty-horse-power queen."

"I wasn't born yesterday, Mr. Barker."

"I know you wasn't, but you can't bluff me off, kiddo. You don't need to give me no high-power shine if you don't want to, but I've got one dollar and forty minutes' worth of your time cornered, just the samey."

Miss Sprunt dipped his hands into tepid water.

"I knew what I said would not frighten you off, Mr. Barker. I wouldn't have said it if I thought it would."

Mr. Barker guffawed with gusto.

"Can you beat the wimmin?" he cried. "Can you beat the wimmin?"

"You want a high pink finish, don't you, Mr. Barker?"

"Go as far as you like, sis; give 'em to me as pink and shiny as a baby's heel."

Miss Sprunt gouged out a finger-tip of pink cream and applied it lightly to the several members of his right hand. Her touch was sure and swift.

He regarded her with frankly admiring eyes.

"You're some little goil," he said; "you can tell me what I want better than I know myself."

"That's easy; there isn't a broker in New York who doesn't want a high pink finish, and I've been doing brokers, actors, millionaires, bank clerks, and Sixth Avenue swells in this hotel for three years."

He laughed delightedly, his eyes almost disappearing behind a fretwork of fine wrinkles.

"What makes you know I'm a tape-puller, kiddo? Durned if you ain't got my number better than I got it myself."

"I can tell a broker from a business man as easy as I can tell a five-carat diamond from a gilt-edge bond."

He slid farther down on his chair and regarded her with genuine approval.

"Say, kiddo, I've been all round the world--took a trip through Egypt in my car last spring that I could write a book about; but I ain't seen nothin' in the way of skirts that could touch you with a ten-foot rod."

She flushed.

"Oh, you fellows are such jolliers!"

"On the level, kiddo, you're preferred stock all right, and I'd be willin' to take a flyer any time."

"Say, Mr. Barker, you'd better quit stirring the candy, or it will turn to sugar."

"Lemme tell you, Miss Gertie, I ain't guyin', and I'll prove it to you. I'm goin' to take you out in the swellest little ninety-horse-power speedwagon you ever seen; if you'll gimme leave I'll set you and me up to-night to the niftiest little dinner-party on the island, eh?"

She filed rapidly at his thumb, bringing the nail to a pointed apex.

"I'm very careful about accepting invitations, Mr. Barker."

"Don't you think I can tell a genteel goil when I see her? That's why I ain't asked you out the first time I seen you."

She kept her eyes lowered.

"Of course, since you put it that way, I'll be pleased to accept your invitation, Mr. Barker."

He struck the table with his free hand.

"You're a live un, all right. How about callin' round fer you at six this evenin'?"

She nodded assent.

"Good goil! We'll keep the speedometer busy, all right!"

She skidded the palms of her hands over his nails. "There," she said, "that's not a bad shine."

He straightened his hands out before him and regarded them in mock scrutiny. "Those are some classy grabbers," he said; "and you're some classy little woiker."

He watched her replace the crystal stoppers in their several bottles and fit her various commodities into place. She ranged the scissors and files in neat graduated rows and blew powder particles off the cover with prettily pursed lips.

"That'll be about all, Mr. Barker."

He ambled reluctantly out from his chair.

"You'll be here at six, then?"

"Will I be here at six, sis? Say, will a fish swim?"

He fitted his cap carefully upon his head and pulled the vizor low over his eyes.

"So long, kiddo!" He crossed the marble corridor, stepped into the gold elevator, the filigree door snapped shut, and he shot upward.

Miss Ethyl waited a moment and then pitched her voice to a careful note of indifference.

"I'll bet the million-dollar kid asked you to elope with him."

Miss Gertrude tilted her coiffure forward and ran her amber back-comb through her front hair.

"No," she said, with the same indifference, "he didn't ask me to elope with him; he just wanted to know if I'd tour Hester Street with him in his canoe."

"I don't see no medals on you fer bein' the end man of the minstrel show. Don't let a boat trip to Coney go to your head; you might get brain-fever."

Gertrude Sprunt cast her eyes ceilingward.

"Well, one good thing, your brain will never cause you any trouble, Ethyl."

"Lord, Gert, cut out the airs! You ain't livin' in the rose suite on the tenth floor; you're only applyin' nail-polishes and cuticle-lotions down here in the basement."

"There's something else I'm doing, too," retorted Miss Gertrude, with unruffled amiability. "I'm minding my own affairs."

They fell to work again after these happy sallies, and it was late afternoon before there came a welcome lull.

"Who's your last, Gert?"

"Mr. Chase." There were two red spots of excitement burning on Miss Sprunt's cheeks, and her eyes showed more black than blue.

"Not that little guy with the Now-I-lay-me-down-to-sleep face? Take it from me, he's a bank clerk or a library guy. Thank Heaven, I ain't got no cheap skates on my staff!"

Miss Gertrude flushed up to her eyes.

"He may be a clerk, but--"

Mr. Chase entered quietly. There was a gentle, even shrinking smile upon his features, and he carried a small offering covered with purple tissue-paper, which he placed nervously upon the edge of the table.

"Good afternoon, Miss Sprunt." He pushed the greeting toward her. "May I hope that you will accept these?"

"Oh, Mr. Chase, aren't you good?" The very quality of her voice was suddenly different, like the softening of a violin note when you mute the strings.

He drew his chair up to the table with the quiet satisfaction of a man ready for a well-merited meal.

"You and violets are inseparable in my mind, Miss Sprunt, because you both suggest the spring."

She laughed in low, rich tones, and her shirtwaist rose and fell rapidly from short breathing.

"Why," she said, "that's the very nicest thing any one ever said to me!"

His hand, long-fingered and virile, drooped over the edge of the bowl into the warm water; he leaned forward with his chest against the line of the table.

"What do you mean, Miss Sprunt?"

She took his dripping hand from the water and dried each finger separately.

"If you had been doing high pink finishes for three years you'd know the difference when a dull white came along--I--I mean, I--"

He smoothed away her embarrassment with a raillery: "By your polish shall ye be known."

"Yes," she replied, with more seriousness than banter; "that's exactly what I mean. I'm not used to men whose polish extends beyond their finger-nails."

She worked with her head bent low, and he regarded the shining coils of her hair.

"How droll you are!" he said.

She pushed back the half-moons of his fingers with an orange stick dipped in cold-cream.

"You ought to watch your cuticle, Mr. Chase, and be more regular about the manicures. Your hands are more delicate than most."

He started.

"Of course I should pay more attention to them, but I'm pretty busy and--and--"

"Of course I understand manicures are expensive luxuries these days."

"Yes."

"I have become so accustomed to hotel trade that I forgot that some hands may be earning salaries instead of drawing incomes."

Her manner was unobtrusive, and he laughed quietly.

"You are quite a student of types, Miss Sprunt."

"Wouldn't I have to be, Mr. Chase, me doing as many as a hundred fingers a day, and something different coming with each ten of them?"

"You are delightful," he said, letting his amused eyes rest upon her; "but I fear you've mysterious methods of divination."

"Oh, I don't know," she said, airily. "Just take you, for example. I don't need an X-ray to see that there isn't a Fifth Avenue tailor sign stitched inside your coat. It doesn't take any mind-reader to know that you come in from the Sixth Avenue entrance and not from the elevator. Besides, when you come to live in a lobster palace you usually have your claws done to match your shell. I'd have given *you* a dull white finish without your even asking for it."

"I see where I stand with you, Miss Sprunt."

"Oh, it isn't that, Mr. Chase. I guess, if the truth was known, the crawfish stand better with me than the lobsters."

Mr. Chase's fingers closed lightly over hers.

"I believe you mean what you say," he said.

"You bet your life I do!" she said, emphasizing each word with a buff. She looked up, met his insistent eyes, and laughed in a high, unnatural pitch. "Other hand, please," she whispered.

When he finally rose to depart she rose with him, holding her nosegay at arm's-length and tilting her head.

"It's almost time for wood violets, Miss Sprunt. I'll try to get you some."

"Oh, don't trouble, Mr. Chase; these hothouse ones are beauties."

"I--I'll be dropping in soon again, Miss Sprunt. I think I'll take your advice and be more regular about my manicures."

"Oh," she said, in some confusion, "I--I didn't mean that. You can care for them in between times yourself."

At the Sixth Avenue exit he paused.

"Good night," he said, slowly.

"Good night," she responded, her lips warm and parted like a child's.

When the click of his footsteps had echoed down the marble corridor Miss Ethyl crossed the room and indulged in several jerky sniffs at the little floral offering. "Well, whatta you know about that little tin Willie, bringin' a goil violets in May? You better stick to the million-dollar kid, Gert; he's the strawberries-in-December brand."

For once Miss Gertrude did not retort; her eyes, full of dreams, were gazing past the doorway which had so recently framed the modest figure of Mr. Chase.

Promptly at six Mr. Barker appeared for his appointment. He bespoke the last word and epilogue in sartorial perfection--his suit was a trifle too brown and a trifle too creased and his carnation a bit too large, but he radiated good cheer and perfume.

Miss Ethyl nudged Miss Gertrude excitedly.

"Pipe the rig, Gert; he makes you look like a hole in a doughnut."

He entered, suave as oil.

"Well, sis, ready?"

"Oh, Mr. Barker, you're all dressed up--and look at me. I--"

"Ah-h-h, how do you like it? Some class, eh? Guess your Uncle Fuller ain't some hit--brand-new gear from tonneau to rear wheels."

Mr. Barker circumvolved on one heel, holding his coat-tails apart.

"I blew me right fer this outfit; but it's woith the money, sis."

"If I had known I'd have gone home and dressed up, too."

"Well, whatta you know about that?" exclaimed Mr. Barker, observing her up and down. "That there shroud you're wearing is as classy as anything I've seen up in the lobby or any place else, and I've been all round the wold some, too. I know the real thing from the seconds every time."

Miss Gertrude worked into her gloves.

"I guess it is more becoming for a girl like me to go plainly."

"Believe me, kiddo"--Mr. Barker placed his hand blinker-fashion against the side of his mouth, and his lips took on an oblique slant--"take it from me, kiddo, when it comes to real feet-on-the-fender comfort, a nineteen-fifty suit with a extry pair of pants thrown in can make this rig feel like a busted tire."

"Well, Mr. Barker, I'm ready if you are."

He swung one arm akimbo with an outward circular movement, clicked his heels together, and straightened his shoulders until his speckled white vest swelled.

"Hitch on, sis, and let's show Broadway we're in town!"

Gertrude took a pinch of sleeve between her gloved fingers; they fell into step. At the door she turned and nodded over one shoulder.

"Good night, Ethyl dear," she said, a trifle too sweetly.

A huge mahogany-colored touring-car caparisoned in nickel and upholstered in darker red panted and chugged at the Broadway curb. Mr. Barker helped her into the front seat, swung himself behind the steering-wheel, covered them over with a striped rug, and turned his shining monster into the flux of Broadway.

Miss Gertrude leaned her head back against the upholstery and breathed a deep-seated, satisfied sigh.

"This," she said, "is what I call living."

Mr. Barker grinned and let out five miles more to the hour.

"I guess this ain't got the Sixth Avenue 'L' skinned a mile!"

"Two miles," she said.

"Honest, sis, I could be arrested for what I think of the 'L'"

"I know the furnishing of every third-floor front on the line," she replied, with a dreary attempt at jocoseness.

"Never mind, kiddo, I've got my eye on you," he sang, quoting from a street song of the hour.

They sped on silently, the wind singing in their ears.

"Want the shield up?"

"The what?"

"The glass front."

"No, thank you, Mr. Barker; this air is good."

"This old wagon can eat up the miles, all right, eh? She toured Egypt fer two months and never turned an ankle."

"To think of having traveled as you have."

"Me, I'm the best little traveler you ever seen. More than once I drove this car up a mountainside. Hold your hat--here goes, kiddo."

"I guess you'll think I'm slow, but this is the first time I've been in an automobile, except once when I was sent for in a taxi-cab for a private manicure."

"You think you could get used to mine, kiddo?" He nudged her elbow with his free arm; she drew herself back against the cushions.

"The way I feel now," she said, closing her eyes, "I could ride this way until the crack of doom."

They drew up before a flaring, electric-lighted cafe with an awning extending from the entrance out to the curb. A footman swung open the door, a doorman relieved Mr. Barker of his hat and light overcoat, a head waiter steered them through an Arcadia of palms, flower-banked tables, and small fountains to a mirrored corner, a lackey drew out their chairs, a pantry boy placed crisp rolls and small pats of sweet butter beside their plates and filled their tumblers with water from a crystal bottle, a waiter bent almost double wrote their order on a silver-mounted pad, and music faint as the symphony of the spheres came to them from a small gold balcony.

Miss Gertrude removed her gloves thoughtfully.

"That is what I call living," she repeated. She leaned forward, her elbows on the table, and the little bunch of violets at her belt worked out and fell to the floor. An attendant sprang to recover them.

"Let 'em go," said Barker. He drew a heavy-headed rose from the embankment between them and wiped its wet stem. "Here's a posy that's got them beat right."

She took it and pinned it at her throat. "Thanks," she said, glancing about her with glowing, interested eyes.

"This place makes Runey's lunch-room look like a two-weeks-old manicure."

"I told you I was goin' to show you the time of your life, didn't I? Any goil that goes out with me ain't with a piker."

"Gee!" said Gertrude; "if Ethyl could only see me now!"

She sipped her water, and the ice tinkled against the frail sides of the tumbler. A waiter swung a silver dome off a platter and served them a steaming and unpronounceable delicacy; a woman sang from the small gold balcony--life, wine, and jewels sparkled alike.

A page with converging lines of gilt balls down the front of his uniform passed picture post-cards, showing the cafe, from table to table. Gertrude asked for a lead-pencil and wrote one to a cousin in Montana, and Mr. Barker signed his name beneath hers.

They dallied with pink ices and French pastries, and he loudly requested the best cigar in the place.

"It's all in knowin' how to live," he explained. "I've been all over the woild, and there ain't much I don't know or ain't seen; but you gotta know the right way to go about things."

"Anybody could tell by looking at you that you are a man of the world," said Miss Gertrude.

It was eleven o'clock when they entered the car for the homeward spin. The cool air blew color and verve into her face; and her hair, responding to the night damp, curled in little grape-vine tendrils round her face.

"You're some swell little goil," remarked Mr. Barker, a cigar hung idle from one corner of his mouth.

"And you are some driver!" she retorted. "You run a car like a real chauffeur."

"I wouldn't own a car if I couldn't run it myself," he said. "I ran this car all through France last fall. There ain't no fun bein' steered like a mollycoddle."

"No one could ever accuse you of being a mollycoddle, Mr. Barker."

He turned and loosened the back of her seat until it reclined like a Morris chair. "My own invention," he said; "to lie back and watch the stars on a clear night sort of--gives you a hunch what's goin' on up there."

She looked at him in some surprise. "You're clever, all right," she said, rather seriously.

"Wait till you know me better, kiddo. I'll learn you a whole lot about me that'll surprise you."

His hand groped for hers; she drew it away gently, but her voice was also gentle:

"Here we are home, Mr. Barker."

In front of her lower West Side rooming-house he helped her carefully to alight, regarding her sententiously in the flare of the street lamp.

"You're my style, all right, kiddo. My speedometer registers you pretty high."

She giggled.

"I'm here to tell you that you look good to me, and--and--I--anything on fer to-morrow night?"

"No," she said, softly.

"Are you on?"

She nodded.

"I'll drop in and see you to-morrow," he said.

"Good," she replied.

"If nothin' unexpected comes up to-morrow night we'll take one swell spin out along the Hudson Drive and have dinner at the Vista. There's some swell scenery out along the Palisade drive when the moon comes up and shines over the water."

"Oh, Mr. Barker, that will be heavenly!"

"I'm some on the soft-soap stuff myself," he said.

"You're full of surprises," she agreed.

"I'll drop in and see you to-morrow, kiddo."

"Good night," she whispered.

"Good night, little sis," he replied.

They parted with a final hand-shake; as she climbed up to her room she heard the machine chug away.

The perfume of her rose floated about her like a delicate mist. She undressed and went to bed into a dream-world of shimmering women and hidden music, a world chiefly peopled by deferential waiters and scraping lackeys. All the night through she sped in a silent mahogany-colored touring-car, with the wind singing in her ears and lights flashing past like meteors.

When Miss Gertrude arrived at the Knockerbeck parlors next morning a little violet offering wrapped in white tissue-paper lay on her desk. They were fresh wood violets, cool and damp with dew. She flushed and placed them in a small glass vase behind the cold-cream case.

Her eyes were blue like the sky when you look straight up, and a smile trembled on her lips. Ten minutes later Mr. Barker, dust-begrimed and enveloped in a long linen duster, swaggered in. He peeled off his stout gloves; his fingers were black-rimmed and grease-splotched.

"Mornin', sis; here's a fine job for you. Took an unexpected business trip ten miles out, and the bloomin' spark-plug got to cuttin' up like a balky horse."

He crammed his gloves and goggles into spacious pockets and looked at Miss Gertrude with warming eyes.

"Durned if you ain't lookin' pert as a mornin'-glory to-day!"

She took his fingers on her hand and regarded them reprovingly.

"Shame on you, Mr. Barker, for getting yourself so mussed up!" cried Miss Sprunt.

"Looks like I need somebody to take care of me, doan it, sis?"

"Yes," she agreed, unblushingly.

Once in warm water, his hands exuded the odor of gasoline. She sniffed like a horse scenting the turf.

"I'd rather have a whiff of an automobile," she remarked, "than of the best attar of roses on the market."

"You ain't forgot about to-night, sis?"

She lowered her eyes.

"No, I haven't forgotten."

"There ain't nothin' but a business engagement can keep me off. I gotta big deal on, and I may be too busy to-night, but we'll go to-morrow sure."

"That'll be all right, Mr. Barker; business before pleasure."

"I'm pretty sure it'll be to-night, though. I--I don't like to have to wait too long."

He reached across the table suddenly and gripped hold of her working arm.

"Say, kiddo, I like you."

"Silly!" she said, softly.

"I ain't foolin'!"

"I'll be ready at six," she said, lightly. "If you can't come let me know."

"I ain't the sort to do things snide," he said. "If I can't come I'll put you wise, all right."

"You certainly know how to treat a girl," she said.

"Let me get to likin' a goil, and there ain't nothin' I won't do for her."

"You sure can run a machine, Mr. Barker."

"You wait till I let loose some speed along the Hudson road, and then you'll see some real drivin'; last night wasn't nothin'."

"Oh, Mr. Barker!"

"Call me Jim," he said.

"Jim," she repeated, softly, after him.

The day was crowded with appointments. She worked unceasingly until the nerves at the back of her head were strained and aching, and tired shadows appeared under her eyes. The languor of spring oppressed her.

To her surprise, Mr. Chase appeared at four o'clock. At the sight of him the point of her little scissors slipped into the unoffending cuticle of the hand she was grooming. She motioned him to a chair along the wall.

"In just a few minutes, Mr. Chase."

"Thank you," he replied, seating himself and watching her with interested, near-sighted eyes.

A nervousness sent the blood rushing to her head. The low drone of Ethyl's voice talking to a customer, the tick of the clock, the click and sough of the elevator were thrice magnified. She could feel the gush of color to her face.

The fat old gentleman whose fingers she had been administering placed a generous bonus on the table and ambled out. She turned her burning eyes upon Mr. Chase and spoke slowly to steady her voice. She was ashamed of her unaccountable nervousness and of the suffocating dryness in her throat.

"Ready for you, Mr. Chase."

He came toward her with a peculiar slowness of movement, a characteristic slowness which was one of the trivial things which burned his attractiveness into her consciousness. In the stuffiness of her own little room she had more than once closed her eyes and deliberately pictured him as he came toward her table, gentle yet eager, with a deference which was new as it was delightful to her.

As he approached her she snapped a flexible file between her thumb and forefinger, and watched it vibrate and come to a jerky stop; then she looked up.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Chase."

"Good afternoon, Miss Sprunt. You see, I am following your advice." He took the chair opposite her.

"I--I want to thank you for the violets. They are the first real hint of May I've had."

"You knew they came from me?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Why--I--why, I just knew."

She covered her confusion by removing and replacing crystal bottle-stoppers.

"I'm glad that you knew they came from me, Miss Sprunt."

"Yes, I knew that they could come from no one but you--they were so simple and natural and--sweet."

She laughed a pitch too high and plunged his fingers into water some degrees too hot. He did not wince, but she did.

"Oh, Mr. Chase, forgive me. I--I've scalded your fingers."

"Why," he replied, not taking his eyes from her face, "so you have!" They both laughed.

Across the room Miss Ethyl coughed twice. "I always say," she observed to her customer, "a workin'-girl can't be too careful of her actions. That's why I am of a retiring disposition and don't try to force myself on nobody."

Mr. Chase regarded the shadows beneath Miss Sprunt's eyes with a pucker between his own.

"You don't get much of the springtime in here, do you, Miss Sprunt?"

"No," she replied, smiling faintly. "The only way we can tell the seasons down here is by the midwinter Elks convention and the cloak drummers who come to buy fur coats in July."

"You poor little girl," he said, slowly. "What you need is air--good, wholesome air, and plenty of it."

"Oh, I get along all right," she said, biting at her nether lip.

"You're confined too closely, Miss Sprunt."

"Life isn't all choice," she replied, briefly.

"Forgive me," he said.

"I walk home sometimes," she said.

"You're fond of walking?"

"Yes, when I'm not too tired."

"Miss Sprunt, would--would you walk with me this evening? I know a quiet little place where we could dine together."

"Oh," she said, "I--I already have an engagement. I--"

She colored with surprise.

"You have an engagement?" His tones were suddenly flat.

"No," she replied, in tones of sudden decision, "I'd be pleased to go with you. I can do what I planned to-night any other time."

"Thank you, Miss Sprunt."

Her fingers trembled as she worked, and his suddenly closed over them.

"You poor, tired little girl," he repeated.

She gulped down her emotions.

"Miss Sprunt, this is neither the time nor the place for me to express myself, yet somehow our great moments come when we least expect them."

She let her limp fingers rest in his; she was strangely calm.

"I know it is always a great pleasure to have you come in, Mr. Chase."

"The first time I dropped in was chance, Miss Sprunt. You can see for yourself that I am not the sort of fellow who goes in for the little niceties like manicures. I'm what you might call the seedy kind. But the second time I dropped in for a manicure was not accident, nor the third time, nor the tenth--it was *you*."

"You've been extravagant all on account of me?" she parried.

"I've been more than that on account of you, dear girl. I've been consumed night and day by the sweet thought of you."

"Oh-h-h!" She placed one hand at her throat.

"Miss Sprunt, I am not asking anything of you; I simply want you to know me better. I want to begin to-night to try to teach you to reciprocate the immense regard--the love I feel for you."

She closed her eyes for a moment; his firm clasp of her hand tightened.

"You'll think I'm a bold girl, Mr. Chase; you'll--you'll--"

"Yes?"

"You'll think I'm everything I ought not to be, but you--you can't teach me what I already know."

"Gertrude!"

She nodded, swallowing back unaccountable tears.

"I never let myself hope, because I didn't think there was a chance, Mr. Chase."

"Dear, is it possible without knowing me--who, what I am--you--"

"I only know *you*," she said, softly. "That is all that matters."

"My little girl," he whispered, regarding her with unshed tears shining in his eyes.

She placed her two hands over her face for a moment.

"What is it, dear?"

She burrowed deeper into her hands.

"I'm so happy," she said, between her fingers.

They regarded each other with almost incredulous eyes, seeking to probe the web of enchantment their love had woven.

"I do not deserve this happiness, dearest." But his voice was a paean of triumph.

"It is I who do not deserve," she said, in turn. "You are too--too everything for me."

They talked in whispers until there were two appointees ranged along the wall. He was loath to go; she urged him gently.

"I can't work while you are here, dear; return for me at six--no," she corrected, struck by a sudden thought, "at six-thirty."

"Let me wait for you, dearest," he pleaded.

She waggled a playful finger at him.

"Good-by until later."

"Until six-thirty, cruel one."

"Yes."

"There is so much to be said, Gertrude dear."

"To-night."

He left her lingeringly. They tried to cover up their fervent, low-voiced farewells with passive faces, but after he had departed her every feature was lyric.

Juliet might have looked like that when her love was young.

Mr. Barker arrived, but she met him diffidently, even shamefacedly. Before she could explain he launched forth:

"I'm sorry, kiddo, but we'll have to make it to-morrow night for that ride of ours. That party I was tellin' you about is goin' to get busy on that big deal, and I gotta do a lot of signin' up to-night."

Fate had carved a way for her with gentle hand.

"That's all right, Mr. Barker; just don't you feel badly about it." She felt a gush of sympathy for him; for all humanity.

"You understand, kiddo, don't you? A feller's got to stick to business as much as pleasure, and we'll hit the high places to-morrow night, all right, all right. You're the classiest doll I've met yet."

She swallowed her distaste.

"That's the right idea, Mr. Barker; business appointments are always important."

"I'll see you to-morrow mornin', and we'll fix up some swell party."

"Good night, Mr. Barker."

"So long, honey."

Directly after he departed Miss Ethyl bade her good night in cold, cracky tones.

"The goin's-on in this parlor don't make it no place for a minister's daughter, Miss Gertie Sprunt."

"Then you ought to be glad your father's a policeman," retorted her friend, graciously. "Good night, dearie."

She hummed as she put her table in order. At each footstep down the marble corridor her pulse quickened; she placed her cheeks in her hands, vise-fashion, to feel of their unnatural heat. When Mr. Chase finally came they met shyly and with certain restraint. Whispering together like diffident children, they went out, their hands lightly touching. Broadway was already alight; the cool spring air met them like tonic.

Like an exuberant lad, Mr. Chase led her to the curb. A huge, mahogany-colored touring-car, caparisoned in nickel and upholstered in a darker red, vibrated and snorted alongside. A chauffeur, with a striped rug across his knees, reached back respectfully and flung open the door. Like an automaton Gertrude placed her small foot upon the step and paused, her dumfounded gaze confronting the equally stunned eyes of the chauffeur. Mr. Chase aided and encouraged at her elbow.

"It's all right, dearest, it's all right; this is your surprise."

"Why," she gasped, her eyes never leaving the steel-blue shaved face of the chauffeur--"why--I--"

Mr. Chase regarded her in some anxiety. "What a surprised little girl you are! I shouldn't have taken you so unawares." He almost lifted her in.

"This machine is yours, Mr. Chase?"

"Yes, dear, this machine is *ours*."

"You never told me anything."

"There is little to tell, Gertrude. I have not used my cars to amount to anything since I'm back from Egypt. I've been pretty busy with affairs."

"Back from Egypt!"

"Do not look so helpless, dear. I'm only back three months from a trip round the world, and I've been putting up with hotel life meanwhile. Then I happened to meet you, and as long as you had me all sized up I just let it go--that's all, dear."

"You're not the Mr. Adam Chase who's had the rose suite on the tenth floor all winter?"

"That's me," he laughed.

Her slowly comprehending eyes did not leave his face.

"Why, I thought--I--you--"

"It was my use of the private elevator on the east side of the building that gave you the Sixth Avenue idea, and it was too good a joke on me to spoil, dearie."

She regarded him through blurry eyes.

"What must you think of me?"

He felt for her hand underneath the lap-robe.

"Among other things," he said, "I think that your eyes exactly match the violets I motored out to get for you this morning at my place ten miles up the Hudson."

"When did you go, dear?"

"Before you were up. We were back before ten, in spite of a spark-plug that gave us some trouble."

"Oh," she said.

The figure at the wheel squirmed to be off. She lay back faint against the upholstery.

"To think," she said, "that you should care for me!"

"My own dear girl!"

He touched a spring and the back of her seat reclined like a Morris chair.

"Lie back, dear. I invented that scheme so I can recline at night and watch the stars parade past. I toured that way all through Egypt."

The figure in the front seat gripped his wheel.

"Where are we going, Adam dear?" she whispered.

"This is your night, Gertrude; give James your orders."

She snuggled deeper into the dark-red upholstery, and their hands clasped closer beneath the robe.

"James," she said, in a voice like a bell, "take us to the Vista for dinner; afterward motor out along the Palisade drive, far out so that we can see the Hudson by moonlight."

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OTHER PEOPLE'S SHOES

AT the close of a grilling summer that had sapped the life from the city as insidiously as fever runs through veins and licks them up--at the close of a day that had bleached the streets as dry as desert bones--Abe Ginsburg closed his store half an hour earlier than usual because his clerk, Miss Ruby Cohn, was enjoying a two days' vacation at the Long Island Recreation Farm, and because a staggering pain behind his eyes and zigzag down the back of his neck to his left shoulder-blade made the shelves of shoe-boxes appear as if they were wavering with the heat-dance of the atmosphere and ready to cast their neatly arranged stock in a hopeless fuddle on the center of the floor.

Up-stairs, on an exact level with the elevated trains that tore past the kitchen windows like speed monsters annihilating distance, Mrs. Ginsburg poised a pie-pan aloft on the tips of five fingers and waltzed a knife round the rim of the tin. A ragged ruffle of dough swung for a moment; she snipped it off, leaving the pie pat and sleek.

Then Mrs. Ginsburg smiled until a too perfect row of badly executed teeth showed their pink rubber gums, leaned over the delicate lid of the pie, and with a three-pronged fork pricked out the doughy inscription--ABE. Sarah baking cakes for Abraham's prophetic visitors had no more gracious zeal.

The waiting oven filled the kitchen with its gassy breath; a train hurtled by and rattled the chandeliers, a stack of plates on a shelf, and a blue-glass vase on the parlor mantel. A buzz-bell rang three staccato times. Mrs. Ginsburg placed the pie on the table-edge and hurried down a black aisle of hallway.

Book-agents, harbingers of a dozen-cabinet-photographs-colored-crayon-thrown-in, and their kin have all combined to make wary the gentle cliff-dweller. Mrs. Ginsburg opened her door just wide enough to insert a narrow pencil, placed the tip of her shoe in the aperture, and leaned her face against the jamb so that from without half an eye burned through the crack.

"Abie? It ain't you, is it, Abie?"

"Don't get excited, mamma!"

"It ain't six o'clock yet, Abie--something ain't right with you!"

"Don't get excited, mamma! I just closed early for the heat. For what should I keep open when a patent-leather shoe burns a hole in your hand?"

"*Ach*, such a scare as you give me! If I'd 'a' known it I could have had supper ready. It wouldn't hurt you to call up-stairs when you close early--no consideration that boy has got for his mother! Poor papa! If he so much as closed the store ten minutes earlier he used to call up for me to heat the things--no consideration that boy has got for his old mother!"

Mr. Ginsburg placed a heavy hand on each of his mother's shoulders and kissed her while the words were unfinished and smoking on her lips.

"It's too hot to eat, mamma. Ain't I asked you every night during this heat not to cook so much?"

"Just the same, when it comes to the table I see you eat. I never see you refuse nothing--I bet you come twice for apple-pie to-night. Is the hall table the place for your cuffs, Abie? I'm ashamed for the people the way my house looks when you're home--no order that boy has got! I go now and put my pie in the oven."

"I ain't hungry, mamma--honest! Don't fix no supper for me--I go in the front room and lay down for a while. Never have I known such heat as I had it in the store to-day--and with Miss Ruby gone it was bad enough, I can tell you."

Mrs. Ginsburg reached up suddenly and turned high a tiny bead of gas-light--it flared for a moment like a ragged-edged fan and then settled into a sooty flare. In its low-candle-power light their faces were far away and without outline--like shadows seen through the mirage of a dream.

"Abie--tell mamma--you ain't sick, are you? Abie, you look pale."

"Now, mamma, begin to worry about nothing when--"

"It ain't like you to come up early, heat or no heat. *Ach!* I should have known when he comes up-stairs early it means something. What hurts you, Abie? That's what I need yet, a sickness! What hurts you, Abie?"

"Mamma, the way you go on it's enough to make me sick if I ain't. Can't a boy come up-stairs just because--"

"I know you like a book; when you close the store and lay down before supper there's something wrong. Tell me, Abie--"

"All right, then! You know it so well I can't tell you nothing--all I got is a little tiredness from the heat."

"Go in and lay down. Can't you tell mamma what hurts you, Abie? Are you afraid it would give me a little pleasure if you tell me? No consideration that boy has got for his mother!"

"Honest, mamma, ain't I told you three times I ain't nothing but tired?"

"He snaps me up yet like he was a turtle and me his worst enemy! For what should I worry myself? For my part, I don't care. I only say, Abie, if there's anything hurts you--you know how poor papa started to complain just one night like this how he fussed at me when I wanted the doctor. If there's anything hurts you--"

"There ain't, mamma."

"Come in and let me fix the sofa for you. I only say when you close the store early there's something wrong. That Miss Ruby should go off yet--vacation she has to have--a girl like that, with her satin shoes and all--comes into the store at nine o'clock 'cause she runs to the picture shows all night! Yetta Washeim seen her. Vacation yet she has to

have! Twenty years I spent with poor papa in the store, and no vacation did I have. Lay down, Abie."

"All right, then," said Mr. Ginsburg, as if duty were a geological eon, and throwing himself across the flowered velvet lounge in the parlor. "I'll lay down if it suits you better."

Mr. Ginsburg was of a cut that never appears on a classy clothes advertisement or in the silver frame on the bird's-eye maple dressing-table of sweet sixteen or more; he belonged to the less ornamented but not unimportant stratum that manufactures the classy clothes by the hundred thousand, and eventually develops into husbands and sponsors for full-length double-breasted sealskin coats for the sweet sixteens and more.

He was as tall as Napoleon, with a round, un-Napoleonic head, close-shaved so that his short-nap hair grew tight like moss on a rock, and a beard that defied every hirsute precaution by pricking darkly through the lower half of his face as phenomenally as the first grass-blades of spring push out in an hour.

"Let me fix you a little something, Abie. I got grand broth in the ice-box--all I need to do is to heat it."

"Ain't I told you I ain't hungry, mamma?"

"When that boy don't eat he's sick. I should worry yet! Poor papa! If he'd listened to me he'd be living to-day. I'm your worst enemy--I am! I work against my own child--that's the thanks what I get."

Sappho, who never wore a gingham wrapper and whose throat was unwrinkled and full of music, never sang more surely than did Mrs. Ginsburg into the heart-cells of her son. He reached out for her wrapper and drew her to him.

"Aw, mamma, you know I don't mean nothing; just when you get all worried over nothing it makes me mad. Come, sit down by me."

"To-night we don't go up to Washeims'. I care a lot for Yetta's talk--her Beulah this and her Beulah that! It makes me sick!"

"I'll take you up, mamma, if you want to go."

"Indeed, you stay where you are! For their front steps and refreshments I don't need to ride in the Subway to Harlem anyway."

"What's the difference? A little evening's pleasure won't hurt you, mamma."

"Such a lunch as she served last time! I got better right now in my ice-box, and I ain't expecting company. They can buy and sell us, too, I guess. Sol Washeim don't take a nine-room house when boys' pants ain't booming--but such a lunch as she served! You can believe me, I wouldn't have the nerve to. Abie, I see Herschey's got fall cloth-tops in their windows already."

"Yes?"

"Good business to-day--not, Abie?--and such heat too! Mrs. Abrahams called across the hallway just now that she was in for a pair; but you was so busy with a customer she couldn't wait--that little pink-haired clerk, with her extravagant ways, had to go off and leave you in the heat! Shoe-buttoners she puts in every box like they cost nothing. I told her so last week, too."

"She's a grand little clerk, mamma--such a business head I never seen!"

"Like I couldn't have come down and helped you to-day! Believe me--when I was in the store with papa, Abie, we wasn't so up-to-date; but none of'em got away."

"I should know when Mrs. Abrahams wants shoes--five times a week she comes in to be sociable."

"I used to say to papa: 'Always leave a customer to go take a new one's shoes off, and then go back and take your time! Two customers in their stocking feet is worth more than one in a new pair of shoes!' Abie, you don't look right. You'll tell me the truth if you don't feel well, won't you? I always say to have the doctor in time saves nine. If poor papa had listened to me--"

"I'm all right, mamma. Why don't you sit down by me? Don't light the gas--for why should you make it hotter? Come, sit down by me."

"I go put the oven light out. Apple-pie I was baking for you yet; for myself I don't need supper--I had coffee at five o'clock."

Dusk entered the little apartment and crowded the furniture into phantoms; a red signal light from the skeleton of the elevated road threw a glow as mellow as firelight across the mantelpiece. Mrs. Ginsburg's canary rustled himself until he swelled up twice too fat and performed the ever-amazing ritual of thrusting his head within himself as if he would prey on his own vitals. The cooler breath of night; the smells of neighboring food; the more frequent rushing of trains, and a navy-blue sky, pit-marked with small stars, came all at once. In the hallway Mrs. Ginsburg worked the hook of the telephone impatiently up and down.

"Audubon 6879! Hello! Washeims' residence? Yetta? Yes, this is Carrie. Ain't it awful? I'm nearly dead with it. Yetta, Abie ain't feeling so well; so we won't be up to-night. No--it ain't nothing but the heat; but I worry enough, I can tell you."

"Mamma, don't holler in the telephone so--she can't hear you when you scream."

"It's always something, ain't it? That's what I tell him; but he's like his poor papa before him--he's afraid no one can do nothing but him; his little snip of a clerk he gives a vacation, but none for himself. I'm glad we ain't going then; you always make yourself so much trouble. It's too hot to eat, Abie says. Beef with horseradish sauce I had for supper, too--and apple-pie I baked in the heat for him; but not a bite will that boy eat! And when he don't eat I know he ain't feeling well. Who? Beulah? Ain't that grand? Yes, cooking is always good for a girl to know even if she don't need it. No; I go to work and thicken my gravy with flour and horseradish. Believe me, I cried enough when I did it! *Ach*, Yetta, why should I leave that boy? You can believe me when I tell you that not one night except when he was took in at the lodge--not one night since poor papa died--has that boy left me at home alone. Not one step will he take without me."

"Aw, mamma!"

"Sometimes I say, 'Abie, go out like other boys and see the girls.' But he thinks if he ain't home to fix the windows and the covers for my rheumatism it ain't right. Yes; believe me, when your children ain't feeling well it's worry enough."

"Aw, maw, I can take you up to the Washeims' if you want to go."

"You ought to hear him in there, Yetta--fussing because I want to keep him laying down. Yes, I go with you; tomorrow at nine I meet you down by Fulton Street. Up round here they're forty-two cents. Ain't it so? And I used two whites and a yolk in my pie-dough. Yes; I hope so too. If not I call a doctor. Nine o'clock! Good-by, Yetta."

"Maw, for me you shouldn't stay home."

Mrs. Ginsburg flopped into a rocker beside the flowered velvet couch.

"A little broth, Abie?"

"No."

"When you don't eat it's something wrong."

"You needn't fan me, mamma--I ain't hot now."

Insidious darkness crept into the room like a cool hand descending on the feverish brow of day; the red glow shifted farther along the mantel and lay vivid as blood across the blue vase and the photograph of a grizzled head in a seashell frame. Mrs. Ginsburg rocked over a loose board in the floor and waved a palm-leaf fan toward the reclining shadow of her son until he could taste its tape-bound edge.

"Next week to-night five years since we lost poor papa, Abie--five years! *Gott!* When I think of it! Just like his picture he looked up to the last, too--just like his picture."

"Yes, mamma."

"I ain't so spry as I used to be, neither, Abie--or, believe me, I would never let you take on a clerk. Sometimes I think, when the rheumatism gets up round my heart, it won't be long as I go too. Poor papa! If I could have gone with him! How he always hated to go alone to places! To the barber he hated to go, till I got so I could cut it myself."

"Mamma, you ain't got nothing to worry about."

"I worry enough."

"You can take it as easy as you want to now--I even want we should have a better apartment. We got the best little business between here and One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street! If poor papa could see it now he wouldn't know it from five years ago. Poor papa! He wasn't willing to spend on improvements."

"Papa always said you had a good business head on you, Abie; but I ain't one, neither, for funny businesses like a clerk. And what you needed them new glass shoe-stands for when the old ones--"

"Now, mamma, don't begin on that again."

"When I was down in the store papa used to say to me: 'Wait till Abie's grown up, mamma! By how his ears stand out from his head I can tell he's got good business sense!' And to think that so little of you he had in the store--such a man that deserved the best of everything! He had to die just when things might have got easy for him."

"Don't cry, mamma; everything is for the best."

"You're a good boy, Abie. Sometimes I think I stand in your way enough."

"Such talk!"

"Any girl would do well enough for herself to get you. Believe me, Beulah Washeim don't need a new pair of shoes every two weeks for nothing! Her mother thinks I don't notice it--she's always braggin' to me how hard her Beulah is on shoes and what a good customer she makes."

"Beulah Washeim! I don't even know what last she wears--that's how much I think of Beulah Washeim."

"Don't let me stand in your way, Abie. Ain't I often told you, now since you do a grand business and we're all paid up, don't let your old mother stand in your way?"

"Like you could be in my way!"

"Once I said to poor papa, the night we paid the mortgage off and had wine for supper: 'Papa,' I said, 'we're out of debt now--*Gott sei Dank!*--except one debt we owe to some girl when Abie grows up; and that debt we got to pay with money that won't come from work and struggle and saving; we got to pay that debt with our boy--with *blood-money*.' Poor papa! Already he was asleep when I said it--half a glass of wine, and he was mussy-headed."

"Yes, yes, mamma."

"A girl like Beulah Washeim I ain't got so much use for neither--with her silk petticoats and silk stockings; but Sol Washeim's got a grand business there, Abie. They don't move in a nine-room house from a four-room apartment for nothing."

"For Beulah's weight in gold I don't want her--the way she looks at me with her eyes and shoots 'em round like I was a three-ringed circus."

"You're right--for money you shouldn't marry neither; only I always say it's just as easy to fall in love with a rich one as a poor one. But I'm the last one to force you. There's Hannah Rosenblatt--a grand, economical girl!"

"Hannah Rosenblatt--a girl that teaches school, she pushes on me. I got to get educated yet!"

Mrs. Ginsburg rocked and fanned rhythmically; her unsubtle lips curled upward with the subtle smile of a zingaro. The placidity of peace on a mountain-top, shade in a dell, and love in a garden crept into her tones.

"I just want you to know I don't stand in your way, Abie. You ain't a child no more; but while I'm here you got so good a home as you want--not?"

"Sure!"

"Girls you can always get--not? Girls nowadays ain't what they used to be neither. I'd like to see a girl do to-day for papa what I did--how I was in the store and kitchen all at once; then we didn't have no satin-shoe clerks! Girls ain't what they used to be; in my day working-girls had no time for fine-smelling cologne-water and--"

"All girls ain't alike, mamma--satin shoes cost no more nowadays as leather. We got a dollar-ninety-eight satin pump, you wouldn't believe it--and such a seller! All girls ain't alike, mamma."

"What you mean, Abie?"

Mr. Ginsburg turned on the couch so that his face was close to the wall, and his voice half lost in the curve of his arm.

"Well, once in a while you come across a girl that ain't--ain't like the rest of 'em. Well, there ought to be girls that ain't like the rest of 'em, oughtn't there?"

Mrs. Ginsburg's rocking and fanning slowed down a bit; a curious moment fell over the little room; a nerve-tingling quiescence that in its pregnant moment can race the mind back over an eternity--a silence that is cold with sweat, like the second when a doctor removes his stethoscope from over a patient's left breast and looks at him with a film of pity glazing his eyes.

"What you mean, Abie? Tell mamma what you mean. I ain't the one to stand in your light." Mrs. Ginsburg's speech clogged in her throat.

"You know you always got a home with me, mamma. You know, no matter what comes, I always got to tuck you in bed at night and fix the windows for you. You know you always got with me the best kind of a home I got to give you. Ain't it?"

His hand crept out and rested lightly--ever so lightly--on his mother's knee.

"Abie, you never talked like this before--I won't stand in your way, Abie. If you can make up your mind, Beulah Washeim or Hannah Rosenblatt, either would be--"

"Aw, mamma, it ain't them."

Mrs. Ginsburg's hand closed tightly over her son's; a train swooped past and created a flurry of warm breeze in the room.

"Who--is--it, Abie? Don't be afraid to tell mamma."

"Why, mamma, it ain't no one! Can't a fellow just talk? You started it, didn't you? I was just talking 'cause you was."

"He scares me yet! No consideration that boy has got for his mother! Abie, a little broth--you ain't got no fever, Abie--your head is cool like ice."

"You ain't had no supper yet, mamma."

"I had coffee at five o'clock; for myself I never worry. I'm glad enough you feel all right. It's eight o'clock, Abie--I go me to bed. To-morrow I go to market with Yetta."

"Aw, mamma, now why for do you--"

"I ain't too proud--such high-toned notions I ain't got. For what I pay forty-two cents for eggs up here when I can get 'em for thirty-eight?"

"Be careful, mamma; don't fall over the chair--you want a light?"

"No. Write me a note for the milkman, Abie, before you go to bed, and leave it out with the bottles--half a pint of double cream I want. I make you cream-potatoes for supper to-morrow. I laid your blue shirt on your bed, Abie--don't go to bed on it. It's the last time I iron it; but once more you can wear it, then I make dust-rags. I ironed it soft like you like."

"Yes, mamma."

"Put the cover on the canary, too, Abie. That night you went to the lodge he chirped and chirped, just like you was lost and he was crying 'cause me and him was lonely."

"Yes, mamma. Wait till I light the gas in your room for you--you'll stumble."

"It's too hot for light; I can see by the Magintys' kitchen light across the air-shaft. What she does in her kitchen so late I don't know--such housekeeping! Yesterday with my own eyes I seen her shake a table-cloth out the window with a hole like my hand in it. She should know what I think of such ways."

Mrs. Ginsburg moved through the gloom, steering carefully round the phantom furniture. From his place on the couch her son could hear her moving about her tiny room adjoining the kitchen. A shoe dropped and, after a satisfying interval, another; the padding of bare feet across a floor; the tink of a china pitcher against its bowl; the slam of a drawer; the rusty squeal of spiral bed-springs under pressure.

"Abie, I'm ready."

When Mr. Ginsburg groped into his mother's room she lay in the casual attitude of sleep, but the yellow patch of light from the shaft fell across her open eyes and gray wisps of hair that lay on her pillow like a sickly aura.

"Good night, Abie. You're a good boy, Abie."

"Good night, mamma. A sheet ain't enough--you got to have the blue-and-white quilt on you, too."

"Don't, Abie--do you want to suffocate me? I can't stand so much. Take off the quilt."

"Your rheumatism, you know, mamma--you'll see how much cooler it will get in the night."

"Ach, Abie, leave that window all the way up. So hot, and that boy closes me up like--"

"When the lace curtain blows in it means you're in a draught, mamma--half-way open you can have it, but not all. Without me to fuss you'd have a fine rheumatism--like it ain't dangerous for you to sleep where there's enough draught to blow the curtain in."

"Abie, if you don't feel good, in two minutes I can get up and heat the broth if--"

"I'm grand, mamma. Here, I move this chair so the light from Magintys' don't shine in your eyes."

"What she does in her kitchen so late I don't know. Good night, Abie. In the dark you look like poor papa. How he used to fuss round the room at night fixing me just like you--poor papa, Abie--not? Poor papa?"

"Good night, mamma."

Mr. Ginsburg leaned over and kissed his mother lightly on the forehead.

"Double cream did you say I should write the milkman?"

"Yes--and, Abie, don't forget to cover the bird."

"Yes. Here, I leave the door half-way open, mamma. Good night."

"Abie! Abie!"

"Yes?"

"Oh, it ain't nothing at all, Abie--never mind."

"I'm right here, mamma. Anything you want me to do?"

"Nothing. Good night, Abie."

"Good night, mamma."

At eight-fifteen Monday morning Miss Ruby Cohn blew into the Ginsburg & Son's shoe store like a breath of thirty-nine-cents-an-ounce perfume shot from a strong-spray atomizer. The street hung with the strong breath of Mayflower a full second after her small, tall-heeled feet had crossed its soft asphalt.

At the first whiff Mr. Ginsburg drew the upper half of his body out from a case of misses' ten-button welt soles he was unpacking and smiled as if Aurora and spring, and all the heyday misses that Guido Reni and Botticelli loved to paint, had suddenly danced into his shop.

"Well, well, Miss Ruby, are you back?"

Miss Cohn titillated toward the rear of the store, the tail of a cockatoo titillated at a sharp angle from her hat, a patent-leather handbag titillated from a long cord at her wrist, and a smile iridescent as sunlight on spray played about her lips. She placed her hand blinker-fashion against her mouth as if she would curb the smile.

"Don't tell anybody, Mr. Ginsburg, and I'll whisper you something. Listen! I ain't back; I'm shooting porcelain ducks off the shelf in a china shop."

"Ah, you're back again with your fun, ain't you? Miss Ruby--believe me--I missed you enough. I bet you had a grand time at the farm!"

Mr. Ginsburg shook hands with her shyly, with a sudden red in his face, and as if her fingers were holy with the dust of a butterfly's wings and he feared to brush it off.

"Say, Mr. Ginsburg, you should have seen me! What I think of a shoe-tree after laying all yesterday afternoon under

a oak-tree next to a brook that made a noise like playing a tune on wine-glasses, I'd hate to tell you. Say, you're unpacking them ten-button welts, ain't you? Good! It ain't too soon for the school stock."

Miss Cohn withdrew two super-long, sapphire-headed hat-pins from her super-small hat, slid out of a tan summer-silk jacket, dallied with the froth of white frills at her throat, ran her fingers through the flame of her hair and turned to Mr. Ginsburg. Her skin was like thick cream and smattered with large, light-brown freckles, which enhanced its creaminess as a crescent of black plaster laid against a lady's cheek makes fairness fairer.

"Well, how's business? I've come back feeling like I could sell storm rubbers to a mermaid."

"You look grand for certain, Miss Ruby. They just can't look any grander'n you. Believe me, I missed you enough! To-day it's cool; but the day before yesterday you can know I was done up when I closed before six."

"Can you beat it? And I was laying flat on the grass, with ants running up my sleeves and down my neck and wishing for my sealskin--it was so cool. I see Herschey's got cloth-tops in his windows. What's the matter with us springing them patent-tip kids? Say, I got a swell idea for a window comin' home on the train--lookin' at the wheat-fields made me think of it."

"Whatta you know about that? Wheat-fields made her think of a shoe window--like a whip she is--so sharp!"

"It's a yellow season, Mr. Ginsburg; and we can use them old-oak stands and have a tan school window that'll make every plate-glass front between here and One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street look like a Sixth Avenue slightly worn display."

"Good! You can have just what kind of a window you like, Miss Ruby--just anything you--you like. After such a summer we can afford such a fall window as we want. I see the Busy Bee's got red-paper poppies in theirs--something like that, maybe, with--"

"Nix on paper flowers for us! I got a china-silk idea from a little drummer I met up in the country--one nice little fellow! I wonder if you know him? Simon Leavitt; he says he sold you goods. Simon Leavitt. Know him?"

"No."

"One nice little fellow!"

Silence.

"I missed you lots, Miss Ruby. When Saturday came I said to mamma: 'How I miss that girl! Only one month she's been with us, but how I miss that girl!' Oh--eh, Miss Ruby!"

Miss Cohn adjusted a pair of tissue-paper sleevelets and smoothed her smooth tan hips as if she would erase them entirely; then she looked up at him delicately, and for the instant the pink aura of her hair and the rise and fall of her too high bosom gave her some of the fleshly beauty of a Flora.

"Like you had time to think of me! I bet the Washeim girl was in every other day for a pair of--"

"Now, Miss Ruby, you--"

"Sh! There's some one out front. It's that cashier from Truman's grocery. You finish unpacking that case, Mr. Ginsburg. I'll wait on her. I bet she wants tango slippers."

Miss Cohn flitted to the front of the store as rapidly as the span of her narrow skirt would permit, and Mr. Ginsburg dived deep into the depths of his wooden case. But in his nostrils, in the creases of his coat, and in the recesses of his heart was the strong breath of the Mayflower; and in the phantasmagoria of bonfire-colored hair and cream-colored skin, and the fragrance of his own emotions, he bent so dreamily over the packing-case that the blood rushed as if by capillary attraction to his temples; and when he staggered to an upright posture large black blotches were doing an elf dance before his eyes.

"Mr. Ginsburg! Oh, Mr. Ginsburg!"

"Yes, Miss Ruby."

From the highest rung of a ladder, parallel with the top row of a wall of shoe-boxes, Miss Cohn poised like a humming-bird.

"Say, have we got any more of them 4567 French heel, chiffon rosette?"

"Yes, Miss Ruby--right there under the 5678's."

"Sure enough. Never mind coming out; I can find 'em--yes, here they are."

From her height she smiled down at him, pushed her ladder leftward along its track, clapped a shoe-box under her arm, and hurried down, her shoe-buttoner jangling from a pink ribbon at her waist-line. Mr. Ginsburg delved deeper.

"Mr. Ginsburg!"

"Yes, Miss Ruby."

"Just a moment, please--there's a lady out here wants low-cuts, and I'm busy with a customer. Front, please--just this way, madam. I'll have some one to wait on you in a moment."

Mr. Ginsburg clapped his hands dry of dust, wriggled into his unlined alpaca coat, brushed his plush-like hair with his palms, and advanced to the front of the store. His voice was lubricated with the sweet-oil of willing servitude.

"What can I do for you, madam? Low-cuts for yourself?"

He straddled a stool and took the foot in the cup of his hand. Beside him on a similar stool that brought their heads parallel Miss Ruby smoothed her hand across her customer's instep.

"Ain't that effect great, Mr. Ginsburg, with that swell little rosette? I was just telling this young lady if I had her instep I'd never wear anything but our dancing-shoes."

"It certainly is swell," agreed Mr. Ginsburg, peering into the lining of the shoe he removed to read its size.

The day's tide quickened; the yellow benches, with ceiling fans purring over them, were filled with rows of trade who tamped the floor with shiny, untried soles, bent themselves double to feel of toe and instep, and walked the narrow strip of green felt as if on clay feet they feared would break.

Came noon and afternoon. Miss Cohn ascended and descended the ladder with the agility of a street vender's mechanical toy, shoes tucked under each arm, and a pencil at a violent angle in the nest of her hair.

"Have we got any more of them 543 flat heels, Mr. Ginsburg?"

"Yes, Miss Ruby--right there in back of you."

"Say, you'd think I was using my eyes for something besides seeing, wouldn't you? Wait on that lady next, Mr. Ginsburg. She wants white kids."

"Certainly."

"Yes'm; we sell lots of them russet browns. It's a little shoe that gives satisfaction every time. Mr. Ginsburg is always ordering more. I wore a pair of them for two years myself. There ain't no wear-out to them. We carry that in stock, too, and it keeps them like new--just rub with a flannel cloth--fifteen cents a bottle. Just a moment, madam; I'll be over to you as soon as I'm finished here. Mr. Ginsburg, take off that lady's shoe and show her a pair of them dollar-ninety-eight elastic sides while I finish with this lady. Sure, you can have 'em by five, madam. Name? Hornschein, 3456 Eighth Avenue? Dollar-eighty out of two. Thank you! Call again. Now, madam, what can I do for you? Yes, we have them in moccasins in year-old size--sixty cents, and grand and soft for their little feet. Wait; I'll see. Mr. Ginsburg, have we got those 672 infants' in pink?"

"Sure thing. Wait, Miss Ruby--I'll climb for you. I have to go up anyway."

"Aw, you're busy with your own customers. Don't trouble."

"Nothing's trouble when it's for you, Miss Ruby. Show her those tassel tops, too."

"Oh, Mr. Ginsburg, ain't you the kidder, though! Yes'm; the tassel tops are eighty. Ain't they the cutest little things?"

At six o'clock a medley of whistles shrieked out the eventide--clarions that ripped upward like sky-rockets in flight; hard-throated soprano whistles that juggled with the topmost note like a colorature diva. The oak benches emptied, Mr. Ginsburg raised the front awning and kicked the carpet-covered brick away from the door, so that it swung quietly closed; daubed at his wrists and collar-top with a damp handkerchief.

"First breathing space we've had to-day, ain't it, Miss Ruby?"

Miss Cohn flopped down on a bench and breathed heavily; her hair lay damp on her temples; the ruffles at her neck

were limp as the ruff of a Pierette the morning after the costume ball.

"You should worry, Mr. Ginsburg! With such a business next year at this time you'll have two clerks and more breathing space than you got breath."

Mr. Ginsburg seated himself carefully beside her at a wide range, so that a customer for a seven-E last could have fitted in between them.

"I've built up a good business here, Miss Ruby. The trouble with poor papa was he was afraid to spend, and he was afraid of novelties. I couldn't learn him that a windowful of satin pumps helps swell the storm-rubber sale. Those little dollar-ninety-eights look swell on your feet, Miss Ruby; you're a good advertisement for the stock--not?"

"Funny what a hit them pumps make! Mr. Leavitt was crazy about them, too; but, say, what your mother thinks of these satin slippers I'd hate to tell you. When she was down the day before I left she looked at 'em till I got so nervous I tripped over the cracks between the boards. Say, but wasn't she sore about the new glass fixtures! I kinda felt like it was my fault, too; but I was strong for 'em because--"

"Mamma's the old-fashioned kind, Miss Ruby--her and poor papa like the old way of doing things. She's getting old, Miss Ruby, but she means well. She's a good mother--a good mother."

"She's sure a grand woman--carrying soup across to old Levinsky every day, and all."

"She's more'n you know she is, too, Miss Ruby--little things that woman does I could tell you about--when she didn't have it so good as now neither."

Miss Ruby dropped her lids until her eyes were as soft as plush behind the portieres of her lashes; her voice dropped into a throat that might have been lined with that same soft plush.

"I had a mother for two days--like I said to Mr. Leavitt the other day up in the country--we was talking about different things. I says to him, I says, she quit when she looked at me--just laid down and died when I was two days old. I must have been enough to scare the daylights out of any one. Next to a pink worm on a fish-hook gimme a red-headed baby for the horrors! Say, you ought to seen Mr. Leavitt fish! Six bass he caught in one day--I sat next him and watched; we had 'em fried for supper. He's some little--"

"What a pleasure you'd 'a' been to your mother, Miss Ruby! Such a girl like you I could wish my own mother."

"That's just what Mr. Leavitt used to tell me; but, gee! he was a kidder! I-I oughtta had a mother! Sometimes I--sometimes in the night when I can't sleep--daytimes you don't care so much--but sometimes at night I-I just don't care about nothing. With a girl like me, that ain't even known a mother or father, it ain't always so easy to keep her head above water."

"Poor little girl!"

"Since the day I left the Institootion I been dodging the city and jumping its mud-holes like a lady trying to cross Sixth Avenue when it's torn up. I--oh, ain't I the silly one?--treating you to my troubles! Say, I got a swell riddle! I can't give it like Leavitt--like Simon did; but--"

"Always Mr. Leavitt, and now it's Simon yet--such a hit as that man made with you--not?"

"Hit! Can't a girl have a gentleman friend? Can't you have a lady friend--a friend like Miss Washeim, who comes in for shoes three times--"

"Ruby, can I help it when she comes in here?"

"Can I help it when I go to the country and meet Mr. Leavitt?"

"Ruby!"

Mr. Ginsburg slid himself along the bench until a customer for a AA misses' last would have fitted with difficulty between, and looked at her as ancient Phidias must have looked at his Athene.

"Ruby--I can't keep it back no longer--since you went away on your vacation I've had it inside of me, but I never knew what it was till you walked back this morning. First, I thought I was sick with the heat; but now I know it was you--"

"What--what you--"

"I--I invite you to get married, Ruby. I got a feeling for you like I never had for any girl! I want it that mamma should have a good girl like you to make it easy for her. I can't say what I want to say, Ruby; I don't say it so good, but--a girl could do worse than me--not, Ruby?"

Miss Cohn's fingers closed over the shoe-hook at her belt until the knuckles sprang out whiter than her white skin.

"Oh, Mr. Ginsburg! What would your mamma say? A young man like you, with a grand business and all--you could do for yourself what you wanted. If you was only a drummer like Simon; but--"

A wisp of Miss Cohn's hair, warm as sunset, brushed close to Mr. Ginsburg's lips; he groped for her hand, because the mist of his emotions was over his eyes.

"Ruby, I invite you to get married; that's--all I want is that mamma should have it good with me always like she has it now. She's getting old, Ruby, and I always say what's the difference if I humor her? When she don't want to move in an apartment with a marble hall and built-in wash-tubs, I say: All right; we stay over the store. When she don't like it that I put a telephone in, I tell her I got a friend in the business put it in for nothing. You could give it to her as good as a daughter--not, Ruby?"

"She's a grand woman, Abie; she--"

"Ruby!"

"Oh! Oh!"

In the eventide quiescence of the shop, with the heliotrope of early dusk about them, and passers-by flashing by the plate-glass window in a stream that paused neither for love nor life, Mr. Ginsburg leaned over and gathered Miss Cohn in his arms, pushed back the hair from her forehead and kissed her thrice--once on each lowered eyelid, and once on her lips, which were puckered to resemble a rosebud.

"Abie, you--you mustn't! We're in the store!"

"I should worry!"

"What will--what will they say?"

"For what they say I care that much!" cried Mr. Ginsburg, with insouciance. "Ain't I got a ruby finer than what they got in the finest jewelry store?"

Miss Cohn raised her smooth cheek from the rough weft of Mr. Ginsburg's sleeve.

"What your mamma will say I don't know! You that could have Beulah Washeim or Birdie Harburger, or any of those grand girls that are grand catches--I ain't bringing you nothing, Abie."

"We're going to make it grand for mamma, Ruby--that's all I want you to bring me. She'll have it so good as never in her life. You are going to be a good daughter to her--not, Ruby?"

"Yes, Abe. If we take a bigger apartment she can have an outside room, and I can take all the housekeeping off her hands. Such nut-salad as I can make you never tasted--like they serve it in the finest restaurant! I got the recipe from my landlady. If we take a bigger apartment--"

"What mamma wants we do--how's that? She's so used to having her own way I always say, What's the difference? When poor papa lived she--"

"Abe, there's your mamma calling you down the back stairs now--you should go up to your supper. I must go, too; my landlady gets mad when I'm late--it's half past six already. Oh, I feel scared! What'll she say when she hears?"

"Scared for what, my little girl?... Yes, mamma; I'm coming!... There ain't a week passes that mamma don't say if I find the right girl I should get married. Even the other night, before I knew it myself, she said it to me. 'Abie,' she always says, 'don't let me stand in your way!'... Yes, mamma; I'll be right up!... You and her can get along grand when you two know each other--grand!"

"Your mamma's calling like she was mad, Abie."

"To-night, Ruby, you come up to us for supper--we bring her a surprise-party."

"Oh, you ain't going to tell her to-night--right away--are you?"

"For what I have secrets from my own mother? She should know the good news. Get your hat, Ruby. Come on,

Ruby-la! Come on!"

"Oh, Abie, you ain't going to forget to lock the front store door, are you?"

"Ach!--that should happen to me yet. The things a man don't do when he's engaged! If mamma should know I forget to lock the store she'd think I've gone crazy with being in love--you little Ruby-la!"

Mr. Ginsburg hastened to the front of the store on feet that bounded off the floor like rubber balls, and switched on the electric show-window display.

"Abe, you got the double switch on! What you think this is--convention or Christmas week?"

"To-night we celebrate with double window lights. What's the difference if it costs a little more or a little less? The night he gets engaged a fellow should afford what he wants."

"Abe!"

"There now--with two locks on the door we should worry about burglars! I'm the burglar that's stealing the ruby, ain't I?... One, two, three--up we go, to mamma and supper. Watch out for the step there! I want her to see my Ruby--finer than you can buy in the finest jewelry store!" cried Mr. Ginsburg, clinging proudly to his metaphor.

Any of three emotions were crowded into his voice--excitement, trepidation, the love that is beyond understanding--or the trilogy of them all.

"Come along, Ruby-la!"

Through the rear of the store and up a winding back stairway they marched like glorified children; and at the first landing he must pause and kiss away the words of fear and nervousness from her lips and look into her diffident eyes with the same rapture that was Jupiter's when he gazed on Antiope.

"Such a little scarey she is--like mamma was going to bite!"

At the top of the flight the door of the apartment stood open; a blob of gas lighted a yellowish way to the kitchen, and through the yellow Mrs. Ginsburg's voice drifted out to them:

"Once more I call you, Abie, and then I dish up supper and eat alone--no consideration that boy has got for his mother! He should know what it is not to have a mother who fixes him *Pfannkuchen* in this heat! Don't complain to me if everything is not fit to eat! In the heat I stand and cook, and that boy closes so late--Abie! Once more I call you and then I dish up. Ab-ie!" Mrs. Ginsburg's voice rose to an acidulated high C.

"Mamma! Mamma, don't get so excited--it ain't late. The days get shorter, that's all. Look! I brought company for supper. We don't stand on no ceremony. Come right in the kitchen, Ruby."

Mr. Ginsburg pushed Miss Cohn into the room before him, and Mrs. Ginsburg raised her face from over the steaming stove-top--the pink of heat and exertion high in her cheek. Reflexly her hand clutched at the collar of her black wrapper, where it fell away to reveal the line where the double scallop of her chin met the high swell of her bosom.

"Miss Cohn! Miss Cohn!"

"How do you do, Mrs. Ginsburg? I--"

"Sit right down, Miss Cohn--or you and Abie go in the front room till I dish up. You must excuse me the way I holler, but so mad that boy makes me. Just like his poor papa, he makes a long face if his supper is cold, but not once does he come up on time."

"All men are alike, Mrs. Ginsburg--that's what they say about 'em anyway."

"Such a supper we got you'll have to excuse, Miss Cohn. Abie, take them German papers off the chair. Miss Cohn can sit out here a minute if she don't mind such heat. If Abie had taken the trouble to tell me you was coming I'd have fixed--"

"I am glad you don't fix no extras for me, Mrs. Ginsburg. I like to take just pot-luck."

"Abie likes *Pfannkuchen* and pot-roast better than the finest I can fix him, and this morning at Fulton Market I seen such grand green beans; and I said to Yetta, 'I fix'em sweet-sour for supper; he likes them so.'"

"I love sweet-sour beans, too, Mrs. Ginsburg. My landlady fixes all them German dishes swell."

"Well, you don't mind that I don't make no extras for you? You had a nice vacation? I tell Abie he should take one himself--not? He worked hisself sick last week. I was scared enough about him. Abie, why don't you find a chair for yourself? Why you stand there like--like--"

Even as she spoke the red suddenly ran out of Mrs. Ginsburg's face, leaving it the color of oysters packed in ice.

"Abie!"

For answer Mr. Ginsburg crossed the room and took his mother in a wide-armed embrace, so that his mouth was close to her ear. His lips were pale and tinged with a faintly green aura, like a child's who holds his breath from rage or a lyceum reader's who feels the icy clutch of stage-panic on him.

"Mamma, we--we--me and Ruby got a surprise-party for you. Guess, mamma--such a grand surprise for you!"

Mrs. Ginsburg placed her two fists against her son's blue shirt-front, threw back her head, and looked into his eyes; her heavy waist-line swayed backward against his firm embrace; immediate tears sprang into her eyes.

"Abie! Abie!"

"Mamma, look how happy you should be! Ain't you always wanted a daughter, mamma? For joy she cries, Ruby."

"Abie, my boy! *Ach*, Miss Cohn, you must excuse me."

"Aw, now, mamma, don't cry so. Look! You make my shoulder all wet--shame on you! You should laugh like never in your life! Ruby, you and mamma kiss right away--you should get to know each other now."

"*Ach*, Miss Cohn, you must excuse me. I always told him I mustn't stand in his way; but what that boy is to me, Miss Cohn--what--what--"

"Ruby--mamma, call her Ruby. Ain't she your little Ruby as much as mine--now, ain't she?"

"Yes; come here, Ruby, and let me kiss you. Since poor papa's gone you can never know what that boy has been to me, Ruby--such a son; not out of the house would he go without me! It's like I was giving away my heart to give him up--like I was tearing it right out from inside of me! *Ach*, but how glad I am for him!"

"Aw, mamma--like you was giving me up!"

Mr. Ginsburg swallowed with such difficulty that the tears sprang into his eyes.

"I ain't taking him away from you, Mrs. Ginsburg--he's your son as much as ever--and more."

"Call her mamma, Ruby--just like I do."

"Mamma! Just don't you worry, mamma; it's going to be grand for you and me and all of us."

"Hear her, mamma, how she talks! Ain't she a girl for you?"

"You--you children mustn't mind me--I'm an old woman. You go in the front room, and I'll be all right in a minute--so happy I am for my boy. You bad boy, you--not to tell your mamma the other night!"

"Mamma, so help me, I didn't know it myself till I seen her come back to-day so pretty, and all--I just felt it inside of me all of a sudden."

"Aw, Abe--ain't he the silly talker, Mrs. Ginsburg?--mamma! You mustn't cry, mamma; we'll make it grand for you."

"Ain't I the silly one myself to cry when I'm so happy for you? I'll be all right in a minute--so happy I am!"

"Ruby, you tell mamma how grand it'll be."

Miss Cohn placed her arms about Mrs. Ginsburg's neck, stood on tiptoe, and kissed her on the tear-wet lips.

"You always got a home with us, mamma. Me and Abie wouldn't be engaged this minute if it wasn't that you would always have a home with us."

With one swoop Mr. Ginsburg gathered the two women in a mutual embrace that strained his arms from their sockets; his voice was taut, like one who talks through a throat that aches.

"My little mamma and my little Ruby--ain't it?"

Mrs. Ginsburg dried her eyes on a corner of her apron and smiled at them with fresh tears forming instantly.

"He's been a good boy, Ruby. I only want that he should make just so good a husband. I always said the girl that gets him does well enough for herself. I don't want to brag on my own child, but--if--"

"Aw, mamma!"

"But, if I do say it myself, he's been a good boy to his mother."

"Now, mamma, don't begin--"

"I always said to him, Ruby, looks in a girl don't count the most--such girls as you see nowadays, with their big ideas, ain't worth house-room. I always say to him, Ruby, a girl that ain't ashamed to work and knows the value of a dollar, and can help a young man save and get a start without such big ideas like apartments and dummy waiters--"

"Honest, wouldn't you think this was a funeral! Mamma, to-night we have a party--not? I go down and get up that bottle of wine!"

"*Himmel!* My *Pfannkuchen!* Yes, Abie, run down in the cellar; on the top shelf it is, under the grape-jelly row--left yet from poor papa's last birthday. *Ach*, Ruby, you should have known poor papa--that such a man could have been taken before his time! Sit down, Ruby, while I dish up."

The tears dried on Mrs. Ginsburg's cheeks, leaving the ravages of dry paths down them; Mr. Ginsburg's footsteps clacked down the bare flight of stairs.

"Abie! Oh, Abie!"

"Yes, mamma!"

His voice came up remotely from two flights down, like a banshee voice drifting through a yellow sheol of dim-lit hallway.

"Abe, bring up some dill pickles from the jar--there's a dish in the closet."

"Yes, I bring them."

Between the two women fell silence--a silence that in its brief moment spawned the eggs of a thousand unborn thoughts.

From her corner the girl regarded the older woman with a nervous diffidence, her small, black-satin feet curled well inward and round the rungs of the chair.

"I--I hope you ain't mad at me, Mrs. Ginsburg--you ain't more surprised than me."

A note as thin as sheet tin crept into Mrs. Ginsburg's voice.

"He's my boy, Ruby, and what he wants I want. I know you ain't the kind of a girl, Ruby, that won't help my boy along--not? Extravagant ways and high living never got a young couple nowheres. Abie should take out a thousand more life insurance now; and, with economical ways, you got a grand future. For myself I don't care--I ain't so young any more, and--"

"You always got a home with us, Mrs. Ginsburg. You won't know yourself, you'll have it so good! If we move you with us out of this dark little flat we--you won't know yourself, you'll have it so good!"

"I hope you ain't starting out with no big ideas, Ruby--this flat ain't so dark but it could be worse. For young people with good eyes it should do all right. If it was good enough for Abie's papa and me it--"

Mr. Ginsburg burst into the kitchen, a wine-bottle tucked under one arm and a white china dish held at arm's-length.

"Such pickles as mamma makes, Ruby, you never tasted! You should learn how. You two can get out here in the kitchen, with your sleeves rolled up to your elbows, and such housekeeping times you can have! I'll get dill down by Anchute's like last year--not, mamma?... Come; we sit down now. We can all eat in the kitchen, mamma. Don't make company out of Ruby--she knows we got a front room to eat in if we want it. Come and sit down, Ruby, across from mamma, so we get used to it right away--sit here, you little Ruby-la, you!"

Mr. Ginsburg exuded radiance like August bricks exude the heat of day. He kissed Miss Cohn playfully under the pink lobe of each ear and repeated the performance beneath Mrs. Ginsburg's not so pink lobes; carved the gravy-oozing slices of pot-roast with a hand that was no less skilful because it trembled under pressure of a sublime agitation.

"Ruby, I learn you right away--we always got to save mamma the heel of the bread, 'cause she likes it."

Miss Cohn smiled and regarded Mr. Ginsburg from the left corner of each eye.

"I wasn't so slow learning the shoe business, was I, Abe?"

"You look at me so cute-like, and I'll come over to you right this minute! Look at her, mamma, how she flirts with me--just like it wasn't all settled."

"Abie, pass Ruby the beans. Honest, for a beau, you don't know nothing--your papa was a better beau as you. Pass her the beans. Don't you see she ain't got none? You two with your love-making! You remind me of me and poor papa; he-he--"

"Now, mamma, don't you go getting sad again like a funeral."

"I ain't, Abie. I'm-so happy--for you."

"To-night we just play, and to-morrow mamma decides when we get married--not, Ruby? We do like she wants it--tonight we just play. Ruby, pass your glass and mamma's, and we drink to our three selves with claret."

Mr. Ginsburg poured with agitated hand, and the red in his face mounted even as the wine in the glass.

"To the two grandest women in the world! May we all be happy and prosperous from to-night!" Mr. Ginsburg swung his right arm far from him and brought his glass round to his lips in a grand semi-circle. "To the two grandest women in the world!"

Mrs. Ginsburg tipped the glass against her lips.

"To my two children! God bless them and poor papa!"

"The first time I ever seen mamma drink wine, Ruby. She hates it--that shows how much she likes you already. Eat your dessert, mamma; it'll take the taste away. You like noodle dumplings? Such dumplings as these you should learn to make, Ruby-la."

"Children, you have had enough supper?"

"It was a grand supper, mamma."

They scraped their chairs backward from the table and smiled satiated, soul-deep smiles. From the sitting-room a clock chimed the half-hour.

"So late, children! *Ach*, how time flies when there's excitement! You and Ruby go in the parlor--I do the dishes so quick you won't know it."

"Ruby can help you with the dishes, mamma."

"Sure I can; we can do 'em in a hurry, and then go maybe to a picture show or some place."

"Picture show--nine o'clock!"

"There's always two shows, Mrs. Ginsburg--the second don't begin till then. I always go to the second show--it's always the liveliest."

"Come on, mamma; you and Ruby do the dishes, and we go. It's a grand night, and for once late hours won't hurt you."

"*Ach*, you ain't got no time for a old lady like me--in the night air I get rheumatism. Abie can tell you how on cool nights like this I get rheumatism. You two children go. I'm sleepy already. These few dishes I can do quicker as with you, Ruby."

"Without you we don't go--me and Ruby won't go then."

"We won't go, then, like Abe says--we won't go then."

"Abie, if it pleases me that you go to the picture show for an hour--you can do that much for mamma the first night you're engaged; some other night maybe I go too. Let me stay at home, Abie, and get my sleep like always."

"Ah, mamma, you're afraid. I know you even get scared when the bed-post creaks. We stay home, too."

"Ruby, for me will you make him go?"

"Abie, if your mamma wants you to go for an hour--you go. If she comes, too, we're glad; but many a night I've stayed in the boarding-house alone. If you was afraid you'd say so--wouldn't you, Mrs. Ginsburg--mamma?"

"Afraid of what? Nobody won't steal me!"

"Sure, mamma?"

"Get Ruby's hat and coat, Abie. Good-by, you children, you! Have a good time. Abie, stop with your nonsense--on the nose he has to kiss me!"

"Ruby, just as easy we can stay at home with mamma--not?"

"Sure! Aw, Abe, don't you know how to hold a girl's coat? So clumsy he is!"

"Good night, Ruby. I congratulate you on being my daughter. Good night, Ruby--you come to-morrow."

"Good night, mamma--to-morrow I see you."

"Good night, mamma. In less than an hour I be back--before the clock strikes ten. You shouldn't make me go--I don't like to leave you here."

"Ach, you silly children! I'm glad for peace by myself. Look! I close the door right on you."

"Good night, mamma. I be back by ten."

"Good-by, Abie."

"What?"

"Good night, children!"

When the clock in the parlor struck eleven Mrs. Ginsburg wiped dry her last dish, flapped out her damp dish-towel, and hung it over a cord stretched diagonally across a corner of the kitchen. Then she closed the cupboard door on the rows of still warm dishes, slammed down the window and locked it, reached up, turned out the gas, and groped into her adjoining bedroom.

Reflected light from the Maginty kitchen lay in an oblong on the floor and climbed half-way on the bed. By aid of the yellow oblong Mrs. Ginsburg undressed slowly and like a withered Suzanne, who dared not blush through her wrinkles.

The black wrapper, with empty arms dangling, she spread across a chair, and atop of it a black cotton petticoat, sans all the gentle mysteries of lace and frill. Lastly, beside the bed, in the very attitude of the service of love, she placed her shoes--expressive shoes, swollen from swollen joints, and full of the capacity for labor.

Then Mrs. Ginsburg climbed into bed, knees first, threw backward over the foot-board the blue-and-white coverlet, and drew the sheet up about her. A fresh-as-water breeze blew inward the lace curtain, admitting a streak of light across her eyes and a merry draught about her head. The parlor clock tonged the half-hour.

Silence for a while, then the black rush of a train, an intermittent little plaint like the chirrup of a bird in its cage, the squeak of a bed-post, and a succession of the unimportant noises that belong solely to the mystery of night.

Finally, from under the sheet, the tremolo of a moan--the sob of a heart that aches and, aching, dares not break.

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THE OTHER CHEEK

Romance has more lives than a cat. Crushed to earth beneath the double-tube, non-skiddable tires of a sixty-horse-power limousine, she allows her prancing steed to die in the dust of yesterday and elopes with the chauffeur.

Love has transferred his activities from the garden to the electric-heated taxi-cab and suffers fewer colds in the head. No, romance is not dead--only reincarnated; she rode away in divided skirt and side-saddle, and motored back in goggles. The tree-bark messages of the lovers of Arden are the fifty-word night letters of to-day.

The first editions of the Iliad were writ in the tenderest flesh parts of men's hearts, and truly enough did Moses blast his sublime messages out of the marble of all time; but why bury romance with the typewriter as a headstone?

Why, indeed--when up in the ninth-floor offices of A. L. Gregory, stenographers and expert typewriters--Miss Goldie Flint, with hair the color of heat-lightning, and wrists that jangled to the rolled-gold music of three bracelets, could tick-tack a hundred-word-a-minute love scene that was destined, after her neat carbon copies were distributed, to wring tears, laughter, and two dollars each from a tired-business-man audience.

Why, indeed, when the same slow fires that burned in Giacinda's upslanted eyes and made the world her lover lay deep in Goldie's own and invariably won her a seat in the six-o'clock Subway rush, and a bold, bad, flirtatious stare if she ventured to look above the third button of a man's coat.

Goldie Flint, beneath whose too-openwork shirt-waist fluttered a heart the tempo of which was love of life--and love of life on eight dollars a week and ninety per cent. impure food, and a hall-room, more specifically a standing room, is like a pink rose-bush that grows in a slack heap and begs its warmth from ashes.

Goldie, however, up in her ninth-floor offices, and bent to an angle of forty-five degrees over the denouement of white-slave drama that promised a standing-room-only run and the free advertising of censorship, had little time or concern for her various atrophies.

It was nearly six o'clock, and she wanted half a yard of pink tulle before the shops closed. Besides, hers were the problems of the six-million-dollar incorporateds, who hire girls for six dollars a week; for the small-eyed, large-diamonded birds of prey who haunt the glove-counters and lace departments of the six-million-dollar incorporateds with invitations to dinner; and for the night courts, which are struggling to stanch the open gap of the social wound with medicated gauze instead of a tight tourniquet.

A yard of pink tulle cut to advantage would make a fresh yoke that would brighten even a three-year-old, gasolene-cleaned blouse. Harry Trimp liked pink tulle. Most Harry Trims do.

At twenty minutes before six the lead-colored dusk of January crowded into the Gregory typewriting office so thick that the two figures before the two typewriters faded into the veil of gloom like a Corot landscape faints into its own mist.

Miss Flint ripped the final sheet of her second act from the roll of her machine, reached out a dim arm that was noisy with bracelets, and clicked on the lights. The two figures at the typewriters, the stationary wash-stand in the corner, a roll-top desk, and the heat-lightning tints in Miss Flint's hair sprang out in the jaundiced low candle-power.

"I'm done the second act, Miss Gregory. May I go now?"

Miss Flint's eyes were shining with the love-of-life lamps, the mica powder of romance, and a brilliant anticipation of Harry Trimp. Miss Gregory's were twenty years older and dulled like glass when you breathed on it.

"Yes; if you got to go I guess you can."

"Ain't it a swell play, Miss Gregory? Ain't it grand where he pushes her to the edge of the bridge and she throws herself down and hugs his knees?"

"Did you red ink your stage directions in, with the margin wide, like he wants? He was fussy about the first act."

"Yes'm; and say, ain't it a swell name for a show--'The Last of the Dee-Moolans'? Give me a show to do every time, and you can have all your contracts and statements and multigraph letters. Those love stories that long, narrow fellow brings in are swell to do, too, if he wa'n't such an old grouch about punctuation. Give me stuff that has some reading in it every time!"

Miss Gregory sniffed--the realistic, acidulated sniff of unloved forty and a thin nose.

"The sooner you quit curlin' your side-hair and begin to learn that life's made up of statements and multigraphs, instead of love scenes on papier-mache bridges and flashy fellows in checked suits and get-rich-quick schemes, the better off you're going to be."

The light in Goldie's face died out as suddenly as a Jack-o'-lantern when you blow on the taper.

"Aw, Miss Greg-or-ee!" Her voice was the downscale wail of an oboe. "Whatta you always picking on Harry Trimp for? He ain't ever done anything to you--and you said yourself when he brought them circular letters in that he was one handsome kid."

"Just the same, I knew when he came in here the second time hanging round you with them blue eyes and black lashes, and that batch of get-rich-quick letters, he was as phony as his scarf-pin."

"I glory in a fellow's spunk that can give up a clerking job and strike out for hisself--that's what I do!"

"He was fired--that's how he started out for himself. Ask Mae Pope; she knows a thing or two about him."

"Aw, Miss--"

"Wait until you have been dealing with them as long as I have! Once get a line on a man's correspondence, and you can see through him as easy as through a looking-glass with the mercury rubbed off."

The walls of Jericho fell at the blast of a ram's horn. Not so Miss Flint's frailer fortifications.

"The minute a fellow that doesn't belong to the society of pikers and gets a three-figure salary comes along, and can take a girl to a restaurant where they begin with horse-dooories instead of wiping your cutlery on the table-cloth and deciding whether you want the 'and' with your ham fried or scrambled--the minute a fellow like that comes along and learns one of us girls that taxi-cabs was made for something besides dodging, and pink roses for something besides florist windows--that minute they put on another white-slave play, and your friends begin to recite the doxology to music. Gee! It's fierce!"

"Gimme that second act, Goldie. Thank Gawd I can say that in all my years of experience I've never been made a fool of: and, if I do say it, I had chances in my time!"

"You--you're the safest girl I know, Miss Gregory."

"What?"

"You're safe if you know the ropes, Miss Gregory."

"What did you do with the Rheinhardt statement, Goldie? He'll be in for it any minute."

"It's in your left-hand drawer, along with those contracts, Miss Gregory. I made two carbons."

Miss Flint slid into her pressed-plush fourteen-dollar-and-a-half copy of a fourteen-hundred-fifty-dollar unborn-lamb coat, pulled her curls out from under the brim of her tight hat, and clasped a dyed-rat tippet about her neck so that her face flowered above it like a small rose out of its calyx.

The Bacon-Shakespeare controversy, the Fifth Dimension, and the American Shopgirl and How She Does Not Look It on Six Dollars a Week, and Milk-Chocolate Lunches are still the subjects that are flung like serpentine confetti across the pink candle-shades of four-fork dinners, and are wound like red tape round Uplift Societies and Ladies' Culture Clubs.

Yet Goldie flourished on milk-chocolate lunches like the baby-food infants on the backs of magazines flourish on an add-hot-water-and-serve, twenty-five-cents-a-can substitute for motherhood.

"Good night, Miss Gregory."

"Night!"

Goldie closed the door softly behind her as though tiptoeing away from the buzzing gnats of an eight-hour day. Simultaneously across the hall the ground-glass door of the Underwriters' Realty Company swung open with a gust, and Mr. Eddie Bopp, clerk, celibate, and aspirant for the beyond of each state, bowed himself directly in Goldie's path.

"Ed-die! Ain't you early to-night, though! Since when are you keeping board-of-directors hours?"

"I been watching for you, Goldie."

Eddie needs no introduction. He solicits coffee orders at your door. The shipping-clerks and dustless-broom agents and lottery-ticket buyers of the world are made of his stuff. Bronx apartment houses, with perambulators and imitation marble columns in the down-stairs foyer, are built for his destiny. He sells you a yard of silk; he travels to Coney Island on hot Sunday afternoons; he bleaches on the bleachers; he bookkeeps; he belongs to a building association and

wears polka-dot neckties. He is not above the pink evening edition. Ibsen and eugenics and post impressionism have never darkened the door of his consciousness. He is the safe-and-sane strata in the social mountain; not of the base or of the rarefied heights that carry dizziness.

Yet when Eddie regarded Goldie there was that in his eyes which transported him far above the safe-and-sane strata to the only communal ground that men and socialists admit--the Arcadia of lovers.

"I wasn't going to let you get by me to-night, Goldie. I ain't walked home with you for so long I haven't a rag of an excuse left to give Addie."

Miss Flint colored the faint pink of dawn's first moment.

"I--I got to do some shopping to-night, Eddie. That's why I quit early. Believe me, Gregory'll make me pay up to-morrow."

"It won't be the first time I shopped with you, Goldie."

"No."

"Remember the time we went down in Tracy's basement for a little alcohol-stove you wanted for your breakfasts? The girl at the counter thought we--we were spliced."

"Yeh!" Miss Flint's voice was faint as the thud of a nut to the ground.

They shot down fifteen fireproof stories in a breath-taking elevator, and then out on the whitest, brightest Broadway in the world, where the dreary trilogy of Wine, Woman, and Song is played from noon to dawn, with woman the cheapest of the three.

"How's Addie?"

"She don't complain, but she gets whiter and whiter--poor kid! I got her some new crutches, Goldie--swell mahogany ones with silver tips. You ought to see her get round on them!"

"I--I been so busy--night-work and--and--"

"She's been asking about you every night, Goldie. It ain't like you to stay away like this."

Their breaths clouded before them in the stinging air, and down the length of the enchanted highway lights sprang out of the gloom and winked at them like naughty eyes.

"What's the matter, Goldie? You ain't mad at me--us--are you?"

Eddie took her pressed-plush elbow in the cup of his hand and looked down at her, trying in vain to capture the bright flame of her glance.

"Nothing's the matter, Eddie. Why should I be mad? I been busy--that's all."

The tide of home-going New York caught them in its six-o'clock vortex. Shops emptied and street-cars filled. A newsboy fell beneath a car, and Broadway parted like a Red Sea for an overworked ambulance, the mission of which was futile. A lady in a fourteen-hundred-fifty-dollar unborn-lamb coat and a notorious dog-collar of pearls stepped out of a wine-colored limousine into the gold-leaf foyer of a hotel. A ten-story emporium ran an iron grating across its entrance, and ten watchmen reported for night duty.

"Aw, gee! They're closed! Ain't that the limit now! Ain't that the limit! I wanted some pink tulle."

"Poor kid! Don't you care! You can get it tomorrow--you can work Gregory."

"I--I wanted it for tonight."

"What?"

"I wanted it for my yoke."

They turned into the dark aisle of a side street; the wind lurked around the corner to leap at them.

"Oh-h-h-h!"

He held tight to her arm.

"It's some night--ain't it, girlie?"

"I should say so!"

"Poor little kid!"

Eddie's voice was suddenly the lover's, full of that quality which is like unto the ting of a silver bell after the clapper is quiet.

"You're coming home to a good hot supper with me, Goldie--ain't you, Goldie? Addie'll like it."

She withdrew her hand from the curve of his elbow.

"I can't, Eddie--not tonight. I--tell her I'm coming over real soon."

"Oh!"

"It's sure cold, ain't it?"

"Goldie, can't you tell a fellow what's the matter? Can't you tell me why you been dodging me--us--for two weeks? Can't you tell a fellow--huh, Goldie?"

"Geewhillikins, Eddie! Ain't I told you it's nothing? There ain't a girl could be a better friend to Addie than me."

"I know that, Goldie; but--"

"Didn't we work in the same office thick as peas for two whole years before her--accident--even before I knew she had a brother? Ain't I stuck to her right through--ain't I?"

"You know that ain't what I mean, Goldie. You been a swell friend to poor Addie, stayin' with her Sundays when you could be havin' a swell time and all; but it's me I'm talking about, Goldie. Sometimes--sometimes I--"

"Aw!"

"I've never talked straight out about it before, Goldie; but you--you remember the night--the night I rigged up like a Christmas tree, and you said I was all the ice-cream in my white pants--the night Addie was run over and they sent for me?"

"Will I ever forget it!"

"I was tuning up that evening to tell you, Goldie--while we were sitting there on your stoop, with the street-light in our eyes, and you screechin' every time a June-bug bumbled in your face!"

"Gawd, how I hate bugs! There was one in Miss Gregory's--"

"I was going to tell you that night, Goldie, that there was only one girl--one girl for me--and--"

"Yeh; and while we were sittin' there gigglin' and screechin' at June-bugs poor Addie was provin' that a street-car fender has got it all over a mangling-machine."

"Yes; it's like she says about herself--she was payin' her initiation fee for life membership into the Society of Cripples with a perfectly good hip and a bit of spine."

"Poor Addie! Gawd, how she loved to dance! She used to spend every noon-hour eatin' marshmallows and learning me new steps."

The wind soughed in their ears, and Goldie's skirts blew backward like sails.

"You haven't got a better friend than Addie right now, girlie! She always says our little flat is yours. The three of us, Goldie--the three of us could--"

"It's swell for a girl that ain't got none of her own blood to have a friend like that. Swell, lemme tell you!"

"Goldie!"

"Yes."

"It's like I said--I've never talked right out before, but I got a feelin' you're slippin' away from me like a eel, girlie. You know--aw, you know I ain't much on the elocution stuff; but if it wasn't for Addie and her accident right now--I'd ask you outright--I would. You know what I mean!"

"I don't know anything, Eddie; I'm no mind-reader!"

"Aw, cut it out, Goldie! You know I'm tied up right now and can't say some of the things I was going to say that night on the stoop. You know what I mean--with Addie's doctor's bills and chair and crutches, and all."

"Sure I do, Eddie. You've got no right to think of anything."

She turned from him so that her profile was like a white cameo mounted on black velvet.

"You just give me a little time, Goldie, and I'll be on my feet, all righty. I just want some kind of understanding between us--that's all."

"Oh--you--I--"

"I got Joe's job cinched if he goes over to the other firm in March; and by that time, Goldie, you and me and Addie, on eighty per, could--why, we--"

She swayed back from his close glance and ran up the first three steps of her rooming-house. Her face was struck with fear suddenly, as with a white flame out of the sky.

"Sh-h-h-h-h-h-h!" she said. "You mustn't!"

He reached for her hand, caught it and held it--but like a man who feels the rope sliding through his fingers and sees his schooner slipping out to sea--slipping out to sea.

"Lemme go, Eddie! I gotta go--it's late!"

"*I know*, Goldie. They been guyin' me at the office about you passin' me up; and it's right--ain't it? It's--It's him--" She shook her head and tugged for the freedom of her hand. Tears crowded into her eyes like water to the surface of a tumbler just before the overflow. "It's *him*--ain't it, Goldie?"

"Well, you won't give--give a girl a chance to say anything. If you'd have given me time I was comin' over and tell you, and--and tell--"

"Goldie!"

"I was--I was--"

"It's none of my business, girlie; but--but he ain't fit for you. He--"

"There you go! The whole crowd of you make me--"

"He ain't fit for no girl, Goldie! Listen to me, girlie! He's just a regular ladykiller! He can't keep a job no more'n a week for the life of him! I used to know him when I worked at Delaney's. Listen to me, Goldie! This here new minin' scheme he's in ain't even on the level! It ain't none of my business; but, good God, Goldie, just because a guy's good-lookin' and a swell dresser and--"

She sprang from his grasp and up the three remaining steps. In the sooty flare of the street lamp she was like Jeanne d'Arc heeding the vision or a suffragette declaiming on a soap-box and equal rights.

"You--the whole crowd of you make me sick! The minute a fellow graduates out of the sixty-dollar-clerk class, and can afford a twenty-dollar suit, without an extra pair of pants thrown in, the whole pack of you begin to yowl and yap at his heels like--"

"Goldie! Goldie, listen--"

"Yes, you do! But I ain't caring. I know him, and I know what I want. We're goin' to get married when we're good and ready, and we ain't apologizing to no one! I don't care what the whole pack of you have to say, except Addie and you; and--and--I--oh--"

Goldie turned and fled into the house, slamming the front door after her so that the stained-glass panels rattled--then up four flights, with the breath soughing in her throat and the fever of agitation racing through her veins.

Her oblong box of a room at the top of the long flights was cold with a cavern damp and musty with the must that is as indigenous to rooming-houses as chorus-girls to the English peerage or insomnia to black coffee.

Even before she lighted her short-armed gas-jet, however, a sweet, insidious, hothouse fragrance greeted her faintly through the must, as the memory of mignonette clings to old lace. Goldie's face softened as if a choir invisible was

singing her ragtime from above her skylight. She lighted her fan of gas with fingers that trembled in a pleasant frenzy of anticipation, and the tears dried on her face and left little paths down her cheeks.

A fan of pink roses, fretted with maidenhair fern and caught with a sash of pink tulle, lay on her coarse cot coverlet, as though one of her dreams had ventured out of its long night.

What a witch is love!

Pink leaped into Goldie's cheeks, and into her eyes the light that passeth understanding. Life dropped its dun-colored cloak and stood suddenly garlanded in pink, wire-stemmed roses.

She buried her face in their fragrance. She kissed a cool bud, the heart of which was closed. She unwrapped the pink tulle sash with fingers that were addled--like a child's at the gold cord of a candy-box--and held the filmy streamer against her bosom in the outline of a yoke.

In Mrs. McCasky's boarding-house the onward march of night was as regular as a Swiss watch with an American movement.

At nine o'clock Mr. McCasky's tin bucket grated along the hall wall, down two flights of banisters, across the street, and through the knee-high swinging-doors of Joe's place.

At ten o'clock the Polinis, on the third-floor back, let down their folding-bed and shivered the chandelier in Major Florida's second-floor back.

At eleven o'clock Mr. McCasky's tin bucket grated unevenly along the hall wall, down two flights of banisters, across the street, and through the knee-high swinging-doors of Joe's place.

At twelve o'clock the electric piano in Joe's place ceased to clatter through the night like coal pouring into an empty steel bin, and Mrs. McCasky lowered the hall light from a blob the size of a cranberry to a French pea.

At one o'clock the next to the youngest Polini infant lifted its voice to the skylight, and Mr. Trimp's night-key waltzed round the front-door lock, scratch-scratching for its hole.

In the dim-lit first-floor front Mrs. Trimp started from her light doze like a deer in a park, which vibrates to the fall of a lady's feather fan. The criss-cross from the cane chair-back was imprinted on one sleep-flushed cheek, and her eyes, dim with the weariness of the night-watch, flew to the white-china door-knob.

Reader, rest undismayed. Mr. Trimp entered on the banking-hour legs of a scholar and a gentleman. With a white carnation in his buttonhole, his hat unbattered in the curve of his arm, and his blue eyes behind their curtain of black lashes, but slightly watery, like a thawing ice-pond with a film atop.

"Hello, my little Goldie-eyes!"

Mr. Trimp flashed his double deck of girlish-pearlish teeth. When Mr. Trimp smiled Greuze might have wanted to paint his lips for a child-study. Women tightened up about the throat and dared to wonder whether he wore a chest-protector and asafetida bag. Old ladies in street-cars regarded him through the mist of memories, and as if their motherly fingers itched to run through the heavy yellow hemp of his hair. There was that in his smile which seemed to provoke hand-painted sofa-pillows and baby-ribboned coat-hangers, knitted neckties, and cross-stitch slippers. Once he had posed for an Adonis underwear advertisement.

"Hello, baby! Did you wait up for your old man?"

Goldie regarded her husband with eyes that ten months of marriage had dimmed slightly. Her lips were thinner and tighter and silent.

"I think we landed a sucker to-night for fifty shares, kiddo. Ain't so bad, is it? And so you waited up for your tired old man, baby?"

"No!" she said, the words sparking from her lips like the hiss of a hot iron when you test it with a moist forefinger. "No; I didn't wait up. I been out with you--painting the town."

"I couldn't get home for supper, hon. Me and Cutty--"

"You and Cutty! I wasn't born yesterday!"

"Me and Cutty had a sucker out, baby. He'll bite for fifty shares sure!"

"Gee!" she flamed at him, backing round the rocker from his amorous advances. "Gee! If I was low enough to be a crook--if I was low enough to try and make a livin' sellin' dead dirt for pay dirt--I'd be a successful crook, anyway; I'd--"

"Now, Goldie, hon! Don't--"

"I wouldn't leave my wife havin' heart failure every time McCasky passes the door--I wouldn't!"

"Now, don't fuss at me, Goldie. I'm tired--dog-tired. I got some money comin' in to-morrow that'll--"

"That don't go with me any more!"

"Sure I have."

"I been set out on the street too many times before on promises like that; and it was always after a week of one of these here slow jags. I know them and how they begin. I know them!"

"Tain't so this time, honey. I been--"

"I know them and how they begin, with your sweet, silky ways. I'd rather have you come staggering home than like this--with your claws hid. I--I'm afraid of you, I tell you. I ain't forgot the night up at Hinkey's. You haven't been out with Cutty no more than I have. You been up to the Crescent, where the Red Slipper is dancing this week, you--"

Mr. Trimp swayed ever so slightly--slightly as a silver reed in the lightest breeze that blows--and regained his balance immediately. His breath, redolent as a garden of spice and cloves, was close to his wife's neck.

"Baby," he said, "you better believe your old man. I been out with Cutty, Goldie. We had a sucker out!"

She sprang back from his touch, hot tears in her eyes.

"Believe you! I did till I learnt better. I believed you for four months, sittin' round waiting for you and your goings-on. You ain't been out with Cutty--you ain't been out with him one night this week. You been--you--"

Mrs. Trimp's voice rose to a hysterical crescendo. Her hair, yellow as corn-silk, and caught in a low chignon at her back, escaped its restraint of pins and fell in a whorl down her shirt-waist. She was like a young immortal eaten by the corroding acids of earlier experiences--raw with the vitriol of her deathless destiny.

"You ain't been out with Cutty. You been--"

The piano-salesman in the first-floor back knocked against the closed folding-door for the stilly night that should have been his by right. A distant night-stick struck the asphalt, and across Harry Trimp's features, like filmy clouds across the moon, floated a composite death-mask of Henry the Eighth and Othello, and all their alimony-paying kith. His mouth curved into an expression that did not coincide with pale hair and light eyes.

He slid from his greatcoat, a black one with an astrakan collar and bought in three payments, and inclined closer to his wife, a contumelious quirk on his lips.

"Well, whatta you going to do about it, kiddo--huh?"

"I--I'm going to--quit!"

He laughed and let her squirm from his hold, strolled over to the dresser mirror, pulled his red four-in-hand upward from its knot and tugged his collar open.

"You're not going to quit, kiddo! You ain't got the nerve!"

He leaned to the mirror and examined the even rows of teeth, and grinned at himself like a Hallowe'en pumpkin to flash whiter their whiteness.

"Ain't I! Which takes the most nerve, I'd like to know, stickin' to you and your devilishness or strikin' out for myself like I been raised to do? I was born a worm, and I ain't never found the cocoon that would change me into a butterfly. I--I had as swell a job up at Gregory's as a girl ever had. I'm an expert stenographer, I am! I got a diploma from--"

"Why don't you get your job back, baby? You been up there twice to my knowin'; maybe the third time'll be a charm. Don't let me keep you, kiddo."

The sluice-gates of her fear and anger opened suddenly, and tears rained down her cheeks. She wiped them away with her bare palm.

"It's because you took the life and soul out of me! They don't want me back because I ain't nothin' but a rag any more. I guess they're ashamed to take me back cause I'm in--in your class. Ten months of standing for your funny business and dodging landladies, and waitin' up nights, and watchin' you and your crooked starvation game would take the life out of any girl. It would! It would!"

"Don't fuss at me any more, Goldie-eyes. It's gettin' hard for me to keep down; and I don't want--want to begin gettin' ugly."

Mr. Trimp advanced toward his wife gently--gently.

"Don't come near me! I know what's coming; but you ain't going to get me this time with your oily ways. You're the kind that, walks on a girl with spiked heels and tries to kiss the sores away. I'm going to quit!"

Mr. Trimp plucked at the faint hirsute adornment of his upper lip and folded his black-and-white waistcoat over the back of a chair. He fumbled it a bit.

"Stay where you're put, you--you bloomin' vest, you!"

"I--I got friends that'll help me, I have--even if I ain't ever laid eyes on 'em since the day I married you. I got friends--*real* friends! Addie'll take me in any minute, day or night. Eddie Bopp could get me a job in his firm to-morrow if--if I ask him. I got friends! You've kept me from'em; but I ain't afraid to look 'em up. I'm not!"

He advanced to where she stood beneath the waving gas-flame, a pet phrase clung to his lips, and he stumbled over it.

"My--my little--pussy-cat!"

"You're drunk!"

"No, I ain't, baby--only dog-tired. Dog-tired! Don't fuss at me! You just don't know how much I love you, baby!"

"Who wouldn't fuss, I'd like to know?"

Her voice was like ice crackling with thaw. He took her lax waist in his embrace and kissed her on the brow.

"Don't, honey--don't! Me and Cutty had a sucker out, I tell you."

"You--you always get your way with me. You treat me like a dog; but you know you can wind me round--wind me round."

"Baby! Baby!"

He smoothed her hair away from her salt-bitten eyes, laid his cheek pat against hers, and murmured to her through the scratch in his throat, like a parakeet croons to its mate.

"Pussy-cat! Pussy!"

The river of difference between them dried in the warm sun of her forgiveness, and she sobbed on his shoulder with the exhaustion of a child after a tantrum.

"You won't leave me alone nights no more, Harry?"

"Thu--thu--thu--such a little Goldie-eyes!"

"I can't stand for the wory of the board no more, Harry. McCaskys are gettin' ugly. I ain't got a decent rag to my back, neither."

"I'm going to take a shipping-room job next week, honey, and get back in harness. Bill's going to fix me up. There ain't nothin' in this rotten game, and I'm going to get out."

"Sure?"

"Sure, Goldie."

"You ain't been drinking, Harry?"

"Sure I ain't. Me and Cutty had a rube out, I tell you."

"You'll keep straight, won't you, Harry? You're killin' me, boy, you are."

"Come, dry your face, baby."

He reached to his hip-pocket for his handkerchief, and with it a sparse shower of red and green and pink and white and blue confetti showered to the floor like snow through a spectrum. Goldie slid from his embrace and laughed--a laugh frapped with the ice of scorn and chilled as her own chilled heart.

"Liar!" she said, and trembled as she stood.

His lips curled again into the expression that so ill-fitted his albinism.

"You little cat! You can bluff me!"

"I knew you was up at the Crescent Cotillon! I felt it in my bones. I knew you was up there when I read on the billboards that the Red Slipper was dancing there. I knew where you was every night while I been sittin' here waitin'! I knew--I knew--"

The piano-salesman rapped against the folding-doors thrice, with distemper and the head of a cane. At that instant the lower half of Mr. Trimp's face protruded suddenly into a lantern-jawed facsimile of a blue-ribbon English bull; his hand shot out and hurled the chair that stood between them half-way across the room, where it fell on its side against the wash-stand and split a rung.

"You--you little devil, you!"

The second-floor front beat a tattoo of remonstrance; but there was a sudden howling as of boiling surf in Mr. Trimp's ears, and the hot ember of an oath dropped from his lips.

"You little devil! You been hounding me with the quit game for eight months. Now you gotta quit!"

"I--I--"

"There ain't a man livin' would stand for your long face and naggin'! If you don't like my banking-hours and my game and the company I keep you quit, kiddo! Quit! Do you hear?"

"Will--I--quit? Well--"

"Yeh; I been up to the Crescent Confetti--every night this week, just like you say! I been round live wires, where there ain't no long, white faces shoving board bills and whining the daylights out of me."

"Oh, you--you ain't nothing but--"

"Sure, I been up there! I can get two laughs for every long face you pull on me. You quit if you want to, kiddo--there ain't no strings to you. Quit--and the sooner the better!" Mr. Trimp grasped his wife by her taut wrists and jerked her to him until her head fell backward and the breath jumped out of her throat in a choke. "Quit--and the sooner the better!"

"Lemme go! Lem-me-go!"

He tightened his hold and inclined toward her, so close that their faces almost touched. With his hot clutches on her wrists and his hot breath in her face it seemed to her that his eyes fused into one huge Cyclopean circle that spun and spun in the center of his forehead, like a fiery Catharine Wheel against a night sky.

"Bah! You little whiteface, you! You played a snide trick on me, anyway--lost your looks the second month and went dead like a punctured tire! Quit when you want to--there ain't no strings. Quit now!"

He flung her from him, so that she staggered backward four steps and struck her right cheek sharply against the mantel corner. A blue-glass vase fell to the hearth and was shattered. With the salt of fray on his lips, he kicked at the overturned chair and slammed a closet door so that the windows rattled. A carpet-covered hassock lay in his path, and he hurled it across the floor. Goldie edged toward the wardrobe, hugging the wall like one who gropes in the dark.

"If you're right bright, kiddo, you'll keep out of my way. You got me crazy to-night--crazy! Do you hear me, you little--"

"My hat!"

He flung it to her from its peg, with her jacket, so that they fell crumpled at her feet.

"You're called on your bluff this time, little one. This is one night it's quits for you--and I ain't drunk, neither!"

She crowded her rampant hair, flowing as Ophelia's, into her cheap little boyish hat and fumbled into her jacket. A red welt, shaped like a tongue of flame, burned diagonally down her right cheek.

"Keep out of my way--you! You got me crazy to-night--crazy to-night!"

He watched her from the opposite side of the room with lowered head, like a bull lunging for onslaught.

She moved toward the door with the rigidity of an automaton doll, her magnetized eyes never leaving his reddening face and her hands groping ahead. Her mouth was moist and no older than a child's; but her skin dead, as if coated over with tallow. She opened the door slowly, fearing to break the spell--then suddenly slipped through the aperture and slammed it after her. Then the slam of another door; the scurrying of feet down cold stone steps that sprung echoes in the deserted street.

The douse of cold air stung her flaming cheek; a policeman glanced after her; a drunken sailor staggered out of a black doorway, and her trembling limbs sped faster--a labyrinth of city streets and rows of blank-faced houses; an occasional pedestrian, who glanced after her because she wheezed in her throat, and ever so often gathered her strength and broke into a run; then a close, ill-smelling apartment house, with a tipsy gas-light mewling in the hall, and a dull-brown door that remained blank to her knocks and rings. The sobs were rising in her throat, and the trembling in her limbs shook her as with ague.

A knock that was more of a pound and a frenzied rattling of the knob! Finally from the inside of the door a thump-thump down a long hallway--and the door creaked open cautiously, suspiciously!

In its frame a pale figure, in the rumpled clothes of one always sitting down and hunched on a pair of silver-mounted mahogany crutches that slanted from her sides like props.

"Goldie! Little Goldie!"

"Oh, Addie! Addie!"

Youth has rebound like a rubber ball. Batted up against the back fence, she bounces back into the heart of a rose-bush or into the carefully weeded, radishless radish-bed of the kitchen garden.

Mrs. Trimp rose from the couch-bed davenport of the Bopp sitting-dining-sleeping-room, with something of the old lamps burning in her eyes and a full-lipped mouth to which clung the memory of smiles. Even Psyche, abandoned by love, smiled a specious smile when she posed for the scalpel.

Eddie Bopp reached out a protective arm and drew Goldie by the sleeve of her shirt-waist down to the couch-bed davenport again.

"Take it easy there, Goldie. Don't get yourself all excited again."

"But it's just like you say, Eddie--I got the law on my side. I got him on the grounds of cruelty if--if I show nothin' but--but this cheek."

"Sure, you have, Goldie; but you just sit quiet. Addie, come in here and make Goldie behave her little self."

"I'm all right, Eddie. Gee! With Addie treating me like I was a queen in a gilt crown, and you skidding round me like a tire, I feel like cream!"

Eddie regarded her with eyes that were soft as rose-colored lamps at dusk.

"You poor little kid!"

Addie hobbled in from the kitchen.

"I got something you'll like, Goldie. It's hot and good for you, too."

God alone knew the secret of Addie. He had fashioned her in clay and water, even as you and me--from the same earthy compound from which is sprung ward politicians and magic-throated divas, editors and plumbers, poet laureates and Polish immigrants, kings and French ballet dancers, propagandists and piece-workers, single-taxers and

suffragettes.

He fashioned her in clay; and it was as if she came from under the teeth of a Ninth Avenue street-car fender--broken, but remolded in alabaster, and with the white light of her stanch spirit shining through--Addie, whose side, up as high as her ribs, was a flaming furnace and whose smile was sunshine on dew.

"You wouldn't eat no supper; so I made you some chicken broth, Goldie. You remember when we was studying shorthand at night school how we used to send Jimmie over to White's lunch-room for chickenette broth and a slab of milk chocolate?"

"Do I? Gee! You were the greatest kid, Addie!"

"Eat, Goldie--gwan."

"I ain't hungry--honest!"

"Quit standing over her, Eddie; you make her nervous. Let me feed you, Goldie."

"Gee! Ain't you swell to me!" Ready tears sprang to her eyes.

"Like you ain't my old chum, Goldie! It don't seem so long since we were working in the same office and going to Recreation Pier dances together, does it?"

"Addie! Addie!"

"Do you remember how you and me and Ed and Charley Snuggs used to walk up and down Ninth Avenue summer evenings eating ice-cream cones?"

"Do I? Oh, Addie, do I?"

"I'm glad we had them ice-cream days, Goldie. They're melted, but the flavor ain't all gone." Addie's face was large and white and calm-featured, like a Botticelli head.

"You two girls sure was cut-ups! Remember the night Addie first introduced us, Goldie? You came over to call for her, and us three went to the wax-works show on Twenty-third Street. Lordy, how we cut up!"

"And I started to ask the wax policeman if we was allowed to go past the rail!" They laughed low in their throats, as if they feared to raise an echo in a vale of tears. "It's like old times for me to be staying all night with you again, Addie. It's been so long! He--he used to get mad like anything if I wanted to see any of the old crowd. He knew they didn't know any good of him. He was always for the sporty, all-night bunch."

"Poor kid!"

"Don't get her to talking about it again, Eddie; it gets her all excited."

"He could have turned me against my own mother, I was that crazy over him."

"That," said Addie, softly, "was *love!* And only women can love like that; and women who do love like that are cursed--and blessed."

"I'm out of it now, Addie. You won't never send me back to him--you won't ever?"

"There now, dearie, you're gettin' worked up again. Ain't you right here, safe with us?"

"That night at Hinkey's was the worst, Goldie," said Eddie. "It makes my blood boil! Why didn't you quit then; why?"

"I ain't told you all, neither, Eddie. One night he came home about two o'clock, and I had been--"

"Just quit thinking and talking about him, Goldie. You're right here, safe with me and Eddie; and he's going to get you a job when you're feeling stronger. And then, when you're free--when you're free--"

Addie regarded her brother with the tender aura of a smile on her lips and a tender implication in her eyes that scurried like a frightened mouse back into its hole. Eddie flamed red; and his ears, by a curious physiological process, seemed to take fire and contemplate instant flight from his head.

"Oh, look, Ad. We got to get a new back for your chair. The stuffin's all poking through the velvet."

"So it is, Eddie. It's a good thing you got your raise, with all these new-fangled dangles we need."

"To-night's his lodge night. He never came home till three--till three o'clock, lodge nights."

"There you go, Goldie--back on the subject, makin' yourself sick."

"Gee!"

"What's the matter, Goldie?"

"To-night's his lodge. I could go now and get my things while he ain't there--couldn't I?"

"Swell! I'll take you, Goldie, and wait outside for you."

"Eddie, can't you see she ain't in any condition to go running round nights? There's plenty time yet, Goldie. You can wear my shirt-waists and things. Wait till--"

"I got to get it over with, Addie; and daytimes Eddie's working, and I'd have to go alone. I--I don't want to go alone."

"Sure; she can't go alone, Addie; and she's got to have her things."

Eddie was on his feet and beside Goldie's palpitating figure, as though he would lay his heart, a living stepping-stone, at her feet.

"We better go now, Addie; honest we had! Eddie'll wait outside for me."

"You poor kid! You want to get it over with, don't you? Get her coat, Eddie, and bring her my sweater to wear underneath. It's getting colder every minute."

"I ain't scared a bit, Addie. I'll just go in and pack my things together and hustle out again."

"Here's a sweater, Goldie, and your coat and hat."

"Take care, children; and, Goldie, don't forget all the things you need. Just take your time and get your things together--warm clothes and all."

"I'll be waiting right outside for you, Goldie."

"I'm ready, Eddie."

"Don't let her get excited and worked up, Eddie."

"I ain't scared a bit, Addie."

"Sure you ain't?"

"Not a bit!"

"Good-by, Addie. Gee, but you're swell to me!"

"Don't forget to bring your rubbers, Goldie; going to work on wet mornings you'll need them."

"I--I ain't got none."

"You can have mine. I--I don't need them any more."

"Good-by, Ad--leave the dishes till we come back. I can do 'em swell myself after you two girls have gone to bed."

"Yes. I'll be waiting, Goldie; and we'll talk in bed like old times."

"Yes, yes!" It was as if Addie's frail hands were gripping Goldie's heart and clogging her speech.

"Good-by, children!"

"Good-by."

"S'long!"

The night air met them with a whoop and tugged and pulled at Goldie's hat.

"Take my arm, Goldie. It's some howler, ain't it?"

Their feet clacked on the cold, dry pavement, and passers-by leaned into the wind.

"He was a great one for hating the cold, Eddie. Gee, how he hated winter!"

"That's why he wears a fur-collared coat and you go freezing along in a cheese-cloth jacket, I guess."

"It always kind of got on his chest and gave him fever."

"What about you? You just shivered along and dassent say anything!"

"And I used to fix him antiphlogistin plasters half the night. When he wasn't mad or drunk he was just like a kid with the measles! It used to make me laugh so--he'd--"

"Humph!"

"But one night--one night I got the antiphlogistin too hot while I was straightening up--'cause he never liked a messy-looking room when he was sick--and he was down and out from one of his bad nights; and it--and it got too hot, and--" She turned away and finished her sentence in the teeth of the wind; but Eddie's arm tightened on hers until she could feel each distinct finger.

"God!" he said.

"I ain't scared a bit, Eddie."

"For what, I'd like to know! Ain't I going to be waiting right here across the street?"

"See! That's the room over there--the dark one, with the shade half-way up. Gee, how I hate it!"

"I'll be waiting right here in front of Joe's place, Goldie. If you need me just shoot the shade all the way up."

"I won't need you."

"Well, then, light the gas, pull the shade all the way down, and that'll mean all's well."

"Swell!" she said. "Down comes the shade--and all's well!"

"Good!"

They smiled, and their breaths clouded between them; and down through the high-walled street the wind shot javelin-like and stung red into their cheeks, and in Eddie's ears and round his heart the blood buzzed.

Goldie crossed the street and went up the steps lightly, her feet grating the brown stone like fine-grained sandpaper. When she unlocked the front door the cave-like mustiness and the cold smell of unsunned hallways and the conglomerate of food smells from below met her at the threshold. Memories like needle-tongued insects stung her.

The first-floor front she opened slowly, pausing after every creak of the door; and the gas she fumbled because her hand trembled, and the match burned close to her fingers before she found the tip.

She turned up the flame until it sang, and glanced about her fearfully, with one hand on her bruised cheek and her underlip caught in by her teeth.

Mr. Trimp's room was as expressive as a lady's glove still warm from her hand. He might have slipped out of it and let it lie crumpled, but in his own image.

The fumes of bay-rum and stale beer struggled for supremacy. The center-table, with a sickening litter of empty bottles and dead ashes, was dreary as cold mutton in its grease, or a woman's painted face at crack o' dawn, or the moment when the flavor of love becomes as tansy.

A red-satin slipper, an unhygienic drinking-goblet, which has leaked and slopped over full many a non-waterproof romance, lay on the floor, with its red run into many pinks and its rosette limp as a wad of paper. Goldie picked her careful way round it. Fear and nausea and sickness at the heart made her dizzy.

The dresser, with its wavy mirror, was strewn with her husband's neckties; an uncorked bottle of bay-rum gave out its last faint fumes.

She opened the first long drawer with a quivering intake of breath and pulled out a shirt-waist, another, and yet another, and a coarse white petticoat with a large-holed embroidery flounce. Then she dragged a suit-case, which was wavy like the mirror, through the blur of her tears, out from under the bed; and while she fumbled with the lock the door behind her opened, and her heart rose in her throat with the sudden velocity of an express elevator shooting up a ten-story shaft.

In the dresser mirror, and without turning her head or gaining her feet, she looked into the eyes of her husband.

"Pussy-cat!" he said, and came toward her with his teeth flashing like Carrara marble in sunlight.

She sprang to her feet and backed against the dresser.

"Don't! Don't you come near me!"

"You don't mean that, Goldie."

She shivered in her scorn.

"Don't you come near me! I came--to get my things."

"Oh!" he said, and tossed his hat on the bed and peeled off his coat. "Help yourself, kiddo. Go as far as you like."

She fell to tearing at the contents of her drawer without discrimination, cramming them into her bag and breathing furiously, like a hare in the torture of the chase. The color sprang out in her cheeks, and her eyes took fire.

Her husband threw himself, in his shirt-sleeves and waistcoat, across the bed and watched her idly. Only her fumbling movements and the sing of the too-high gas broke the silence. He rose, lowered the flame, and lay down again.

Her little box of poor trinkets spilled its contents as she packed it; her hair-brush fell from her trembling fingers and clattered to the floor.

"Can I help you, Goldie-eyes?"

Silence. He coughed rather deep in his chest, and she almost brushed his hand as she passed to the clothes wardrobe. He reached out and caught her wrist.

"Now, Goldie, you--"

"Don't--don't you touch me! Let go!"

He drew her down to the bed beside him.

"Can't you give a fellow another chance, baby? Can't you?" She tugged for her freedom, but his clasp was tight as steel and tender as love. "Can't you, baby?"

"You!" she said, kicking at the sloppy satin slipper at her feet, as if it were a loathsome thing that crawled. "I--I don't ever want to see you again, you--you--"

"You drove me to it, pussy; honest you did!"

"You didn't need no driving. You take to it like a fish to water--nobody can drive you. You just ain't--no--good!"

"You drove me to it. When you quit I just went crazy mad. I kicked the skylight--I tore things wide open. I was that sore for you--honest, baby!"

"I've heard that line of talk before. I ain't forgot the night at Hinkey's. I ain't forgot nothing. You or horses can't hold me here!" She wrenched at her wrists.

"I got a job yesterday, baby. Bill made good. Eighty dollars, honey! Me and Cutty are quits for good. Ain't that something--now, ain't it?"

"Let me go!"

"Pussy-cat!"

"Let me go, I say!"

He coughed and turned on his side toward her.

"You don't mean it."

"I do! I do! Let go! Let go!"

She tore herself free and darted to the wardrobe door. He closed his eyes and his lashes lay low on his cheeks.

"Before you go, Goldie, where's the antiphlogistin? I got a chest on me like an ice-wagon."

"Sure, you have. That's the only time you ever show up before crack of dawn."

He reached out and touched her wrist.

"I'm hot, ain't I?"

She placed a reluctant hand on his brow.

"Fever?"

"It ain't nothing much. I'll be all right."

"It's just one of your spells. Stay in bed a couple of days, and you'll soon be ready for another jamboree!"

"Don't fuss at me, baby."

"It's in the wash-stand drawer in a little tin can. Don't make the plaster too hot."

"Sure, I won't. I'll get along all righty."

She threw a shabby cloth skirt over her arm and a pressed-plush coat that was gray at the elbows and frayed at the hem. He reached out for the dangling empty sleeve as she passed.

"You was married in that coat, wasn't you, hon?"

"Yes," she said, and her lips curled like burning paper; "I was married in that coat."

"Goldie-eyes, you know I can't get along without my petsie; you know it. There ain't no one can hold a candle to you, baby!"

"Yes, yes!"

"There ain't! I wish I was feelin' well enough to tell you how sorry, baby--how sorry a fellow like me can get. I just wish it, baby--baby--"

She surrendered like a reed to the curve of a scythe and crumpled in a contortional heap beside the bed.

"You--you always get me!"

He gathered her up and laid her head backward on his shoulder, so that her face was foreshortened and close to his.

"Goldie-eyes," he said, "I'll make it up to you! I'll make it up to you!" And he made a motion as though to kiss her where the curls lay on her face, but drew back as if sickened.

"Good God!" he said. "Poor little baby!"

Quick as a throb of a heart she turned her left cheek, smooth as a lily petal, to his lips.

"It's all right, Harry!" she said, in a voice that was tight. "I'm crazy, I guess; but, gee, it's great to be crazy!"

"I'll make it up to you, baby. See if I don't! I'll make it up to you."

She kissed him, and his lips were hot and dry.

"Lemme fix your plaster, dearie; you got one of your colds."

"Don't get it too hot, hon."

"Gee! Lemme straighten up. Say, ain't you a messer, though! Look at this here wash-stand and those neckties! Ain't you a messer, though, dearie!"

She crammed the ties into a dresser drawer, dragged a chair into place, removed a small tin can from the wash-stand drawer, hung her hat and jacket on their peg, and lowered the shade.

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MARKED DOWN

A LONG with radium, parcels post, wireless telegraphy, and orchestral church music came tight skirts and the hipless movement.

Adolph Katzenstein placed his figurative ear to the ground, heard the stealthy whisper of soft messalines and clinging charmeuse, and sold out the Empire Shirt-waist Company for twenty-five hundred dollars at a slight loss.

Five years later the Katzenstein Neat-Fit Petticoat was flaunted in the red and white electric lights in the lightest part of Broadway, and the figure of an ecstatic girl in an elastic-top, charmeuse-ruffled petticoat had become as much of an epic in street-car advertising as the flakiest breakfast food or the safest safety razor.

Then the Katzensteins moved from a simplex to a complex apartment, furnished the dining-room in Flemish oak and the bedroom in white mahogany; Mrs. Katzenstein telephoned to her fancy grocer's for artichokes instead of buying cabbages from the street-vender, and Mr. Katzenstein walked with the four fingers of each hand thrust into the distended front pockets of his trousers.

On the first Tuesday of each month Mrs. Katzenstein entertained at whist--an antediluvian survival of a bridgeless era.

At eight o'clock in the morning of one of these first Tuesdays she entered her daughter's white-mahogany bedroom, raised the shades with a clatter, and drew back the curtains.

"Birdie, get up! It's late, and we got house-cleaning this morning. Papa's been gone already an hour."

The pink-and-white flowered comforter on the bed stirred, and two plump arms, with frills of lace falling backward, raised up like sturdy monoliths in the stretch that accompanies a yawn.

"Aw--yaw--yaw--mamma! Can't you let a girl sleep after she's been up late? Tell Tillie she should begin her sweeping in the hall."

"I should know what time you got home last night. You sneak in like you was afraid it would give me some pleasure to wake up and hear about it! Who was there? What did Marcus have to say?"

"Aw, mamma, let me sleep--can't you? I'll get up in a minute."

"So close-mouthed she is--goes to the party with a grand boy like Marcus and comes home like she was muzzled! Nothing to say! If I was out with a young man so often I could talk."

"Please, mamma, pull down the shade."

"Please, mamma, pull down the shade!" mimicked Mrs. Katzenstein, in a high falsetto. "After I rush round all day yesterday for the pink wreath for her hair, that's what I hear the next morning--that's the thanks I get!"

Birdie pulled the comforter up closer about her ears, and the head on the rumpled pillow burrowed deeper.

"And such laziness! I been up two hours with my *Kuchen* and cheese-pie fixed already for this afternoon, and my daughter sleeps like a lady! The man that gets her I don't envy!"

The pink-and-white mound on the bed heaved like a ship at sea.

"In a minute, mamma!"

Mrs. Katzenstein jerked up a filmy gown from across the back of a chair and held it from her at arm's-length.

"Anybody's too good for a girl that ain't got no order! I wonder what Marcus Gump would say if he knew how you treat your things? Her good pink dress that I paid twenty dollars for the making alone she throws round like it cost nothing! Sack-cloth is too good! I don't put it away--you can wait on yourself!"

However, as she spoke Mrs. Katzenstein folded the pink gown, with an avalanche of lace flowing from the bodice, lengthwise in a drawer and smothered it with tissue-paper.

"That a girl like that shouldn't be ashamed to let her poor old mother wait on her!"

"I'd put it away, mamma, if you'd just give me time."

"Tuesday, when I have the ladies and my card party, she sleeps! No consideration that girl has got for her mother!"

Birdie swung herself to the side of the bed; her wealth of crow-blue hair fell over her shoulders; sleep trembled on her lashes.

"I'm up, ain't I? Now are you satisfied?"

"For all the help you are to me you might as well stay in bed the rest of the morning. A girl that can come home from a party and have nothing to say! But for my part I don't want to know. I guess they had a big blow-out, didn't they?"

Birdie, high-chested as Juno, with wide, firm shoulders that sloped as must have sloped the shoulders of Artemis when they tempted Actaeon, coiled her hair before the mirror with the gesture that has belonged to women since first they coiled their hair. Her cheeks, fleshly but fruit-like in their freshness, might have belonged to a buxom nymph of the grove.

"I wish you could have seen the spread Jeanette had, mamma! I brought home the recipe for her lobster chops. I'll bet if she had one she had six different kinds of ice-cream."

With one swoop Mrs. Katzenstein flung the snowy avalanche of pillows and sheets over the footboard of the bed and opened wide both the windows.

"Tillie," she cried, "bring me the broom. I'll start in Miss Birdie's room while you finish the breakfast dishes."

"Such an affair as she had! I said to Marcus, on the way home, it could have been at Delmonico's and not have been finer."

"You don't say so! Such is life, ain't it? We knew Simon Lefkowitz when he used to come to papa and buy for his stock six shirt-waists at a time. Then they didn't live in no eighty-dollar apartment. Many's the morning I used to meet the old lady at market. Who else was there?"

"Who? Let me see! Gertie Glauber was there. She had on that dress Laevitt made; and, believe me, I liked mine better. Tekla Stein and Morris Adler--you know those Adlers in the millinery business?"

"Nice people!"

"You couldn't get a pin between Tekla and him--honest, how that girl worked for him! Selma Blumenthal was there, too, and I must say she looked grand--those eyes of hers and that figure! But what those fellows can see in her so much I don't know. Honest, mamma, she's such a dumbhead she can't talk ten words to a boy."

"Girls don't need so much brains. I always say it scares the men off. Look at Gussie Graudenheimer--high school she had to have yet! What good does it do? Not a thing does that girl have--and her mother worries enough about it, too."

"That's what Marcus says about her--he says she's too smart for him; he says he'd rather have a girl nice and sweet than too smart."

Mrs. Katzenstein leaned her broom in a corner, daubed at the mantelpiece with a flannel cloth, and regarded her daughter surreptitiously through the mirror.

"You had a nice time with Marcus last night? You've been out with him five times and still have nothing to say."

"What's there to say, mamma? He's a fine boy and shows a girl a grand time. Last night it was sleeting just a little, and he had to have a taxi-cab. Honest, it was a shame for the money! Take it from me, Morris Adler walked Tekla. I saw them going to the Subway."

"Well, what's what? Is that the end of it?"

"Aw, mamma, how should I know? I can't read a fellow's mind! All I know is he--he's coming over to-night."

"Don't you bother with putting those slippers away, Birdie; you just lie round and take it easy this morning. When a girl's going to have company in the evening she should rest up--me and Tillie can do this little work."

Birdie wrapped herself in a crimson kimono plentifully splotched with large pink and blue and red and green chrysanthemums and snuggled into a white wicker rocking-chair. Her lips, warmly curved like a child's, were parted in a smile.

"I don't want breakfast," she announced. "Irma Friedman quit it and lost five pounds in two weeks."

"Papa and me were saying last night, Birdie, we aren't in a hurry to get rid of you; but such a young man as Marcus Gump any girl can be lucky to get. Aunt Batta said she heard for sure Loeb Brothers are going to make him manager of

their new factory--think once, manager and three thousand a year!--just double his salary! Think of putting a young man like him in that big Newark factory!"

"It's surely grand; but for what does it have to be in a place like Newark?"

"Papa says that boy put March Hare boys' pants on the market for the Loebs. How grand for his mother and all, her a widow, to have such a son! Wasn't I right to invite her this afternoon?"

"I'm the last one to say a word against Marcus. You ought to heard them last night talking on the side about him and his new position he might get--just grand! Jeanette's got a new stitch, mamma. It's not like eyelet or French, but sort of between the two, and grand for centerpieces. I could embroider a dresser-cover in a week."

"I thought I'd have sardines this afternoon instead of cold tongue. For why should I make Mrs. Cohen feel bad that we don't buy at their delicatessen?"

"I'll fix the cut-glass bowl with fruit for the center of the table."

"It's like papa and me said last night, Birdie--a girl makes no mistake when she follows her parents' advice. Marcus Gump's own mother told me when I was introduced to her at Hirsch's yesterday afternoon, you're the first girl he ever took out more than two or three times."

Birdie snuggled deeper in her chair and stretched her arms with the gesture of Aurora greeting the day.

"Mamma," she said, softly, "what do you think he--he said I looked like last night?"

"What?"

"He said--he said--"

Mrs. Katzenstein paused in her dusting.

"He--said--Aw, mamma, I can't go telling it--so silly it sounds."

"Ach! For nonsense I got no time--such silliness for two grown-up children! That gets you nowhere. Plain talking is what does it."

But suddenly the thridding and thudding of Mrs. Katzenstein's machinations died down. It was as if a steamboat had turned off its power and drifted quietly into its slip. She tiptoed to the table and straightened the cover, arranged the shades until they were precisely even one with the other, gave the new-made bed a final pat, and tiptoed to the door.

"I forgot to order my finger-rolls for this afternoon," she said.

At two o'clock guests began to arrive. A heavy sleet clattered against the windows; the sky and the apartment houses across the way were shrouded in cold gray. Birdie drew the shades and tweaked on the electric lights; tables were grouped about the parlor, laid out with decks of cards, pencils and paper, and small glass dishes of candies.

Mother and daughter had emerged from the morning like moths out of a chrysalis. Mrs. Katzenstein's black crepe-de-Chine, with cut-jet trimmings, trailed after her when she walked. She greeted her guests with effulgence and enthusiasm.

"Come right in, Carrie! Tillie, take Mrs. Ginsburg's umbrella. I bet you got your winning clothes on to-day, Carrie; I can always tell it when you wear your willow plume and furs."

Carrie Ginsburg flopped a remonstrating and loose-wristed hand at Mrs. Katzenstein.

"Go 'way! That glass pickle-dish I won at Silverman's three weeks ago is the last luck I had. Your mamma's the winner--ain't she, Birdie? At my house she always carries off the prize. I bet I helped furnish her china-closet."

"You should worry, Mrs. Ginsburg, when your husband owns the Cut-Glass Palace!"

"You can believe me or not, Birdie, but Aaron's that particular if I take so much as a pin-tray out of stock he charges it up! When you get such an honest husband it's almost as bad as the other way. He don't get thanks for it."

"Birdie, take Mrs. Ginsburg in the middle room and help off with her things. Hello, Mrs. Silverman! You're a sight for sore eyes. Why wasn't you down at the Ladies' Auxiliary on Wednesday? It was grand! Doctor Lippman spoke so beautiful, and there was coffee in the Sunday-school rooms after."

Mrs. Silverman deposited a large and elaborate muff on the table and unbuttoned her full-length fur coat.

"Such a day as it was Wednesday! Even to-day my Meena begged me not to come out. 'Mamma,' she said, 'to go out in such sleet and rain for a card party--it's a shame!' Then my Louis telephoned up from the store that if I went out I should take a cab. What that boy don't think of!"

"He's a fine boy, Mrs. Silverman; and such a sweet girl he married."

"It ain't for the money, Mrs. Katzenstein--believe me, it ain't; but why should I take a cab when it's only one block away to the Subway? I leave that to my children. Meena's the stylish one of our family--when it so much as sprinkles that girl has to have a cab."

"Come right in, Mrs. Gump; I knew you wouldn't be afraid of a little weather. Here, let me take your umbrella."

"It's a fine weather for ducks, Mrs. Katzenstein."

"Just you go right in the middle room with Birdie and make yourself at home."

"Come right with me, Mrs. Gump; me and mamma was so afraid maybe you wouldn't come."

Birdie flitted in and out from parlor to bedroom; the languor of the morning had fallen from her.

"Now, mamma, you and the ladies sit down at your tables. That's right, Mrs. Mince--you and Mrs. Kronfeldt play opposites, and Mrs. Ginsburg and Aunt Batta. Don't get excited, mamma. I'll fix the ladies in their places. Here, Mrs. Weissenheimer, you sit here between Mrs. Gump and mamma."

"Look at that goil!" exclaimed Mrs. Mince, seating herself and taking a pinch of Birdie's firmly molded arm between thumb and forefinger. "I wish you'd look how thin she's got. Ain't that grand, though! I bet you don't drink water with your meals?"

"Not a drop, Mrs. Mince; and no starchy food; no--"

"Mrs. Mince," interrupted Mrs. Ginsburg, dealing the cards with skill and rapidity, "Doctor Adelberg told my sister-in-law that rolling on the floor two hundred times morning and night had got this diet business beat. All he says you got to be careful about is no water at meals. But with me it's like Aaron says--I keep him busy filling up my glass at the table."

"I wish you'd see my Birdie diet, Carrie! The grandest things she won't eat! Last night for supper we had potato *Pfannkuchen*, that would melt in your mouth. Not one will she touch! Her papa says how she lives he don't know."

"I wish my Marcus would diet a little. I always say to him he's just a little bit too stout--he takes after his poor father," said Mrs. Gump.

"You can believe me or not, Mrs. Gump; but, so sure as my name is Mince, I got down from a hundred and ninety-two to a hundred and seventy-four in two months! Reducing ain't so bad when you get used to it."

"Honest now, Mrs. Mince, how I wish my Marcus had such a determination! But that boy loves to eat--Didn't you see me discard, Mrs. Weissenheimer?"

"Say, it wasn't so easy! How I worked you can ask my husband. I bend for thirty minutes when I get up in the morning; and if you think it's easy, try it--a cup of hot water and a piece of dry toast for breakfast; lettuce salad, no oil, for lunch; and a chop with dry toast for supper. What I suffered nobody knows!"

"Batta, don't you see I lead from weakness?"

"I wish you could see my husband's partner's daughter!" quoth Mrs. Kronfeldt. "I met her on Fifty-third Street last week, and she was so thin I didn't know her--massage and diet did it. She ain't feeling so well; but she looks grand--not a sign of hips!"

From an adjoining table Mrs. Silverman waved a plump and deprecatory hand.

"Ladies, don't talk to me about dieting! I know, because I've tried it. Now I eat what I please. It's standing up twenty minutes after meals that does the reducing. Last summer at Arverne every lady in the hotel did it, and never did I see

anything like it! Take my word for it that when my husband came down for Saturday and Sunday he didn't know me!"

"Ach, Mrs. Silverman, that was almost a grand slam! You should watch my discard!"

"When I came home I had to have two inches taken out of every skirt-band."

"You don't mean it!"

"Feel, Birdie, my arm. Last summer your thumbs wouldn't have met."

"I said to mamma when we saw you at the matinee last week, Mrs. Silverman, you're grand and thin!"

"You try a little lemon in your hot water, Birdie. But you're not too stout--I should say not! You're grand and tall and can stand it."

"Grand and tall!" echoed Mrs. Gump.

"It's a wonder she isn't as thin as a match, Mrs. Gump, the way that girl does society! Last night it was two o'clock when she got home from Jeanette Lefkowitz's party."

"I wish you'd heard the grand things Marcus said about you this morning at breakfast, Miss Birdie! I bet your ears were ringing. It's not often that he talks, either, when he's been out."

"What's this grand news I hear, Mrs. Gump, about your son being taken in the firm and made manager of the new Loeb factory? It's wonderful for a boy to work himself up with a firm like that."

"There's nothing sure about it yet, Mrs. Silverman. How such things get out I don't know. Marcus is a good boy; and, believe me or not, we think he's got a future with the firm. But you know how it is--there's nothing settled yet, and I don't believe in counting your chickens before they are hatched."

"I wish it to you, Mrs. Gump," purred Mrs. Katzenstein. "I wish the good luck to you."

"You don't make it diamonds, Mrs. Kronfeldt, unless you got to."

"Who made that dress for you, Birdie? It fits fine."

"That's the dressmaker on Lenox Avenue I was telling you about, Mrs. Adler," replied Mrs. Katzenstein, answering for her daughter. "Me and Birdie go to her for everything. Look at that fit and all!"

"Grand!"

"I'll give you her address if you don't tell everybody. You know how it is when you begin to recommend a dressmaker--up in their prices they go, and that's all the thanks you get."

"You are safe with me, Mrs. Katzenstein."

"Come here, Birdie! Turn round for Mrs. Adler--only twelve dollars to make with findings!"

"I'll take her my blue cloth," said Mrs. Adler.

"You won't regret it. Just tell her I sent you. If you want you can have the address, too, Mrs. Gump."

"I got a compliment for you about the dress you wore last night, Miss Birdie. Wonderful! No trump! This morning at breakfast Marcus said lots about your pretty dress and pretty ways; and for him to say that is a lot; not ten words can I get out of him, as a rule."

"I wish you could hear Birdie, too, Mrs. Gump! Believe me, she thinks he's a fine boy--and how hard that girl is to suit you wouldn't believe it!"

"Aw, mamma!"

"Change partners, ladies!"

Birdie hurried out into the dining-room; a flush branded her cheeks--Daphne fleeing from Apollo could not have been more deliciously agitated.

"Tillie," she directed, "you can make the coffee now and put the finger-rolls on."

A snowy round table was spread beneath a large, opaline dome of lights, which showered over the feast like a spray of stars; and in the center a mammoth cut-glass bowl of fruit, overflowing its sides with trailing bunches of hothouse

grapes, and piled to a fitting climax of oranges, peeled in fanciful flower designs; fat bananas, with half the skin curled backward; and apples so firm and red that they might have been lacquered. The guests filed in.

"We haven't got much, ladies--Tillie, bring in some of the chairs from the parlor--but Birdie says it isn't style to have such big lunches any more. Sit right down here, Mrs. Gump, between me and Birdie. Now, ladies, help yourselves and don't be bashful. Start the sardines round, Batta."

"What a pretty centerpiece, Mrs. Katzenstein!"

"Do you like it, Mrs. Kronfeldt? Birdie made it when the whip-stitch first came out. We got the doilies, too."

"I think it's good for a girl to be so practical," said Mrs. Gump, squeezing an arc of a lemon over her sardine. "If I had a daughter she should know how to do things round the house, even if she didn't have to use it."

"I'm not the kind to brag on my children; but, if I do say so myself, my girls can turn their hands to anything. If the day ever comes--God forbid!--when they should need it they'll know how."

"Exactly."

"When my Ray got engaged she made every monogram for her trousseau. I can prove it by Batta what a trousseau that girl had--and she made every monogram for every piece. She never comes home with the children to visit that she don't say: 'Mamma, thank Heaven, Abe is doing so grand and I don't need to--but there ain't a woman in Kansas City can beat me on housekeeping.'"

"This is delicious grape-jelly, Mrs. Katzenstein."

"That's some more of Birdie's doings. Honest, you may believe me or not, Mrs. Gump, but I have to fight to keep that girl away from the kitchen and housework! Yesterday it was all I could do to get her to go to Rosie Freund's linen shower; she wanted to stay home and help me with to-day's *Kuchen*. This morning, after last night, she was up before eight! Such a child!"

"I suppose you heard of poor Flora Freund's trouble, didn't you, Salcha?"

"Yes, Batta; you could have knocked me down with a feather! But Mr. Katzenstein always said the new store was too big. And such a failure, too!"

"I guess Flora won't have so many airs now! Down to her feet she got a sealskin coat this winter."

"I always say to Mr. Katzenstein we ain't such high-fliers, but we are steady. Try some of that pickled herring, Mrs. Gump. I put it up myself."

"I guess you heard of Stella Loeb's engagement, Birdie, didn't you?" inquired Mrs. Mince, spreading the grape-jelly atop a finger-roll. "To a Mr. Steinfeld from Cleveland."

"Yes, I hear she's doing grand; but so is he. To get in with the Loeb Brothers' crowd ain't so bad."

"Yes, they're all grand matches!" exclaimed Mrs. Ginsburg. "It's just like Meena says; they're all gold pocket-book and automobile matches when they're with out-of-town men; but Cleveland--I don't wish it to her to live in Cleveland--not that I've ever been there, but I don't envy girls that marry out of New York."

"My Ray's got it grand in Kansas City! I wish you could see her closet room and her pantry--as big as my whole kitchen! A girl could do worse than Kansas City or Cleveland."

"I always say," remarked Birdie, "when I get engaged it makes no difference where he goes."

"That's the right way to feel, Miss Birdie. Some day, if Marcus should ever marry--and I'm the last one to stand in his way--if he gets his promotion to the Newark factories and the girl he picks out don't like Newark, then she's not the right girl," said Mrs. Gump.

"Newark," said Mrs. Katzenstein, "is a grand little town. Whenever we pass through on our way to Kansas City Birdie always says what a sweet little town it is. Mrs. Silverman, have another cup of coffee."

The short winter day sloughed off suddenly, and it was dark when they rose from the table. "So late!" exclaimed Mrs. Mince. "I got a girl that can't so much as put on the potatoes. Honest, the servant problem gets woise and woise."

"Sh-h-h!" cautioned Mrs. Katzenstein, placing her forefinger across her lips and glancing warily toward the kitchen. "Tillie," she whispered, "ain't such a jewel neither; but she's honest, and I'm glad enough to have anybody

these days. Birdie, she's always fussing with me because I do too much in the kitchen; but why should my husband have his coffee so it don't suit him? Children don't understand--they're too much for style."

"In my little flat, with Etta married and gone," chimed in Mrs. Adler, "I'm better off without a girl. I got a woman to come in and clean three times a week, and me and Ike go out for our supper. I got it better without the worry of a girl."

"I give you right. If I'd listen to Marcus I'd keep a servant, too--a servant when I got my troubles without one!"

"Ain't that jus' like papa, Birdie? He always says: 'Salcha, you take it easy now; when one girl isn't enough keep two--as if I didn't have enough troubles already!'"

"Good-by, Mrs. Katzenstein!" Mrs. Kronfeldt inserted a tissue-paper-wrapped package carefully within her muff. "You got good taste in prizes--salts and peppers always come in handy."

"That's the way me and Birdie felt when we picked them out--you can't have too many of them."

"And, Birdie, you come over with your mamma some afternoon when Ruby's home. That girl with her society and engagements--I never see her myself! This afternoon she saw vaudeville with Sol Littleberger. He's in off the road."

"Birdie had an engagement this afternoon, too, with a traveling-man; but I always like to have her home when I entertain."

"I had a lovely afternoon, Mrs. Katzenstein. You and Miss Birdie must come and see me--One Hundred and Forty-first Street ain't so far away that you can't get to us."

"Me and Birdie can come almost any afternoon, Mrs. Gump, except Saturday we go to the matinee--we're great ones for Saturday matinee."

"That's what I call too bad! On Saturday Marcus comes home early, and he could see you home."

"Well," said Mrs. Katzenstein, plucking a thread off Mrs. Gump's coat-sleeve, "it's not like there weren't plenty more Saturdays in the year. I got enough vaudeville shows this year anyway."

"After the third number I always say, 'Mamma, let's go!--don't I, mamma?' said Birdie.

"We can come next Saturday, all right, Mrs. Gump; but mind, don't you go to any trouble for us--Birdie's on a diet, and all I want is a cup of coffee. It makes my husband so mad when I come home and got no appetite."

"Good-by, Mrs. Ginsburg. *Ach*, that's right--I forgot; Birdie, write down Maggie's address for Mrs. Ginsburg. You try her once. She brings home the clothes so white it's a pleasure to put them away. Tell her I recommended her. I wish you could see Birdie's shirt-waists come home from the wash--just like new!"

"I'll try her next week," said Mrs. Ginsburg, buckling her fur neckpiece.

"Give Adolph my love, Batta. Birdie, help Aunt Batta with her coat. Come over some evening soon. Good-by, ladies! Come again. Good-by! Be careful of that step there, Mrs. Gump. Good-by!"

Mrs. Katzenstein clicked the door softly shut and turned to her daughter. There were high red spots on her cheeks.

"Well," she sighed, "I'm glad that's over."

"Me, too; and I'm sorry enough that Mrs. Gump didn't win those salt-cellars."

"Such a grand woman as she is--plain and unassuming! He left her real comfortable, too--not much, but enough for herself. But, to look at her in that plain black dress, you wouldn't think that she had a son that might be made manager of the Loeb factory, would you?"

"It is so," agreed Birdie, nibbling from a half-emptied candy-dish on one of the tables; "and that's just the way with Marcus last night--it was only accident that he let out that him and Louis Epstein might have an automobile."

"Plain and unassuming people!" Mrs. Katzenstein exclaimed.

"I says to him when we were in the taxi, I says: 'Automobile-riding sure is grand!' Then he says: 'If something I'm hoping for happens in a couple of days, me and Louis Epstein are going to buy one of those five-hundred-dollar roadsters together. Then we can have a swell time together, Birdie!' Just like that he said it."

"You're a good girl, Birdie, and you deserve the best. To-night you wear your blue. Tillie, come in and set the chairs straight--nice--Miss Birdie's going to have company. How that Mrs. Ginsburg got on my nerves, I can't tell you, with

her Meena and her brag!"

"I should say so!"

At eight o'clock Birdie again posed before her mirror. Her robin's-egg-blue dress where it fell away from her rather splendid and carefully powdered chest was spangled with small sequins, which glinted like stars. There was a corresponding galaxy of spangles arranged bandeau-fashion in her hair. The Blessed Damozel, when she leaned out from the golden bar of Heaven, wore seven significant stars in her hair. Birdie also wore stars in her hair, in her eyes, and in her heart and on her bosom.

"I think this dress makes me look grand and thin, mamma."

"It cost enough."

"Do you like those silver spangles in my hair? That's the way Bella Block wore hers at the theater the other night."

"I don't believe in such fussiness for girls! Your mother before you didn't have it. If you want you can wear my diamond bow-knot. Have Tillie come in and pin it on you with the safety-catch. I'm so nervous like a cat!"

"What are you so nervous about, mamma?"

"Say, Birdie, you know I'm the last one to talk about such things--but the Gumps don't start things without intentions. Flora told me herself that Ben Gump got engaged to her sister the second time he called."

"Aw, mamma!"

"Believe me, if it should come to us we got no cause to complain. Grand prospects! Grand boy! And what more do you want? Papa and me, with such a son-in-law, can enjoy our old age."

"Such talk!"

"You think I let on to anybody! All I say is to you; but a girl needs advice from her parents. Look at your sister Ray--she was a smart and sensible girl."

"Abe, with his stuttering and all!"

"Just the same he is a good husband to her and makes her a good living. You think she would have got him if she hadn't fixed things for herself--kind of! Believe me, it was hard enough for us, then, before papa went into petticoats."

"She can have him!"

"I always say Ray was a smart girl. She wasn't no beauty, and the chances didn't come so thick; and now to walk in her house you wouldn't think she did the courting! A more devoted boy than Abe I don't know."

"Do you like that bow at the belt, mamma?"

"Yes.... Tillie," called Mrs. Katzenstein, raising her voice, "turn on the lights in the parlor, and then tell Mr. Katzenstein I said to put on his coat."

"I don't want the lights on, mamma--it looks better that way."

"You want it to look like we was stingy with light yet! How does that look--just the gas-logs going! You tell Mr. Katzenstein, Tillie, that I insist that he should put on his coat to meet Birdie's company--his newspaper will keep. There's the bell! Tillie, go to the door."

After a well-timed interval Birdie entered the soft-lighted parlor; the gas-logs gave out a mellow but uncertain light. It was as if the spirit of fire were doing an elf dance about the room--glinting on the polished surface of the floor, glancing on and off the gilt frame of a wall-picture, and gleaming at its own reflection in the mahogany table-legs and glass doors of the curio cabinet.

Mr. Gump was seated in a remote corner, elbows on knees and face in hands, like a Marius mourning among the ruins of his Carthage.

"Howdy-do, Marcus? Such a dark corner you pick out! It's just as cheap to sit in the light," said Birdie.

He rose and came toward her, squaring his shoulders and tossing his head backward after the manner of a man throwing off a mood, or of the strong man before he stoops to raise the thousand-pound bar of iron.

"What's the matter, Marcus? You aren't sick, are you?"

"Sure I'm not," he said. "I'm just catching up on sleep."

They shook hands and smiled, both of them full of the sweet mystery of their new shyness. His hand trembled, and he released her fingers abruptly.

"Well, how did you get over last night, Marcus? Honest, you look real tired! Didn't we have the grandest time? Henrietta called me up this morning and said she nearly split her sides laughing when you imitated how Mr. Latz sells cigars."

"To-night," he said, running a hand over the woolly surface of his hair and exhaling loudly, "I feel as funny as a funeral."

"Marcus," she said, "honest, you don't look right; you're pale!"

He seated himself on the divan, with her as his immediate *vis-a-vis*. The light played over them.

"You can believe me, Birdie; somehow when I'm with you I got so many kinds of feelings I don't know how to tell you."

Nature had been in a slightly playful mood when she chiseled Mr. Gump. He was a well-set-up young man--solidly knit and close packed--but five inches short of the stuff that matinee idols and policemen are made of. Napoleon and Don Quixote lacked those same five inches.

This facetious mood, however, was further emphasized in the large, well-formed ears, which flared away from his head as if alarmed, and in a wide, heavy-set mouth, which seemed straining to meet those respective ears; yet when Mr. Gump smiled he showed a double deck of large white teeth, dazzling as snow, and his eyes illuminated, and small-rayed wrinkles spread out from the corners and gave them geniality.

"Your mamma was here at the whist this afternoon, Marcus. We think she's a grand woman!"

His face lighted.

"I was afraid she wouldn't come on account of the weather. I meant to telephone from the factory to take a cab, but I had a hard day of it. What's the difference, I always say in a case like that, whether it costs a little more or a little less? Recreation is good for her."

"It's a terrible night, isn't it? Papa says even the horses can't walk--it's so slippery."

"I care a lot how slippery it is when I come to see you, Birdie." He sighed and regarded her nervously.

"Aw, Marcus! Jollier!" She colored the red of the deepest peony in the garden and giggled like water purling over stones.

"You can believe me, I wish I was jollying! Until I met you it was all right to say that about me; but now--but--Oh, well, what's the use of talking?"

He rose from the divan in some agitation, thrust his hands into his pockets, hitched his trousers upward, and walked away.

Birdie remained on the divan, observing the rules of the oldest game, clasped her hands on her knees, and held the silence. When she finally spoke her voice was filtered by the benign process of understanding.

"Look how easy he gets mad," she said, querulously; "just like I'm not glad he wasn't jollying!"

There was a pause; the large onyx clock on the mantelpiece ticked loudly and impersonally, as if its concern were solely with time and not with man.

Mr. Gump dilly-dallied backward and forward on his heels, and gazed at an oak-framed print of two neck-and-neck horses--a sloe black and a virgin white--rearing at a large zigzag of lightning.

"A fellow like me ain't got much chance with a girl like you, anyway. It's like I said to you last night--if a fellow can't

give you what you're used to he'd better keep his hands off."

"A boy that's going to manage Loeb Brothers' new factory to talk like that!"

Mr. Gump swung suddenly on his heel, came toward her, and took her pliant hands in his. In the improvised caldron of their palms an important chemical reaction suddenly effervesced and sent the blood fizzing through their veins.

"Birdie," he began, "I'm not the kind of a fellow to go stringing a girl along. I only wish I'd 'a' known what I know now sooner; but wishing ain't going to help. I came up here to-night to tell--"

At the high tide of this remark the door opened and Birdie turned reluctant eyes upon her parent. Mrs. Katzenstein, stately as a frigate in low seas, hove in.

"How do you do, Mr. Gump? No; stay where you are. This is my favorite rocker. Such weather, ain't it? I telephoned to Mr. Katzenstein twice this afternoon to be sure and wear his rubbers home. You're looking well, Mr. Gump. When you do well you feel well--ain't it?"

"That's right," he agreed, reseating himself. "I'm pretty tired from a hard day; but work can't hurt anybody."

"Just like Mr. Katzenstein--ain't it, Birdie? Honest, sometimes I wish there wasn't such a thing as a petticoat made. How that man works! Believe me, I worry enough about it. He should make a few dollars less, I tell him."

"You got a swell apartment here, Mrs. Katzenstein. Some cousins of my poor father's--the Morris Jacobs--live in this same house."

"Are those Jacobs your cousins? Such grand people--the knit-underwear Jacobs, Birdie! I never meet the old lady in the elevator that she don't ask me to come up and see her. It's terrible the way I don't pay calls. Birdie, we must go up soon."

"Yes, mamma."

"Yes, we got a nice little apartment here, Mr. Gump; but for what we pay it might be better. If I didn't dread the *gedinks* of moving we could do better for the money; but we got comfort here, even if it ain't so grand. Sometimes, on account of Birdie, I say we take a bigger place; but who knows how long she is at home--not that we're in a hurry with her, but you know how it is when a girl reaches a certain age."

"Yes, indeed," said Mr. Gump.

"I'm in no hurry," said Birdie.

"I don't say that, neither. When a girl meets the right one it's different. Look at Ray--two hours before she was engaged she didn't know it was going to happen!"

"Come right in, papa. Mr. Gump is here--so tired he is he hates to come in."

There are a few epics waiting to be dug out of remote corners. One day an American drama will be born in a Western shack or under some East Side stairway; one day a prophet will look within the dingy temple of a Mr. Katzenstein at the warm red heart beating beneath a hairy chest, and there find a classic rune to the men who moil and toil, and pay millinery bills with a three-figure check; another day an elegiac will be written to the men who slip the shoes off their aching feet in the merciful seclusion of their alternate Wednesday-night subscription boxes and sit through four hours of Wagner--facing an underdressed daughter, two notes due on the morrow, and a remote stageful of vocalizing figures especially designed for his alternate and inquisitional Wednesday nights.

Life had whacked hard at Mr. Katzenstein, writ across his face in a thousand welts and wrinkles, bent his knees and fingers, and calloused his hands.

"Good evening, Mr. Gump--good evening! I say to mamma the young folks got no time for us in here. I'm right?"

"The more the merrier!" said Mr. Gump, reseating himself.

"Mr. Katzenstein says he used to know your father, Mr. Gump."

"Rudolph Gump! I should say so--yes. Believe me, I wish I had half a dollar for every shirtwaist I bought off him in my life! Your father and me played side by each down on Cedar Street before you was born. I knew him longer as you--he was a good silk man, was Rudolph Gump. Have a cigar, young man?"

"Thanks--I don't smoke."

"Ain't it wonderful, though, that in a city like this my husband should know you before you was born?"

Mrs. Katzenstein clucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth and patted her hands together. Birdie regarded the company with polite interest.

"Wonders never cease!" she said.

"Birdie, go get your papa his chair out from the dining-room--since he's got lumbago these straight-backs ain't comfortable for him."

"Let me go for you, Miss Birdie."

"Oh no, Marcus--I know just where it is." She smiled at him with her eyes--bright eyes that were full of warmth and reflected firelight.

Mr. Katzenstein groped in his side-pocket for a match, ran his tongue horizontally along a cigar, and puffed it slowly into life.

"How's business?" he said, between puffs, with the lighted match still applied to the end of his cigar.

"We can't complain, Mr. Katzenstein. If this strike don't reach to the piece-workers we can't complain."

"I hear your firm opens a new factory."

"Yes; we're going to put in a line of March Hare neckwear and manufacture it in Newark."

"My wife tells me you manage the new factory--eh?"

"Oh, I can't say that, Mr. Katzenstein; in fact--"

"*Ach*, papa, I didn't say for sure; the ladies this afternoon--"

"Here's you chair, papa."

Mr. Grump sprang to her aid.

"Thanks, Marcus," she said.

"What do you think of my girl there, Gump? She's a fine one--not?"

"Aw, now, papa, you quit! What'll Marcus think--such goings-on!"

"How her papa spoils her, Mr. Gump, you won't believe! Not one thing that girl wants she don't get! Last week she meets her papa down-town after the matinee and comes home with a new muff. Yesterday, before he goes down-town, she gets from him a check for some business like a silver-mesh bag, like the girls are wearing. Just seems like she has to have everything she sees!"

"All I got to say, Gump, you should some day have just such a daughter!"

"Papa!"

"Papa!"

"You couldn't wish me better," said Mr. Gump.

Conversation drifted, and after a time Birdie regarded her mother with level eyes; then her lids drooped and slowly raised--as significantly as the red and green eyes that wink and signal in the black path of the midnight flier.

"Well, papa, we must excuse ourselves. When young folks get together they have no time for old ones."

"Now, mamma!" protested Birdie. "We're glad if you stay."

"I was young once myself," said Mr. Katzenstein; "and I like 'em yet, Gump! Take it from me, I like 'em yet! Mamma here thinks I not got an eye for the nice girls still; but I say what she don't know don't hurt her--eh?"

"I should worry!" said Mrs. Katzenstein, regarding her husband with gentle eyes. "Put your hand on my shoulder, papa. All day he makes the hardest work for himself, and then at night comes home with a lame back."

"Good night, Gump! Come round and we play pinochle."

"I hope you don't think we're stingy with light, Mr. Gump. If I had my way they'd all be going; but Birdie likes only the gas-grate. My Ray was the same way, never a great one for much light."

"I'm the same, too," replied Mr. Gump.

"Good night!"

"Good night!"

Birdie remained seated in the mellow flicker of the fire-dance; its glow lit her large, well-featured face intermittently and set the stars in her hair scintillating. The quiet of late evening fell over the room.

"What a grand old pair, Birdie!"

"Yes," she said, softly--very softly.

Silence.

"Say--Birdie! Say--"

"What?"

"I didn't say anything."

"Oh!" The red in her face ran down into the square-shape neck of her dress.

Silence.

"Aw, look what you did, Marcus! You burnt the toe of your shoe!"

"Say, Birdie, what I started to say when your mamma and papa come in--er--"

"Yes?"

"What I started to say was, so long as a fellow's got intentions it's all right for him to call on a girl--er--regular, like this." Her soft breathing answered him. "But--well, I mustn't--I ain't got the right to come round here any more."

She looked at him like a startled nymph.

"What is it?"

"So long as I had intentions it was all right, I say; but--well, now I ain't."

"Ain't what?" Her breath came more rapidly between her lips.

"I was starting to say before they came in, Birdie--I came here straight from the office to tell you--even maw don't know it yet--*I've lost out!* Loeb's daughter is engaged, and he's going to put his new son-in-law from Cleveland in the Newark factory."

"Marcus!"

"Yes! You can't be so sore as I am--a twenty-eight-hundred-dollar job almost in my hand, and then this had to happen! The little raise I get now don't help. I can't ask a girl to marry me on fifteen hundred when I expected twice that much--not a girl like you!"

Birdie placed the palm of her hand flat against her cheek; the stars in her eyes had vanished in the light of understanding.

"Such a mean trick!" she gasped. "How you've built up their trade for them--and now such a mean trick!"

"I was so sure all along, after what Loeb told me last month. Only last week I says to maw I'll ask you this week right after I know for certain. That sure I--was."

His voice trailed off at the end. She sat watching the flames, her shoulders slightly stooped and her eyes quiet.

"You ain't so sorry as I am, Birdie. Believe me, I could die right now! With you it ain't so bad--you got plenty good chances yet. But if you knew what feelings I got for you! With me there ain't no more Birdies."

She turned her head slowly toward him; her throat throbbing and a delicate pink under her skin.

"I should care, Marcus!" she said, softly.

"What?"

"I should care!" she repeated. "We should live little then, if we can't live big--live little."

"What do you mean, Birdie?"

She regarded and invited him with her eyes, and he stood away from her like a tired traveler trying to shut out the song of the Lorelei!

"Birdie, I ain't got the right! I--I--you been used to so much. With you it ain't like with most girls--your mamma and your papa they--"

Even as he spoke they were somehow in their first embrace, and round their heads came crashing various castles in Spain, and they sat among the ruins and smiled into each other's radiant eyes and whispered, with their warm hands touching:

"I don't deserve such a prize as you, Birdie!"

"Such a scare as you gave me, Marcus! I thought first you meant--you--meant it was me you didn't want."

He refuted the thought with a kiss.

"I ain't good enough for you, Birdie."

"I ain't good enough for you, Marcus."

"You can believe me, Birdie, when he told me to-day it was just like I had died inside."

"It shows it don't pay to work too hard for such people, Marcus--they don't appreciate it."

"I can get the same money as now at Lowen-Felsenthal's; they were after me last year."

"You go, Marcus. You can work up with them; besides, I like the ready-to-wear business better than boys' pants and neckwear."

"I wanted to start out with giving you more than you got already, Birdie."

"Believe me, mamma and papa had no such start as we got. We can afford maybe one of those three-rooms-and-bath apartments in Harlem--Flossie Marks says they're just perfect; and mamma and papa lived right in back of the factory--I remember it myself. Which is worse?"

"That's why I hate it for them, Birdie; your mamma wants you to have the best like she didn't have--I hate it for her."

"You come to-morrow night, and we'll tell them. Just you do like I tell you, and I can fix it."

He placed his hand against her forehead, tilted her head backward and kissed her twice on the lips.

"You're my little Birdie, ain't you--a little birdie like flies in the woods!"

The evening petered out and too soon waned to its finish. They parted with thrice-told good-nights, reluctant to break the weft of their enchantment. She closed the door after him and stood with her back against it; her lips were curved in a perfect smile.

A door creaked, and footsteps padded down the hall.

"Birdie! Birdie!"

"Yes, mamma!" was all she said, going toward her parent and hiding her pink face in the flannel folds of the maternal wrapper.

"God bless you, Birdie! Such happiness I should wish every mother. Go in, baby, and tell papa. For an engagement present you get--like Ray--two hundred dollars."

Mrs. Katzenstein's face was lyric and her voice fury with emotion. She hastened, her night-room slippers slouching off her feet, into the hall and unhooked the telephone receiver.

"Columbus 5-6-2-4," she whispered, standing on her toes to reach the mouthpiece. "Bamberger's apartment. Batta! Hello, Batta! I know you ain't in bed yet, 'cause you got the poker crowd--not? Batta, I got news for you! Guess! Yes; it

just happened--such a surprise, you can believe me! Grand! How happy we are you should know! I want they should start in one of those apartments like yours, Batta. Five rooms and a sleep-out porch is enough for a beginning. You can tell who you want--yes; I don't believe in secrets. Batta, who was the woman that embroidered those towels for your Miriam's trousseau? Yes; both of them gone now! Ain't that the way with raising children? But I wish every girl such a young man! Yes, just think, for a firm like Loeb Brothers--manager yet! Batta, come over the first thing in the morning. Now I got trousseau on my mind again, I think I go to the same woman for the table-linen. Good night. She's in talking to her papa--she'll call you to-morrow. Thank you! Good night! Good-by!... Birdie," she called, through the open doorway, "Mrs. Ginsburg's number is Plaza 8-5-7, ain't it? You think it too late to call her?"

"Yes, mamma, and, anyway, if Aunt Batta knows it that's enough--to-morrow everybody has it."

"Yes," said Mrs. Katzenstein, submissively; but after a moment she turned to the telephone again and unhooked the receiver. "Plaza 8-5-7," she said, in muffled tones.

The evening following, Mrs. Katzenstein greeted her prospective son-in-law with three kisses--one for each cheek and the third for the very center of his mouth. She batted at him playfully with her hand.

"You bad boy, you! What you mean by stealing away our baby? Papa, you come right in here and fight with him."

"Mrs. Katzenstein, for you to give me a girl like Birdie, I don't deserve. She's the grandest girl in the world!"

"He asks me for my Birdie," said Mr. Katzenstein, pumping the young man's arm up and down; "but he asks me after it is all settled and everybody but me knows it--even in the factory to-day I hear about it."

Laughter.

"What could we do, papa--wake you up last night?"

"He should pay your bills awhile, and then he won't feel so glad--ain't it, Birdie?" He pinched his daughter's cheek.

"Marcus took me to lunch at the Kaiserbrau to-day, papa. He's starting in to pay my bills already."

"Have a cigar, Marcus!"

"Thanks, I don't smoke."

"Well, Marcus, you got a fine girl; and you're a good boy, making good money."

"I told your mamma to-day, Marcus; she got the best of it, and I got the best of it," chuckled Mrs. Katzenstein.

Marcus regarded Birdie in some uneasiness, the color drained out of his face.

"Go on, Marcus," she said, with a note of reassurance in her voice.

"Everything as you say is grand and fine, Mr. Katzenstein, except--except--well, to-day at lunch I told Birdie some news I just heard, which--which maybe won't make you feel so good; I told her it wasn't too late if she wanted to change her mind about me."

"Ach!" exclaimed Mrs. Katzenstein, clasping her hands quickly. "Ain't everything all right?"

"What you mean, Marcus?" inquired Mr. Katzenstein, glancing up quickly.

"What's wrong? Ain't everything all right, children?"

"Aw, mamma, it ain't nothing wrong! Don't get so excited over everything."

"Birdie's right, mamma--what you so excited about? What is it you got to say, Marcus?"

"I ain't frightened; but what's the matter, children? This is what we need yet something to happen when it's all fixed!"

"Well, I told Birdie about it at lunch to-day, and--"

There was a pause. Birdie linked her arm within the young man's and regarded her parents like a Nemesis at the bar.

"It isn't so bad as Marcus makes out, papa."

"Well, young man?" questioned Mr. Katzenstein, sharply.

"Well, you don't need to holler at him, papa."

"I got some bad news to-day, Mr. Katzenstein. The raise I was expecting I don't get--instead of twenty-eight hundred dollars I go only to fifteen. Loeb is going to put his son-in-law, Steinfeld, from Cleveland, in the new factory. I still just got the city trade."

"I says to Marcus, papa, it's enough; you and mamma had less than half that much."

"*Ach*, my poor baby! My poor baby!"

"I ain't your poor baby, mamma. It could be worse--believe me--"

"Oh! And I thought he was going to have that grand position and give it to her so fine--how I told everybody; how I--"

"Don't get excited, Salcha! Let's sit quiet and talk it over."

"Such plans as I had for that girl, papa! I had it all fixed that she should have one of those five rooms and a sleeping-out porch over Batta! Already I talked to Tillie that she should go to her."

Mrs. Katzenstein sniffled and wiped each eye with the back of her hand.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Katzenstein."

"That don't get you nowhere, Mr. Gump. If you had only known this last night! Now what will people say?"

"Mamma!"

"Nowadays in New York it ain't like it used to be, Mr. Gump; people can't start in on so little--half of what you make costs Birdie's clothes. *Ach*, when I think what that girl is used to! Every comfort she has--you can't give her like she's used to, Mr. Gump."

"I told all that to Birdie, Mrs. Katzenstein--I can't give her what she's got at home, and she should take her time to decide."

"That's easy enough to say now after it's in everybody's mouth."

"That Loeb Brothers should play you such a trick," said Mr. Katzenstein--"a boy that's built up a trade like you!"

"*Ach*, my baby!" sobbed Mrs. Katzenstein. "And now the whole town already knows it! If only he had known this last night, before it was too late!"

"Salcha, how you talk!"

"My own husband turns against me!"

"That they should start little, mamma, is just so good as they should start big. My boy, you got a good head; and with a good head and a good heart you got just so good a start as you need. Go 'way, you foolisher children! You make me sick with your crying and *gedinks*!"

"Such a father I got, Marcus! What did I tell you, how he would act--what did I tell you?"

She kissed her father lightly on the cheek.

"Go 'way, you children!" he repeated. "You got it too good as it is--ain't it, mamma?"

"I guess you're right, Rudolph; but how I had plans for that girl, papa can tell you, Marcus! You're a good boy, Marcus, and she's got her heart set on you; but I--I hate it how everybody can talk now--something to talk about for them all!"

"They should talk!" said Mr. Katzenstein, lighting a cigar. "And talk and talk!"

"What I ordered embroidered linens enough for five rooms now I don't know, Birdie! If you want him I say you should have him--but how I had plans for that girl!"

"I'll work for her, all right, Mrs. Katzenstein. It will be five rooms before you know it--this don't mean, Mrs. Katzenstein--maw!--that I won't ever get up."

"Kiss me, Marcus," said Mrs. Katzenstein. "That she should be happy is all I care."

"Now, Marcus, we'll go up and see Mamma Gump."

"Get ready, little Birdie," he said.

"Good night, Marcus! You're a good boy, and you'll be good to our baby. Even if she ain't got it so grand, she's got a good husband--that's more than Meena Ginsburg's got."

"Run along, you children," said Mr. Katzenstein. "Here, Marcus, put a cigar in your pocket--one of Goldstein's ten-cent specials."

"I don't smoke, paw," said Marcus.

He went out, his arm linked in Birdie's. Their laughter drifted backward.

Mrs. Katzenstein resumed her chair in the warm glow of the logs--her full face, with the scallop of double chin, was suddenly old and lined; her husband drew up his curved-back rocker beside her.

"Mamma, you shouldn't take on so. Everything comes for the best."

"You can talk, papa! Now I had even told Mrs. Ginsburg for sure she should have one of those Ninety-sixth Street apartments."

"You women folks make me sick! You should be glad we got our health, mamma, and good men for our girls."

"I guess you're right, papa. He's a grand young man!"

"A good boy--*ach*, how tired I am!"

"Stretch out your feet, papa. It's warm by the fire."

The light flickered over their faces and sent long shadows wavering and dancing back of them.

Mr. Katzenstein settled deeper in his chair; his head, bald on top and with a fringe of bristles over the ears, was hunched down between his shoulders.

"You've been a good mother, Salcha."

"Not such a mother as you've been a father--me and them girls never wanted for one thing, even when you couldn't afford it as now."

"Ah--ho!" sighed Mr. Katzenstein.

"You're tired, papa, and it's late. Here, I'll unlace your shoes for you."

"No; in a minute I go to bed--such a back-ache!"

"She's got a good man; and, like you say, that's the main thing," repeated Mrs. Katzenstein, intent on self-conviction. "It ain't always the money."

"*Ya, ya!*" said Mr. Katzenstein.

"Look at us when we was down on Grand Street! We was happy--You remember that green-plush dress I had, papa?"

"Yes, Salcha."

"Don't go to sleep sitting there, papa; you'll take cold."

Mr. Katzenstein's fingers, that were never straight, closed over the veined back of his wife's hand.

"In a minute I go to bed."

"If she had known what was coming when he asked her last night it might be different; but now it's too late, and everything is for the best."

"Yes, mamma."

"She's happy--and that's the main thing."

"Time flies," he said, with his eyes on the flames. "Only yesterday she was a baby!"

"Ain't it so, papa? We had 'em, and we suffered for 'em, and now we give 'em up; that's what it means to raise a family."

"Salcha," he said, his fingers stroking hers gently, "we're getting old--ain't it, old lady?"

"Yes," she said, rocking rhythmically; "twenty-eight years now! We've had good times, and we've had bad times."

"Good--and--bad--times," he repeated.

They watched the flames.

After a while Mr. Katzenstein's head fell forward on his chest and he dozed lightly.

The clock ticked somberly and with increasing loudness; twice it traveled its circle, and twice it tonged the hour. The gas-logs burned steadily and kept the shadows dancing. Off somewhere a dog bayed; a creak, which is one of the noises that belong solely to after midnight, came from the direction of one of the windows.

Mr. Katzenstein woke with a start and jerked his head up.

"Mamma!" he cried, dazed with sleep. "Mamma! Birdie! Mamma!"

"Yes, papa," she replied, smiling at him and with her hand still beneath his; "I'm here."

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BREAKERS AHEAD

IN the ink-blue shrieking trail of the twenty-two-hour Imperial flyer, Slateville lay stark alongside the singing tracks as if hurtled there like a spark off a speed-hot emery wheel.

The Imperial flyer swooped through the dun-colored village like the glance of a lovely coquette shoots through her victim's heart and leaves it bare.

At eight-one the far-off Imperial voice hallooed through the darkness like a conquering hero whose vanguard is a waving sword which flashes in the sunlight before he and his steed come up out of the horizon.

At eight-four a steam yodel shook the panes and lamp-chimneys of Slateville, a semaphore studded with a ruby stiffened out against the sky, and a white eye--the size of a bicycle-wheel--flashed down the tracks.

Then the howl of a fiend, and a mile-long checkerboard of lighted car-windows, and cinders rattling against them like hail.

A fire-boweled engine with a grimy-faced demon leaning out of his red-hot cab, and, on every alternate night, a green eye with a black pupil which winked a signal from that same heat-roaring cab and from a dirt-colored frame shanty in a dirt-brown yard, where a naked tree stretched its thin arms against the sky, an answering eye which gleamed through a bandana-bound lantern and outlined the Hebe-like silhouette of a woman in the window.

Then the flash of a mahogany-lined dining-car with nodding *vis-a-vis*, pink-shaded candles and white-coated, black-faded genii of the bowl and weal; an occasional vague figure peering through cupped hands out from an electric-lighted berth; a plate-glass observation-car with figures lounging in shallow leather chairs like oil-kings and merchant princes and only sons in a Fifth Avenue club, and a great trailing plume of smoke that lingered for a moment and died in the still tingling air.

For a full half-hour, even an hour, after the Imperial flyer had gouged through the village the yellow lights of Slateville burned on behind its unwashed windows, which were half opaque with train-dust and the grimy finger-prints of children. Then they began to flick out, here, there--here, there. In a slate-roofed shanty beside the quarry, in an out-of-balance bookkeeper's office in the Slateville Varnish Factory, in the Red Trunk general store and post-office, the parson's study, a maiden's bedroom, in the dirt-colored frame house, another slate-roofed shanty beside the quarry, another, and yet another. Here, there--here, there.

The clerk in the signal-tower slumped in his chair, the doctor's tin-tired buggy rattled up a hilly street that was

shaped like a crooked finger, and away beyond the melancholy stretches of close-bitten grazing-land and runty corn-fields the flyer shrieked upward, and the miles scuttled the echoes back to Slateville.

On an alternate night that was as singly still as the inside of a cup the flyer tore through the village with the cinders tattooing against its panes and the white eye searching like a near-sighted cyclopean monster.

But from the red fireman's cab the green lantern with the black bull's-eye painted on the outward side dangled unlit, and in the dirt-colored house, behind drawn shades, the Hebe-like figure was crouched in another woman's arms, and, in the room adjoining, John Blaney lay dead with a dent in his head.

Who-o-o-p! Who-o-o-p!

"Listen, Cottie, listen!"

"Sh-h-h-h, darlin'."

The crouching women crouched closer together, a dove-note in the crooning voice of one like the coo of a mate.
"Sh-h-h, darlin'."

"There it goes, Cottie. Gawd, just like nothing had happened."

"Sh-h-h, dearie; lay still!"

"Listen. The engine's playin' a different tune on the tracks; it's lighter and smoother."

"Yes--yes--sh-h-h."

"Just hear, Cottie; they got the old diner on. I know her screech."

"I hear, dearie."

"And the Cleveland sleeper wasn't touched, neither. Hear her. They say she didn't even leave the tracks. He used to say she had a rattle like a dice-box. Just the same, it was the smooth-runnin' Washington sleeper lit on the engine. Listen, Cottie, oh, listen! Just like nothin' had happened."

"Don't tremble so, darlin'. That's life every time--it just rides over its dead."

"He hated the flyer, oh--oh--"

"Don't take on so, Della darlin'. He died on his job."

"He hated the flyer; he--"

"He could have jumped like Jim Dirkey did, and lived to face the shame of it, but he died on his job. You can always say your man died on his job, Della darlin'!"

Della raised her crouching head and brushed the hair back from her eyes. Helen's face that launched a thousand ships was no more fair.

"That he did--didn't he, Cottie? He died on his job."

"Sure he did, darlin'--sure he did."

"You remember--you remember, Cottie, the first night they put him on the flyer?"

"Try to forget it, Della, and don't go gettin' all excited--there--there."

"I was over home that night with you and maw, and--and he came in for supper with the news and--and he was like a funeral about bein' promoted."

"Yes, I remember."

"Even with the extra pay he was for stickin' to the accommodation, because he loved her insides."

"And because it was a chance to spite you."

"But I--I was all for the flyer. I told him he was afraid of her speed, and he hauled off and nearly hit me for callin' him a coward before you and maw, and you up and--"

"He was rough with you, Della, but he wouldn't 'a' dared do it with me there. I had him bluffed, all righty; he wouldn't

'a' done it with me and maw there."

"Lots maw would 'a' cared. Poor maw! She never knew nothing else but abuse, herself."

"Paw wasn't so bad, Della--he always brought home the envelope."

"John--he made me eat the words when we got home that night; but, just the samey, he--he wouldn't 'a' took the Imperial, Cottie, if I hadn't nagged him to it--he wouldn't have!"

"Well, what if he wouldn't? You wouldn't 'a' married him, neither, if he hadn't nagged you to it when paw died, and he knew you had a stepmother that was devilin' and abusin' the life out of us--you."

"He used to say, when he came home with a face as black as a crazy devil's, that coaling the flyer was just like stoking hell. She ate and ate and bellowed for more. He hated the flyer, he did. He stoked her with more hate than coal, and I drove him to it, Cottie. I put the hole in his head."

"Aw, no, dearie! Nobody ever made John Blaney do nothing he didn't want to do. He's dead now and can't take up for hisself, but he was hard as nails--even if he was my brother-in-law."

"Sh-h-h, Cottie, little sister."

"I always say, Della, Gawd knows I ain't got a cinch! I hate the factory like I hate a green devil, and you know what it is to live around maw's doggin' and abuse, but it's like I tolle Joe the other night: I wouldn't marry the finest man livin' before I'd had my chance to try out what I had my heart set on. I told him he could save his breath. I'm goin' to take a chance on gettin' out of this dump--not on tyin' up to it."

"Joe's a good boy, Cottie. He's a saint alongside of what John was. Steady fellows and foremen ain't layin' around loose, dearie. He's a good boy, Cottie--none finer."

"Della! You ain't--"

"No; I ain't urgin' you, Cottie. I ain't sayin' you're not right to hold off, but Joe's the finest boy in these parts, ain't he?"

"That ain't sayin' much. You wasn't a big-enough gambler, Della. You remember how I begged you the night before the wedding to hold off. I ain't goin' to make your mistake. You ought 'a' done what Lily done--took a chance. Tessie says her pictures were all pasted up outside of Indianapolis last week. Lily Divette in the 'Twinkling Belles!' If Lily Maloney with her baby face and--"

"I--I stuck to John to the end, though--didn't I, Cottie? Nobody can say I didn't stick to him--can they, Cottie?"

"No, no! Now don't go gettin' excited again, dearie."

"Oh, Gawd, Gawd, Cottie. I--I feel--so--so--queer!"

"Yes, darlin', I know!"

The cryptic quiescence of death hung over the unpainted pine bedchamber and chilled their skin like damp in a cave seeps through clothing. From the far side of the bed a lamp wavered against a tin reflector and danced through their hair like firelight in copper; wind galloped over the flat country, shook the box-shaped house, and whinnied on every flue.

Cottie, whose head was Tiziano's Flora yet more radiant, held her sister's equally radiant head close to her warm bosom, and through the calico of her open-at-the-throat waist, her heart pumped the organ-prelude of Life--Life in the midst of Death.

"Della darlin'--don't--don't be afraid to talk to me. Ain't--ain't I your--sister?"

"What--what--"

"I--I know--what you're thinkin', Della--"

"Sh-h-h; not now!"

"You're thinkin' that you're--that you're *free*, now, darlin'--free--ain't you?"

"Sh-h-h-h!"

"Free, darlin'--think--there ain't nothin' can hold you! A hundred dollars' benefit-money and--"

"Gawd, Cottie--Cottie--'sh-h-h! Him layin' in there dead! It--it ain't no time to talk about that now. Anyways, you're the one to go. I'll stay with maw."

Her words tumbled, and her tones were galvanized with fear and fear's offspring, superstition. She glanced toward the half-open door with eyes two shades too dark.

"No, no, Della; you're the oldest. You go first, and I--I'll stick it out with maw till--she's gettin' feebler every day, Delia, and I'll be joinin' you some day not far off."

"'Sh-h-h; it ain't right. I--I'll give her--half the benefit-money, Cottie, but it's a sin to--"

"You and folks make me sick. If the devil hisself was to die you'd snivel and bury him in priest's robes. What John was he was--dyin' didn't change it. Ten days ago you were standin' at this very window answering his signal and hating him with every swing of the lantern."

"Cottie, you mustn't!"

"I used to see you sit across from him at the table, and when he yelled at you or wanted to pet you I've seen you run your finger-nails into you palms from hatin' him, clear in till they bled, like you used to do when you was a kid and hated any one, and now, just because he's dead--"

"Oh, Gawd, I never done the right thing by him! He was my husband. Look how bare I kept everything from him. He used to come home from a forty-eight-hour shift and say this house reminded him of hell with the fire gone out. I never did the right thing by him."

"He didn't by you, neither."

"He was my husband."

"He knew if we'd 'a' had the money to light out and do like Lily he wouldn't 'a' stood a show of bein' your husband, though. He knew, from the day they put the bandages on maw's eyes, that he was just the only way out for us. He knew one of us had to quit the factory and stay home with her--and where was the money comin' from? He knew."

"Yes, he knew, Cottie. Even on the New York accommodation, that time on the wedding-trip, trouble began right off. When that fellow on the train got talkin' to me and told me he could give me a job in the biggest show on Broadway, he nearly hauled off and raised a row right there on the train when he came back and seen me talkin' to him."

"If only you'd got the fellow's name, Della, and his street in New York!"

"How could I, when John came back and began snarlin' like--"

"Would you know him if you seen him again, Della? Think, darlin', would you?"

"Would I? In my sleep I'd know him. He was a short fellow with eyes so little they didn't show when he laughed, and a mouth full of gold teeth that stuck out like a buck's. And say, Cottie, for diamonds! A diamond horseshoe scarf-pin as big as a dollar!"

"There's money in it, Della. Look at Lily. Tessie says she's diamond rings to her knuckles."

"John knew what took the life out of me, from that day on. He used to say if he ever laid eyes on that little bullet-headed, rat-eyed sport, as he called him, he'd shake the life out of him. Just like that!"

"Faugh! he wouldn't 'a' had the nerve!"

"Don't you forget he knew what was eatin' us, Cottie."

"Well, wasn't it our right--a beauty like you in this dump?"

"And you?"

Their faces, startlingly alike, were upturned, and in their eyes was the golden fluid of dawn.

"He knew. You remember that letter Lily wrote when you asked her to get you in her show?"

"Do I?"

"He found it in my pocket one night and read it, and laughed and laughed. He used to know it by heart, and he'd cackle it to me whenever he caught me red-eyed from cryin'."

"That letter she wrote out of jealousy? He seen that?"

"Yeh! 'Stay home, dearie,' he used to sing to me, laughin' to split his sides; 'stay home, like Della did, and make happiness and a home for yourself.'"

"Gawd!"

"Then he'd go off in a real fit of laughin' again. 'You ain't got no ideas of the breakers ahead, Cottie dearie,' he'd holler, 'and in this business there ain't many of us got the strength to fight 'em.'"

"Wasn't that like him--stealin' a letter!"

"Then he'd laugh some more, wag his finger at me and make me cry, and keep yellin' 'Breakers ahead! Breakers ahead!'"

"There, there, dearie; it's all over, now. He was too dumb and too mean to know that Lily was as jealous as a snake of me and you--always, even, when we was kids. Sure she don't want us in her show--we'd walk away with it. John was too dumb to see the letter was only--"

"'Sh-h-h; it's a sin to run down the dead."

"Anyway, you never lied to John like he did to you. I can still hear him that dark night, down by the quarry, trying to scare you. Lyin' to you about what girls got to buck up against in the city, that night, when they first put the bandages on maw's eyes, and he was beggin' and beggin' you to marry him."

"Gawd! I was ashamed to listen to some of the things he tried to scare me with that night."

"He couldn't answer when I piped up about his cousin, Tessie Hobbs, that went to St. Louis to learn millinery and sends home four dollars a week. He couldn't answer that, could he?"

"No, he couldn't, Cottie."

A silence--the great stone silence of a coliseum--closed in about them. Della shivered and burrowed her head deeper into her sister's lap.

"Aw, Gawd, us talkin' like this, with him layin' in there!"

"If he wasn't layin' in there we wouldn't be talkin'!"

A shutter swung in on its hinges.

"There, there! It ain't nothin' but the wind, Della."

"He was goin' to fix that shutter to-day when he was off shift. Gawd, he didn't have no more idea of dyin' than I did!"

"That's just like maw. Sometimes in the night I can almost hear her stop breathin'--she's so weak, but she's always talkin' about next year--next year."

"It'll be awful for you, little sister, with me gone and you alone with her."

"It--it ain't a sin to say it, Delia. She--she ain't here for long, and I'll be comin' to join you soon. You'll tell 'em I'm comin'!"

"Gawd, how I wish we was going together, little sister! Leavin' you is just like leavin' my heart. There's nobody I love like you, Cottie."

"Della darlin', look at Lily--she went alone."

"I--I ain't afraid--you got the best voice of us two, but I'll make the way for you, dearie. I'll make it easier for you to come."

"It won't be long."

"If I could only have got his name that time on the train, Cottie!"

"You got Lily's boardin'-house, dearie. Ain't that something?"

"Oh, darlin'--him layin' in there!"

"Don't begin that again, dearie."

"Listen, Cottie--listen--that can't be the six-thirty accommodation already, is it? It ain't the funeral-day already, is it?"

"Yes, dearie; but it's a long way off. See, it's just gettin' light through the crack in the shade."

"Don't raise it, Cottie. It's a sin to let in the light, with him layin' there and dead."

"Darlin', it ain't goin' to hurt him, and the lamp's low. See; there ain't no harm in raisin' it--look how light it's gettin'!"

Off toward the east dawn trembled on the edge of eternity and sent up, as if the earth were lighting the horizon, a pearlish light shotted with pink. A smattering of stars lingered and trembled as though cold. They paled; dawn grew pinker, and the black village, with its naked trees standing darkly against the sky, sent up wispy spirals of smoke. A derrick in the jagged bowl of the quarry moved its giant arms slowly, and a steam-whistle shrieked.

The New York accommodation hallooed to the trembling dawn and tore through Slateville.

The sisters pressed their white faces close to the cold pane and watched it rush into the sunrise. A cock crowed to the dawn, and, from afar, another. A dirt-team rumbled up the road, and the steam-whistle from the quarry blew a second reveille.

"You--you take the accommodation, darlin'. It's cheaper, and you'll be feelin' scary about the flyer for a while. You can catch it down by Terre Haute at five-thirty-one, Monday morning--eh, darlin'?"

"So--so soon, Cottie--only three days after, and him hardly cold."

"Don't let's drag it out, darlin'."

"Oh, Cottie, I'll be waitin' for you! There won't be a day that I won't be waitin' for you. There's nothin' I love like you."

Their faces were close and wet with tears, and the first ray of sun burnished their heads and whitened their white bosoms.

"Kiss me, Cottie."

"Della--Della!"

"My little sister!"

"You're goin', Della--try to think, darlin', what it means--you're goin'!"

"Sh-h-h, dearie--'sh-h-h. Yes--I--I'm goin'."

And in the room adjoining John Blaney lay dead with a dent in his head.

The city has a thousand throats, its voice is like a storm running on the wind, and like ship-high waves plunging on ship-high rocks, and like unto the undertone of lost souls adrift in a sheol of fog and water.

The voice of the city knows none of the acoustic limitations of architects and prima donnas. Its dome is as high as fifty-story sky-scrappers, and its sounding-board the bases of a thousand thousand tired brains.

It penetrates the Persian-velvet hangings of the most rococo palace toward which the sight-seeing automobile points its megaphone, and beats against brains neurotic with the problems of solid-gold-edged bonds and solid-gold cotillion favors. It is the birth-song of the tenement child and the swan-song of the weak. It travels out over fields of new-mown hay and sings to the boy at the plow. It shouts to the victor and whispers to the stranger.

Through the morning bedlam of alarm-clocks, slamming doors, the rattle of ash-cans, and the internal disorders of a rooming-house, came the voice a-whispering to Della.

Out from the mouths of babes and truck-drivers, out from the mouths of debutantes and coal-stokers, out from the mouths of those who toil and those who spin not. Drifting over the sea of housetops, up from the steep-walled streets. The laugh of the glad, the taut laugh of the mad; the lover's sigh, and the convict's sigh--and, beneath, like arpeggio scales under a melody, the swiftly running gabble-gabble of life.

Della stirred on her cot, raised her arms, and yawned to the faun-colored oblong of October sky; breathed in the stale

air and salty pungency of bad ventilation and the city's breakfast-bacon, and swung herself out of bed.

So awoke Adriana, too, with her hair falling in a torrent over her breasts and her languid limbs unfolding.

She shook her hair backward with the changeless gesture of women, held her hands at arm's-length, and regarded them. They were whiter, and the broken nails were shaping themselves into ovals. A callous ridge along her forefinger, souvenir of a cistern which pumped reluctantly, was disappearing.

She smiled to herself in the mirror, like the legendary people who have eyes to see the grass grow must smile at the secret of each blade.

Then she slid into a high-necked, long-sleeved wrapper and bound the whorl of her hair in a loose bun at her neck.

Mrs. Fallows's minimum-priced, minimum-sized hall bedroom speaks for its nine-by-twelve "neatly furnished" self. The hall bedrooms of Forty-fourth Street and Forty-fifth Street and Forty-*ad-infinitum* Street are furnished in that same white-iron bed with the dented brass knobs, light-oak, easy-payment dresser, wash-stand, and square table with a too short fourth leg and shelf beneath for dust--and above the dresser, slightly askew, a heart-rendering, art-rendering version of "Narcissus at the Pool," or any of the well-worn incidents favorite to mythology and lithographers.

But life, like love and the high cost of living and a good cigar, is comparative. To Della, stretching her limbs to the morning, Mrs. Fallows's carpeted fourth-floor back, painted furniture, and a light that sprang into brilliancy at a tweak, was a sybarite's retreat, eighteen hours removed from wash-day, and rising in the dark, black mud-roads and a dirt-colored shanty that met the wind broadside and trembled to its innards.

Two flights below her a mezzo-soprano struggled for high C; adjoining, an early-morning-throated barytone leaned out of a doorway and called for a fresh towel. Came three staccato raps at Della's portal, and enter on the wings of the morning and a pair of white-topped, French-heeled shoes Miss Ysobel Du Prez, late of the third road company of the Broadway success, "Oh, Oh, Marietta!" and with a history in pony ballets that entitled her to a pedigree and honorable mention.

"Girl, ain't you dressed yet? What you doin'? Waitin' for your French maid to get your French lawngerie from the French laundry?"

Miss Du Prez swung herself atop the trunk and crossed her slim limbs. Chatelaine jewelry jangled; Herculean perfume dominated the air, and that expressive sobriquet for soubrette, a fourteen-inch willow-plume, and long as the tail of a male pheasant, brushed her left shoulder.

Miss Ysobel Du Prez--one of the ornamental line of tottering caryatids who uphold on their narrow, whitewashed shoulders the gold-paper thrones of musical-comedy principalities, and on those same shoulders carry every tradition of that section of Broadway which Thespis occupies on a ninety-nine-year, privilege-of-renewal lease--the fumes of grease-paint the incense of her temple, the footlights the white flame of her sacrifice!

"You gotta do a quick change if you're going to the offices with me to-day, girl. I gotta be up at the Empire in the Putney Building by eleven and stop in at the Bijou first."

Delia shed her comfortable shroud of repose like Thais dropping her mantle in an Alexandrian theater.

"I must 'a' overslept, Ysobel. Trying on them duds we bought yesterday up to so late last night done me up. Three days in New York ain't got me used to the pace."

"You should worry! If I had your face and figure I'd sleep till the call-boy rapped twice."

"Ah, Ysobel, you with your cute little face and cute little ways!"

"Soft pedal on the ingenoo stuff, girl. You know you don't hate yourself. I didn't notice that you exactly despised anything about you when they called the floor-walker to have a look at you in that black dress yesterday."

"Honest, Ysobel, I dreamt about it all night."

"Sure you did! But who was it steered you into a 'slightly used,' classy place where you could buy a gown that Mrs. Asterbilt wore once to a reception at the Sultan of Sulu's or the Prince of Pilsen's or any of that crowd; who steered you in a place where you could buy a real gown for one-tenth the cost of production?"

"You did, Ysobel. I don't know what I'd 'a' done if Mrs. Fallows hadn't brought you up."

"That little black dream that only let you back twenty-nine-fifty cost three hundred if it cost a cent, and nothing but a snag in the hem and the lace in front as good as new. Gee, I could show this cheap bunch around here how to dress if I

had a month's advance in hand!"

"Get off the trunk, Ysobel, and sit here, will you? I want to get it out. Say, if Cottie could see me with the black hat to match! My little sister I was telling you about could--"

"Who you got to thank? Who gave you the right steer? Take it from me, if I hadn't gone along with you, every store on Sixth Avenue would have X-rayed the corner of your handkerchief for the thirty-eight dollars tied up in it and body-snatched you for your own funeral. Even with me along you had a lean like a bent pin for that made-on-Canal-Street, thirty-two-fifty, red silk they hauled out of the morgue to show you. I seen you edgin' for that Kokome model."

"Me and Cottie was always great ones for red. I ought to had the red serge you made so much fun of dyed for mourning, but Cottie--"

"Red! When you, in a tight-lookin' black that hugs you like it was wet, and a black hat with a tilt that Anna Held would buy right off your head, can walk into any office in the row this morning and land in the show-girl row of any chorus on the bills. If you think that's an easy stunt, ask any girl in this house."

"I--I ain't scared a bit now, since I'm going around with you, Ysobel: but gee, if I had to go alone!"

"Fallows does the same thing for all of them. When I was in last spring from first pony in a Middle West company of the 'Merry Whirl'--remind me, and I'll show you my notices--when I was in last spring Fallows dumped a little doll-eyed soubrette on me that didn't do a thing, after I dragged her around to the offices, but grab a part away from me in a Snooky Ookums quartet that Jim Simmons was puttin' out."

"Honest?"

"Sure! A production I'd been holding off for all season. Me that's made the boards of more stages creak than she's ever seen!"

"Mrs. Fallows says you're just the one to show me around, that you are one swell little pony, and an old one in the offices."

"An old one in the offices! I don't see Fallows herself suffering from no growing-pains. They don't come any farther gone to seed than her. She tried to stick to her soft-shoe act till the office boys of the Consolidated Association for the Prevention of Cruelty to Managers got up a subscription and bought her this four-flights' rooming-house to keep her feet busy with. Fallows better lay low with me or I can do some fancy tongue-work."

"She didn't mean--"

"Easy there, girl! Didn't I learn you for two hours last night to get the cold-cream on smooth, first? Smooth--now the powder--more white on the nose--more!"

"Like that?"

"Say, I met Vyette D'Orsay up in a office yesterday, and she thought I was tryin' out a comedy line on her when I told her I found one I had to learn how to make up."

"Lily, a girl from our town, used to powder and--"

"Little more red over the cheek-bones--see, honey?--like mine--say, if you wanna see swell work you ought to see me made up for spot--didn't I tell you to work back toward the ears? There--more--good! Don't give yourself a mouth like a low-comedy gash. Use the cheese-cloth, honey."

"Look how it smears!"

"There, a Cupid bow in the middle is all you need. You got a mouth just the size of a kiss, anyway."

"John--John used to say about it that--"

"Good! Say, you're some little learner--you are! Easy there--always line an eyebrow downward--there--more--so!"

"So?"

"Say, you got Zaza, Perfecta, Lillie Russell, and the whole hothouse bunch of them knocked through the glass ceiling."

Delia leaned to her radiant reflection in the mirror and smiled through teeth faintly pink from the ruby richness of her lips.

"You ought to see my little sister Cottie, Ysobel. When she comes you'll sit up and take real notice. I ain't even in her class. She can sit on her hair--it's so long--and it's so gold it's hot-lookin'."

"Before I had typhoid mine was the same way--you can't put them dresses on over your head, girl. You gotta climb in--there ain't no room for a overhead act. There! Say, look at that side-drape, will you! I bet that lace set some dame back ten a yard. Some class! Don't forget to strike for thirty right off the bat--they'll think more of you. Say, girl, it's worth the time I'm wasting on you to see Casey's face when I steer you into there this morning."

"Ain't it--a beauty, Ysobel! But it's a little tight, kinda--"

"Now begin that again, will you? Honest, if Vyette could hear that line!"

"Around the knees I mean, Ysobel. It's hard for me to walk."

"If it was any looser I'd get a fit of the laughs like I did over that red serge. If it was any looser--for Gawd's sake, leave that neck open! No, no; down like that! A strip of real, lily-white, garden-variety neck, and she wants to pin it shut!"

"I--I feel ashamed--I--I--kinda hate to leave it open."

"Shades of Vyette! Leave that neck alone, can't you? After all my preachin' yesterday, look where I landed you. Nowheres!"

"Like that, Ysobel?"

"Take the pin out, there; center left like that. Say, girl, I wish you knew about this game what I've forgot."

"Me, too, Ysobel."

"Say, listen to her warblin' down there, will you? What's she practisin' for, I wonder--a chaser act on a four-a-day circuit? Breathe in, girl, you may be a perfect thirty-six, but you'll never make a tape-measure see it your way."

"Shall I--shall I tell 'em I got a voice, Ysobel? Me and my little sister used to sing in--"

Miss Du Prez glanced up over Della's shoulder and, by proxy of the mirror, their eyes met. The red of exertion was high in her face, and one corner of her mouth compressed over pins, so that her words leaked out as through the lips of a faun.

"Voice! You remind me of the fellow that went down to Bowling Green to bowl. They got as much room for voices in musical comedy as a magazine's got for anything besides the advertisin' pages."

"My little sister's got--"

"Can you beat it? 'Voice,' she says. You put your voice in your ankles and waist-line, girl, and it'll get you further. And as for scales like our friend down-stairs, learn to keep the runners out of your silk stockings first. There, give it the Anna Held tilt--there--more--so!"

"Oh-h-h, Ysobel--oh-h-h!"

"Swell, and then some. Who you got to thank? Who steered you right?"

Like a pale-gold aura of moonlight spreading out from behind a black cloud sprang Della's hair against the drooping brim of her hat. She was like a tight-draped, firm-stayed Venus, lyric in every line, her limbs wrapped in an ephod of grace and a skirt that restricted her steps like anklets joined by a too short chain.

"Here, put them white gloves in your bag and save 'em for outside the office doors. Ready?"

"Oh, Ysobel, if my little sister Cottie could only see me now!"

"Don't forget the lines I learnt you last night--two years' experience on Western short circuit--spot-light work, and silent principal--thirty dollars."

"Western short circuit--Western short circuit!"

"Dancing and first-row promenade specialty."

"Dancing and first--"

"Say, you ain't unlearnt it already, have you?"

"No--no."

Down four flights of narrow, unlit stairs with their gauzy laughter, lingering in black hall corners, and then out into a sunlit morning.

At the end of the tall-walled block, lined on both sides with brownstone, straight-front phalanxes of rooming-houses, a segment of Broadway, flashing with automobiles, darting pedestrians, white-facaded buildings, and sun-reflecting windows, flowed like a mountain stream in spring.

"Gee--Ysobel, look at that jam, will you!"

"Well, whatta you know! There goes Vance Dudley! If you want to know what kind of work I do, ask Vance. Me and him did a duet solo in a two-a-day musical sketch that would have landed us on Broadway sure if the lead hadn't put in his lady friend when she came in off the road, flat. I'll show you my notices sometime. That act was good enough for a Hy Myers house if it had been worked right."

"I bet you're grand, Ysobel--your cute little feet and all."

"Ask any of 'em around the offices about me. I could soft-shoe Clarice off the 'Winter Revue' this minute if--if I wasn't what they call in the profesh a--a tin saint. I kinda got my ideas about things--"

"About what, Ysobel?"

"None of them ingenoo lines again, girl. Leave it to you merry widows to take care of yourselves every time. There's nothin' I can learn a merry widow. A merry widow can make Methuselah, herself, feel like a squab when it comes to bein' wise."

"Honest--"

"That baby stare ain't the kind of a cue to throw me, girl. I can steer you up as far as the offices, but I'm done after you once get past the office boy."

"I--I don't--"

"After she gets past the ground-glass door every girl in the business has got to decide for herself. I decided myself, and look where I got to! Nine years in the business and never creaked a Broadway board yet. I ain't got the looks to get there on my own stuff--and what happens? I wake up dead some day doin' short circuit in a Kansas tank-town. I'll be doin' thirty-a-week, West-of-the-Mississippi stuff to the bitter end because--because I decided *my* way and selected the rocky lane."

"The rocky lane?"

"Sure! The first job I ever went out for I could 'a' had. Five sides to the part--two songs and a specialty solo, but, instead, I hit him flop across the cheek with my glove and walked out, leavin' him staggerin' and my engagement layin' on the floor. I--I ain't preachin' to you, honey--I'm just tellin'! Every girl in this business has got to decide for herself--I ain't sayin' one thing or the other."

"Ysobel--hit who across the cheek--hit who?"

"Take it from me, honey, and remember I ain't tryin' to sing you the 'Saint's Serenade,' but take it from me, if I was startin' all over again--way back where you are--I--I'd do the glove act over again. I would, honey, I would, and I ain't preachin', neither."

"Honest to Gawd, Ysobel; I don't know what--"

"Ain't I told you to cut out that ingenoo with me--honest, it gets on my nerves! Watch out, there!"

"Gee; that scart me!"

"Them are pay-as-you-exit taxi-cabs we're dodging. The chorus-girls' sun-parlors, if you listen to the Sunday supplements and funny papers."

"The time we--came--John--was a great one for watchin' them."

"Take it from me that about all nine out of ten of us gay la-la girls you read about, get out of 'em, is watchin'. All we know about them is dodgin' them after the show to get home in a hurry, stick our feet in hot water to get some of the ache out, and fall into bed too tired to smear the cold-cream off."

"Watch out, there, Ysobel!"

"The truth about the chorus-girl would cripple the box-office and put the feature supplements and press-agents out of business. Here we are, Della--I got to stop off at nine just a minute, and you wait outside for me; remember when we get up to eleven--Western circuit, silent principal and--"

"Western circuit--Western circuit!"

The Putney Building reared nineteen white-tile, marble-facaded stories straight up from the most expensive heart-acreage of Broadway and stemmed the Thespian tide that rushed in from every side and surged against its booking-offices.

A bronze elevator the size of a Harlem bedroom and crowded to its capacity shot them upward with the breath-taking flight of a frightened bird.

Ysobel crowded into a corner and nudged a youthful-looking old man in a blue-and-white striped collar and too much bay-rum.

"Hello, Eddie!"

"Hello yourself, Ysobel."

"How are you?"

"Ain't braggin'."

"What you doin', Eddie?"

"Rehearsin' with a act."

"Musical?"

"No."

"Specialty?"

"No--er--high-class burlesque--two a day."

"Oh!"

"You workin', Ysobel?"

"Got three things danglin'--ain't signed yet. Just came in last week."

"S'long."

"S'long. Come on, Della. Watch out there, Eddie--a fellow burnt a hole in my friend lookin' at her like that once."

A titter ran around the elevator, and the old young man writhed in his blue-striped collar.

"Sh-h-h, Ysobel; everybody heard you." A rosily opalescent hue swam high into Della's face as she stepped out of the elevator, and dyed her neck.

"I should worry! I was never out with him in a show in my life that he didn't ogle a hole in every queen he seen. Out in Spokane onct he--"

"Western circuit--Western circuit--"

They hurried down a curving, white-tile corridor, rows of doors with eye-like glass panes were lined up on each side, and the tick-tack of typewriters penetrating. Della's breath came heavier and faster, and a layer of vivid pink showed through the artificial red.

"You wait out here a minute, Della. I wanna step in here, at the Bijou, and see if Louis Rafalsky is doin' anything this morning. Then we'll shoot up to the Empire--"

"Sure--I--I'll wait, Ysobel."

She leaned against the wall and placed her hand over the region of her lace yoke and heart, as if she would regulate their heaving.

A flash of cerise plume, a jangle of chatelaine jewelry, and Ysobel disappeared behind one of the doors, her many-angled silhouette flashing against the far side of the ground glass.

Della breathed in deep and gulped in her dry, hot throat; her fingers, the damp cold born of nervousness, curled in toward her warm palms. She daubed at her lips with a handkerchief.

Simultaneously a door opposite her opened, and a short, bullet-headed figure in a light checked suit, and a diamond horseshoe scarf-pin that caught the points of light stepped out into the pale nimbus cast by the white signal-light of an up-going elevator.

With a gasp that caught in her throat Della darted in her too narrow skirt across the corridor, reached out, and grasped the light-gray coat-sleeve.

"Look," she cried, thrusting herself between him and the trellis-work of the elevator-shaft and throwing back her head so that her bare neck, soft as the breast feathers of a dove, rose and fell with a dove's agitated breathing, "Look--I'm here!"

The short figure turned on his heel and looked up at her, his shoulder-line a full three inches below hers, and his small, predaceous eyes squinting far back into his head.

"Gad--what?"

"I--I'm here--sir--don't you remember--me--I'm here."

He regarded her with the detailed appraisal of the expert, and his glance registered points in her favor.

"Gad!" he repeated.

"Don't--you remember--me--sir--don't--"

"Not bad for a big girl--are you--eh?"

"Don't you remember?"

"Sure--you're the little girl I met out West--didn't I?--two seasons ago with--"

"No--no--no! Don't you remember me now?"

She tore her hat backward from its carefully adjusted tilt, so that it revealed the brassy gold of her hair, and took a step toward him.

"Now don't you remember?"

"Sure--sure--you're the little girl from--sure I'd remember a big little girl like you anywhere."

"You remember now? On the twenty-eight-hour accommodation out of St. Louis. We--I got on at Terre Haute and sat across from you while he--they made up the berth, and you said--"

"Could I forget a big little queen like you! You've grown to a real big girl, ain't you? Come back in my office, sister. That's how much I think of you--with a whole company waitin' for me over at the Gotham Theater--come in!"

"I--just got here--Mr.--Mr--"

"Myers, if anybody should ask you. That's who you're dealin' with--Hy Myers, if you should happen to forget."

"Ain't it funny, Mr. Myers, my runnin' into you right off. I never thought I'd find you in this town. My little sister I was tellin' you about will be here soon and--"

"This way!"

"I'm ready to take that job you was tellin' me about till--"

"In here, sister, where we can talk business alone."

She followed him back through the glazed door, through an outer office arranged like a school-room with aisle-forming desks, and white-shirt-waisted girls and men clerks with green eye-shades bent double over typewriters and books as big as the marble tablets on which are writ the debit and credit of all men for all time.

Boys scurried and darted; telephone bells jangled; and finally the quiet of an inner office, shut off from the noises

like a padded cell, almost entirely carpeted in a leopard's skin and hung with colored lithographs of many season's comedy queens, whose dynasties were sprung from caprice and whose papier-mache thrones had long since slumped to pulp.

"Now sit here, sister--here in this chair next to my desk, where I can look at you. Gad, ain't you grown to be a big girl, though!"

"I'm ready for that job now, Mr.--Mr. Myers."

"Well--well--well!"

Mr. Myers swung on his swivel-chair, squinted his eyes further back into his head, and nodded further appraisal and approval.

"Big little girl--can I call you that, Queenie? How have you been?"

"I've had a hard time of it, Mr.--"

"Hold out your hand and lemme tell your fortune, sister."

"Quit!"

"Dear child--you mustn't act like that--here--hold out your--"

"Quit!"

"Come now--"

"We want jobs, me and my little sister--when she gets here. I told you about her, you remember. I--I've had experience on Western--"

"Naughty--naughty eyes--devilish eyes! Don't you look at me like that--don't! You big little devil, you!"

"What is it, sir?"

"Good! Sit there with the sun on you--you've got hair like--"

"I've had experience with first-row--"

"Gad!" He swerved suddenly forward in his chair so that his small feet touched the floor. "Gad, stand up there--stand over there in that sunshine by the window!"

"What--"

"Stand up--there, agin that screen there--"

Dark as a nun in her wimple, but golden as a sun-flower, she rose as Trilby rose to the eye of Svengali--

"Gad!" he repeated, bringing his small tight fist down on a littered ash-tray, "by Gad!"

Wine was suddenly in her blood.

"You ought to see me and my little sister when we pose together; we--"

"Take off your hat, girl."

She stood suddenly quiet, as if the wine in her blood had seethed and quieted.

"Aw--no--whatta you think I am--I--"

"Take off your hat, big little girl, and if you're good to me I'll tell you something. If I hadn't taken a fancy to you I wouldn't tell you, neither."

She lifted the heavy brim with both hands and stood in the bar of sunlight.

"Gad!" he cried--"Gad!" and jerked open a drawer and threw the big bulk of a typewritten manuscript on the desk before him. "Read that; read that, sister!" His heavy spatulate finger underlined the caption.

"The--Red--Widow,' 'The Red Widow,' by Al Wilson."

He rose and jerked her by her two wrists so that she flounced toward him, her hair awry and the breath jumping out

of her bosom.

"That's *you*, sister--the Red Widow!"

"The Red--Widow?"

"You're goin' out in a road chorus next week and get broke in. At the end of a season I'm goin' to feature you in the biggest show that ever I had up my sleeve."

She regarded him with glazed eyes of one dazed, and backed away from him.

"Me!"

"You--the Red Widow, sister! You know what a Hy Myers production means, don't you? You know what an Al Wilson show is, don't you? Add them two. I'll make you make that show or bust. Stand off there and lemme look at you again--there--so!"

"Quit!"

She sprang back from his touch and raised her hand with the glove dangling in the attitude of a horseman cracking his whip. "You--you quit!" Like Dryope changed into a tree, with the woodiness creeping up her limbs and the glove in her passive hand, she stood with her arm flung upward. "You quit!"

"Dear child, you mustn't--"

"I--I'm goin'--lemme go!"

"Aw, come now, sister; don't get frisky--I didn't mean to make you sore. Gee! Ain't you a touchy little devil?"

"I'm goin'."

"If that's your number, all righty--but you're just kiddin'--you ain't goin' to be too independent in one of the worst seasons in the business."

She moved toward the door with her hand outstretched to the knob.

"You better think twice, sister--but don't lemme keep you--there's other Red Widows as good and better'n you beatin' like an army at my door this minute. But don't lemme keep you."

"Will--will you lemme alone?"

"Sure I will, if it'll make you feel any better--you cold little queen, you. Nervous as a unbroke colt, ain't you? Sit down there and watch."

He touched a buzzer, and a uniformed boy sprang through the door to his elbow.

"Write Al Wilson to meet me here to-morrow at ten."

"Yes, sir." The uniform flashed out.

She moved around him cautiously, not taking her eyes from his face.

"Have I--have I got a job?"

"Sure you have. I'll send you out to Frisco in a chorus that'll limber you up, all right, but I won't let you stay long. I won't let a little queen like you run away for long."

"Frisco--me--gee!"

"Gad! maybe I won't neither. How would you like to play right close to home over in Brooklyn? I've got a chorus over there that'll take the stiffness out of you. I don't want to let a great, big, beautiful doll like you too far away."

"Frisco--I like Frisco."

"But hold up your right hand. Don't you tell nobody I'm pushing you for next season's feature--that's our little secret--between you and me and Al."

"I was gettin' thirty dollars."

"Don't you worry about that, Doll-Doll. You come back here to-morrow at ten. I wanna show Al how the Red Widow

we've been lookin' for dropped right into my hands. He can't squeal to me no more about *types*."

"I--I'm going now, Mr. Myers--to-morrow, then, at ten--"

"Where you goin', Doll?"

"Home. I guess I've lost my friend now."

"Wait; I'm going your way."

"You don't even know which way I'm goin'."

"Sure I do. I'll drop you there in my car."

"Oh--I--I want--to walk--I do."

"None of that, sister. I'm treatin' you white, and you gotta do the same by me. I won't bite you, you little scare-cat! I'm goin' to make things happen to you that'll make you wake up every day pinchin' yourself."

"My little sister, Mr. Myers, has got me beat on looks."

"But you gotta treat me white, sister. We can talk business in the car, but you gotta have confidence in me. I won't bite--you big little girl, you."

"I don't want--to go--that way, Mr. Myers--I gotta go some place first."

"Comin', sister?"

"I--I--"

"Comin'?"

"Yes."

On its hundredth night "The Red Widow," playing capacity houses at the Gotham Theater, presented each lady in the audience a "handsome souvenir" of Red Widow perfume attractively nestled in a red-satin box with a color picture of Della Delaney on the label.

To the pretty whifflings and "ah's!" of every feminine nose present, to the over-a-million-copies-sold waltz-theme that was puckering the mouth of every newsboy in New York, to the rustly settling back into chairs, furs, and standing-room-only attitudes against Corinthian pillars, the hundredth-night, second-act curtain rose on an audience with an additional sense unexpectedly gratified and the souvenir-loving soul of every woman present sniffing its appreciation.

Comedy is a classic prodigal who has wandered far. Comus has discarded his mantle and donned a red nose, a split-up-the-back waistcoat, and a pair of clap-sticks.

Harlequin and Cap-and-Bells have doffed the sock and many colors for the sixty-dollar-a-week role of million-dollar pickle-magnate pursuing a forty-dollar juvenile, who, in turn, is pursuing the two-hundred-dollar-a-week Red Widow from Act One--summer hotel at Manhattan Beach to Act Two--tropical isle off the Bay of Bungel.

For the hundredth time the opening act of "The Red Widow"--a ghoul at the grave of a hundred musical comedies--sang to its background of white-flannel chorus-men, drop-curtain of too-blue ocean and jungle of cotton-back palms.

A painted ship idled on a painted ocean. Trees reared their tropical leaves into a visible drop-net.

It is the Bay--it is the Bay--it is the Ba-a-ay
Of Love and Bunge-e-e-e-l--

announced the two front rows, kicking backward three times.

It is the Ba-a-a-ay
Of Love and Bunge-e-e-el--

agreed the kicked-at, white-flannel background.

A shapely octet in silk-and-lisle regimentals, black-astrakhan capes flung over one shoulder, and black-astrakhan hats as high as a majordomo's bent eight silk-and-lisle left knees with rhythmic regularity. Six ponies in yellow skirts, as effulgent as inverted chrysanthemums, and led by a black pony with a gold star in her hair, kicked to the wings and adored the audience. A chain of "Bungel belles" stretched their thin arms above their heads in a letter O and prinked about on their toes like bantams in a dust road.

Five trombones, ten violas, twelve violins, a drum and bass-viol bombardment rose to a high-C climax, with the chorus scrambling loyally after them like a mountaineer scaling a cliff for an eaglet's nest.

It is the Bay--it is the Bay--it is the Ba-a-ay
Of Love and Bunge-e-e-l--

shouted the seventy-five of them, receding with a grape-vine motion into the wings.

Enter Cyrus Hinkelstein, mayor and pickle-magnate of Brineytown, on the Suwanee, in a too large white waistcoat, white-duck comedy spats, and a pink-canvas bald head.

He institutes an immediate search behind tropical vines and along the under sides of palm fronds for the forty-dollar juvenile who is pursuing the Red Widow from the summer hotel, Act One to Act Two, tropical isle off the Bay of Bungel.

Enter the Red Widow in a black, fish-scale gown that calls out the stealthy pencil of every Middle West dressmaker in the house and rapid calculation from the women with a good memory and some fish-scales on a discarded basque.

The Red Widow, with a poinsettia sprawling like a frantic clutch at her heart, and her burnished gold head rising with the grace of a gold flower out of a vase!

Cyrus assumes a swoon of delight, throws out a cue--"The date-trees are blooming"--the conductor raps his baton twice for their feature duet entitled, "Oh, Let Me Die on Broadway," and the spot-light focuses.

The house clamors for a fourth encore, but the lights flash on. The pursuing son, in the face of prolonged applause, white trousers, and a straw katy, bursts upon the scene with his features in first position for the denouement.

But the audience clamors on. The son postpones his expression and leans against a jungle to a fourth encore of the tuneful Thanatopsis.

On the final curtain of the hundredth night the company bowed two curtain-calls to the capacity house busily struggling into wraps and up aisles.

The Red Widow, linked between the pickle-magnate and the triumphant son, flanked by sextets, octets, and regimentals, bowed four times over three sheaths of American beauties and a high-handled basket of carnations.

Then, almost on the drop of the curtain, the immediate roar of sliding wings, which mingled with the exit strains of the orchestra, like a Debussy right-hand theme defying the left, and the rumble of forests, retreating.

Scene-shifters, to whom every encore is a knell, demolished whole kingdoms at a lunge, half a hundred satin slippers flashed up a spiral staircase to chorus dressing-rooms, the Red Widow flung the trail of the gown she had on--so carelessly dragged across the tarpaulin terra firma of Bungel--across one bare arm and darted through the door with a red star painted on the panel.

Her dressing-room, hung in vivid chintz, with a canopied table replacing the make-up shelf, and a passing show of signed photographs tacked along the wall, was as fantastic as Gnomes' Cave.

A wildness of chiffon and sleazy silk hung from the wall-hooks, a pair of gauze aeroplane wings hovered across a chair, and, atop a trunk, impudent as a Pierette, the black pony was removing the gold star from her hair.

"Warm house to-night, Del. I sent Sibbie across to the hotel with your flowers."

"Yeh--best house yet."

"But gee! it's a wonder he wouldn't give away kerosene."

"Rotten stuff!"

"It made me so dizzy I nearly flopped like a seal in the pony prance. He must 'a' bought it by the keg."

"I told him it was strong enough to run his new motor-boat. Gawd, ain't I tired! How'd the aeroplane song go, Ysobel?"

"Swell! But leave it to Billy to hog your act every time. I seen him grab a laugh when the propellers was workin'."

"Undo me, Ysobel? Why'd you let Sibbie go? Can't you let me get used to having a maid, hon'?"

"Poor kid, you're dead, ain't you? But you gotta go with him to-night or he'll howl."

Della lowered her beaded lashes over eyes that smarted, and raised her arms like Niobe entreating fate.

"Sure, I gotta go. He's been bragging about this hundredth-night blow-out for a month."

"Quit squirming, Del! Hold still, can't you?"

"Five recalls on 'Let me die,' Ysobel."

"You never went better."

Della slid out of her gown and into a gold-colored kimono embroidered in black flying swans, and creamed off her make-up in long, even strokes.

"Look, he wants me to wear that silver-fox coat and the cloth-of-silver gown. Honest, it's so heavy I nearly fainted in it the other night. Lots he cares!"

"It'll be a swell blow, Del. The hundredth night he gave when Perfecta was starring was town talk. He don't stop at nothin'."

"No, he don't stop at nothin'."

"He gimme a look to-night when I came off from the prance. He'd gimme notice in a minute if he didn't need me. He knows that ballet would fall like a bride's biscuit without me."

"Sure it would! He likes your work, hon'. I never pulled any strings for you, neither. He just seen your try-out and liked it swell."

"Sure he did, but he's that jealous of you! He was dead sore when you brought me down here to dress with you. Gee, you're tired, ain't you, dearie?"

"Dog-tired! That staircase waltz always does me up."

"Lay your head down here a minute. Ain't that just life, though? Here we are kicking just like a year ago in Fallows's 'Neatly Furnished.'"

"I ain't kickin', Ysobel. I wake up every morning pinchin' myself."

"Gawd, if you gotta long face, what ought the rest of us to have? You're the luckiest girl any of us knows. Did you see what the new *Yellow Book* says about you? 'The Titian-headed Vénus de Meelo'--how's that--huh?"

"Just the same, you wouldn't change places with me, Ysobel! Don't wriggle out of answering me! Now, would you?"

"Watch out, you're mussing up your beauty curls. Here, lemme pin that diamond heart on the left shoulder of your dress. Hurry up, honey, Myers will be here any minute, and you know how sore he gets if you keep him waitin'."

"Do I?"

"Say, but that silver's swell on you!"

"Say, Ysobel, wait till they see my little sister. We could do a twin act that would take 'em off their feet. That new 'Heavenly Twin' show that Al read us the first act of, with Cottie and me featured, and you doin' the Columbine--gee--"

"Sh-h-h-h! There--he--is--knockin'."

"It can't be Hy already. I--I ain't dressed yet, Hy--just a minute! Oh, it's a telegram, Ysobel; take it, like a good girl."

"Say, it ain't another from Third Row Bobbie, is it? You ought to tip him off that he's wastin' his pin-money on you, hon'."

Della ripped the flap, read, and very suddenly sat down on the silver-fox coat. The color drained out of her face, and her breath came irregularly as if her heart had missed a beat.

"Della--Del--darlin'--what's the matter?"

"Oh, Gawd!"

"What, darlin'--what?"

"Read!"

Ysobel peered across the bare shoulder, her slim silk legs tiptoed and her neck arched.

Maw buried yesterday. Money you sent for her birthday
paid funeral. Am ready. Wire directions.

COTTIE.

"Aw--aw, Del darlin'--honest, I--I don't know what to say, only it--only--it ain't like she was your *real* mother, Del darlin'. You can't be hard hit over a blind old dame that used to make it hot as sixty for you."

"Poor old soul--she lived like a rat and--died like one, I guess."

"With you sending her money all the time--nixy!"

"Like a rat! Poor old maw."

Della's voice was far removed, like one who speaks through the film of a trance.

"When my old dame died I felt bad, too, but Gawd knows she wasn't peaches and cream to have around the house. And look, darlin'--Cottie's comin' now--look--Cottie's comin'!"

"Cottie--Cottie--comin'?"

"Sure she is--see, read, honey--'Am ready."

"Oh, Gawd, Ysobel, now that it's come I--I'm scared--she--she's such a kid--she--Ysobel--I--I'm scared--I--"

"Sh-h-h. There he is knockin', Del. Try and smile, hon'. You know how sore a long face makes him. Maybe you won't have to go to-night, now--smile, darlin'--smile! Come in!"

The door opened with a fling, and enter Mr. Hy Myers, an unlighted cigar at a sharp oblique in one corner of his mouth, hat slightly askew, and a full-length overcoat flung open to reveal a mink lining and studded shirt-front.

"Gad," he said, dallying backward on his heels, his thumbs in the arm-circles of his waistcoat, and regarding the shining silver figure--"Gad, girl, you're all right."

Della drew back against the dressing-table and twirled the rings on her fingers.

"I--I got bad news, Hy. I can't go to-night. Here, read for yourself."

He reached for the paper, passing Ysobel as if she belonged to the trappings of the room.

"I--I can't--go to-night, Hy."

He read with the sharp eyes of a gray hawk of the world, and drew his coat together in a gesture of buttoning up.

"Don't pull any of that stuff on me, Beauty. Just because the old devil you've been tellin' me about--"

"Oh--you--you--"

"Them ain't real tears--you'd be laughin' in your sleeve if you had any on. Come on; step lively, Beauty. I ain't givin' this blow-out to be made a fool out of. Give her a daub of color there, Du Prez."

"Hy! She was my stepmother, and--"

"Come, Beauty, what you actin' up for? Ain't that doll you've been piping about all these months comin' now that the old woman is out of the way? Bring her on and lemme have a look at her. If she's in your class, lemme look her over."

"Gimme--a minute, Hy. I--I just wanna send--a wire."

"Sure; tell her to come on. I'll send it for you. I'll look her over, and--"

"No--no! Let Ysobel send it. You do it, Ysobel. Here, gimme your pen, Hy."

She wrote with her breath half a moan in her throat, and her bosom heaving and flashing the diamond heart.

"Send it right off, Ysobel darlin'--read it and send it off, darlin'!"

She daubed a rabbit's foot under each eye and slid into the silver-fox coat.

"Read it, darlin', and send it."

Ysobel read slowly like a child spelling out its task.

Breakers--ahead. Stay at home, dearie.

DELLA.

Through eyes that were magnified through the glaze of tears Ysobel burrowed her head in the silver-fox collar.

"Oh, Del--Del darlin'--I'm wise--but, oh, my darlin'!"

"Come on. Whatta you think this is, a soul-kiss scene--you two?"

"Comin', Hy--comin'."

"Della darlin'."

"Good night, Ysobel; lemme go, dearie--lemme go."

Then out through a labyrinth of stacked scenery, with her elbow in the cup of his hand, and the silver shimmering in the gloom.

"Gad, you will have that scrawny little hanger-on around and gettin' on my nerves! If I weren't always humorin' the daylights out of you she wouldn't spoil a ballet of mine for fifteen minutes, she--"

"It's darn little I ask out of you, but you gotta lemme have her--you gotta lemme have that much, or the whole blame show can--"

"Keep cool, there, Tragedy Queen, and watch your step! I don't want you limpin' in there to-night with a busted ankle on top of your long face."

They high-stepped through a dirty passageway stacked with stage bric-a-brac, out into a whiff of night air, across a pavement, and into a wine-colored limousine.

He climbed in after her, throwing open the great fur collar of his coat and lighting his cigar.

They plunged forward into the white flare of Broadway, and within her plate-glass inclosure she was like a doomed queen riding to her destiny.

"Light up there, Dolly! No long face to-night! The crowd's going to be there waitin' for you. Look at me, you little devil--you little devil!"

"Gawd, what are you made of? Ain't you got *no* feelings?"

"Tush! You ain't real on that talk. I know you better'n you know yourself. Ain't I told you that you can bring the little sister on and lemme look her over? There's nothin' I wouldn't do for you, Beauty. You got me crazy to-night over you. Eh! Pretty soft for a little hayseed like you!"

She smiled suddenly, flashed her teeth, cooed in her throat, and reared her white throat out of its fur like a swan rears its head out of its snowy neck.

"I--I'll be all right in a minute, Hy. Just lemme sit quiet a second, Hy. I--I'm dog-tired, encores and all. Gimme a little while to tune up--before--we get there. Just a minute, Hy."

"That's more like it. Look at me, Beauty. Do you love me, eh?"

"Easy on that stuff, Hy. They might chain your wrists for ravin'!"

"I'm ravin' crazy over you to-night, that's what I am. Love me, eh--do you, Beauty?"

She receded from his approaching face close back against the upholstery, and within the satin-down interior of her muff her fingers clasped each other until the nails bit into her palms and broke the flesh.

"Don't make me sore to-night, Queenie. I ain't in the humor. Gowann, answer like a good girl. Love me?"

"Aw, Hy, quit your kiddin'."

"No, no; none of that; come on, Silver Queen. I'll give you six to answer--love me?"

"Aw, now--"

"One--two--three--four--five--"

"Yes."

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THE GOOD PROVIDER

Like a suckling to the warmth of the mother, the township of Newton nestled pat against the flank of the city and drew from her through the arteries of electric trains and interurbans, elevated roads and motor-cars.

Such clots coagulate around the city in the form of Ferndales and Glencoves, Yorkvilles and Newtons, and from them have sprung full-grown the joke paper and the electric lawn-mower, the five-hundred-dollars-down bungalow, and the flower-seed catalogue.

The instinct to return to nature lies deep in men like music that slumbers in harp-strings, but the return to nature *via* the five-forty-six accommodation is fraught with chance.

Nature cannot abide the haunts of men; she faints upon the asphalt bosom of the city. But to abide in the haunts of nature men's hearts bleed. Behind that asphaltic bosom and behind faces too tired to smile, hearts bud and leafen when millinery and open street-cars announce the spring. Behind that asphaltic bosom the murmur of the brook is like an insidious underground stream, and when for a moment it gushes to the surface men pay the five hundred dollars down and inclose return postage for the flower-seed catalogue.

The commuter lives with his head in the rarefied atmosphere of his thirty-fifth-story office, his heart in the five-hundred-dollars-down plot of improved soil, and one eye on the time-table.

For longer than its most unprogressive dared hope, the township of Newton lay comfortable enough without the pale, until one year the interurban reached out steel arms and scooped her to the bosom of the city.

Overnight, as it were, the inoculation was complete. Bungalows and one-story, vine-grown real-estate offices sprang up on large, light-brown tracts of improved property, traffic sold by the book. The new Banner Store, stirred by the heavy, three-trolley interurban cars and the new proximity of the city, swung a three-color electric sign across the sidewalk and instituted a trading-stamp system. But in spite of the three-color electric sign and double the advertising space in the Newton *Weekly Gazette*, Julius Binswanger felt the suction of the city drawing at his strength, and at the close of the second summer he took invoice and frowned at what he saw.

The frown remained an indelible furrow between his eyes. Mrs. Binswanger observed it across the family table one Saturday, and paused in the epic rite of ladling soup out of a tureen, a slight pucker on her large, soft-fleshed face.

"Honest, Julius, when you come home from the store nights right away I get the blues."

Mr. Binswanger glanced up from his soup and regarded his wife above the bulging bib of his napkin. Late sunshine percolated into the dining-room through a vine that clambered up the screen door and flecked a design like coarse lace across his inquiring features.

"Right away you get what, Becky?"

"Right away I get the blues. A long face you've had for so long I can't remember."

"Ya, ya, Becky, something you got to have to talk about. A long face she puts on me yet, children."

"Ain't I right, Poil; ain't I, Izzy? Ask your own children!"

Mr. Isadore Binswanger shrugged his custom-made shoulders until the padding bulged like the muscles of a heavy-

weight champion, and tossed backward the mane of his black pompadour.

"Ma, I keep my mouth closed. Every time I open it I put my foot in it."

Mr. Binswanger waggled a rheumatic forefinger.

"A dude like you with a red-and-white shirt like I wouldn't keep in stock ain't--"

"See, ma, you started something."

"Sh-h-h! Julius! For your own children I'm ashamed. Once a week Izzy comes out to supper, and like a funeral it is. For your own children to be afraid to open their mouths ain't nothing to be proud of. Right now your own daughter is afraid to begin to tell you something--something what's happened. Ain't it, Poil?"

Miss Pearl Binswanger tugged a dainty bite out of a slice of bread, and showed the oval of her teeth against the clear, gold-olive of her skin. The same scarf of sunshine fell like a Spanish shawl across her shoulders, and lay warm on her little bosom and across her head, which was small and dark as Giaconda's.

"I ain't saying nothing, am I, mamma? The minute I try to talk to papa about--about moving to the city or anything, he gets excited like the store was on fire."

"Ya, ya, more as that I get excited over such nonsenses."

"No, to your papa you children say nothing. It's me that gets my head dinned full. Your children, Julius, think that for me you do anything what I ask you; but I don't see it. Pass your papa the dumplings, Poil. Can I help it that he carries on him a face like a funeral?"

"Na, na, Becky; for why should I have a long face? To-morrow I buy me a false face like on Valentine's Day, and then you don't have to look at me no more."

"See! Right away mad he gets with me. Izzy, them noodles I made only on your account; in the city you don't get 'em like that, huh? Some more *Kartoffel Salad*, Julius?"

"Ya, but not so much! My face don't suit my wife and children yet, that's the latest."

"Three times a day all week, Izzy, I ask your papa if he don't feel right. 'Yes,' he says, always 'yes.' Like I says to Poil, what's got him since he's in the new store I don't know."

"Ach, you--the whole three of you make me sick! What you want me to do, walk the tight rope to show what a good humor I got?"

"No; we want, Julius, that you should come home every night with a long face on you till for the neighbors I'm ashamed."

"A little more *Kartoffel Salad*, Becky? Not so much!"

"Like they don't talk enough about us already. With a young lady in the house we live out here where the dogs won't bark at us."

"I only wish all girls had just so good a home as Pearlie."

"Aw, papa, that ain't no argument! I'd rather live in a coop in the city, where a girl can have some life, than in a palace out in this hole."

"Hole, she calls a room like this! A dining-room set she sits on what her grandfather made with his own hands out of the finest cherry wood--"

"For a young girl can you blame her? She feels like if she lived in the city she would meet people and Izzy's friends. Talk for yourself, Poil."

"I--"

"Boys like Ignatz Landauer and Max Teitlebaum, what he meets at the Young Men's Association. Talk for yourself, Poil."

"I--"

"Poil's got a tenant for the house, Julius. I ain't afraid to tell you."

"I don't listen to such nonsense."

"From the real-estate offices they sent 'em, Julius, and Poil took 'em through. Furnished off our hands they take it for three months, till their bungalow is done for 'em. Forty dollars for a house like ours on the wrong side of town away from the improvements ain't so bad. A grand young couple, no children. Izzy thinks it's a grand idea, too, Julius. He says if we move to the city he don't have to live in such a dark little hall-room no more. To the hotel he can come with us on family rates just so cheap. Ain't it, Izzy?"

Mr. Isadore Binswanger broke his conspiracy of silence gently, like a skeptic at breakfast taps his candle-blown egg with the tip of a silver spoon once, twice, thrice, then opens it slowly, suspiciously.

"I said, pa, that with forty dollars a month rent from the house, and--"

"In my own house, where I belong and can afford, I stay. I'm an old man, and--"

"Not so fast, pa, not so fast! I only said that with forty dollars from the house for three months this winter you can live almost as cheap in the city as here. And for me to come out every Saturday night to take Pearlie to the theater ain't such a cinch, neither. Take a boy like Max Teitlebaum, he likes her well enough to take her to the theater himself, but by the time he gets out here for her he ain't go no enjoyment left in him."

"When a young man likes well enough a young lady, a forty-five-minutes street-car ride is like nothing."

"Aw, papa, in story-books such talk is all right, but when a young man has got to change cars at Low Bridge and wait for the Owl going home it don't work out so easy--does it Izzy, does it, mamma?"

"For three years, pa, even before I got my first job in the city, always mamma and Pearlie been wantin' a few months away."

"With my son in the city losing every two months his job I got enough city to last me so long as I live. When in my store I need so bad a good young man for the new-fashioned advertising and stock, to the city he has to go for a salesman's job. When a young man can't get along in business with his old father I don't go running after him in the city."

"Pa, for heaven's sakes don't begin that! I'm sick of listening to it. Newton ain't no place for a fellow to waste his time in."

"What else you do in the city, I like to know!"

"Julius, leave Izzy alone when one night a week he comes home."

"For my part you don't need to move to the city. I only said to Pearlie and ma, when they asked me, that a few months in a family hotel like the Wellington can't bust you. For me to come out home every Saturday night to take Pearlie into the theater ain't no cinch. In town there's plenty of grand boys that I know who live at the Wellington--Ignatz Landauer, Max Teitlebaum, and all that crowd. Yourself I've heard you say how much you like Max."

"For why, when everybody is moving out to Newton, we move away?"

"That's just it, papa, now with the interurban boom you got the chance to sublet. Ain't it, mamma and Izzy?"

"Sure it--"

"Ya, ya; I know just what's coming, but for me Newton is good enough."

"What about your children, Julius? You ain't the only one in the family."

"Twenty-five year I've lived in this one place since the store was only so big as this room, and on this house we didn't have a second story. A home that I did everything but build with my own hands I don't move out of so easy. Such ideas you let your children pump you with, Becky."

"See, children, you say he can't never refuse me nothing; listen how he won't let me get in a word crossways before he snaps me off. If we sublet, Julius, we--"

"Sublet we don't neither! I should ride forty-five minutes into the city after my hard day's work, when away from the city forty-five minutes every one else is riding. My house is my house, my yard is my yard. I don't got no ideas like my high-toned son and daughter for a hotel where to stretch your feet you got to pay for the space."

"Listen to your papa, children, even before I got my mouth open good how he talks back to a wife that nursed him

through ten years of bronchitis. All he thinks I'm good enough for is to make poultices and rub on his chest goose grease."

"Ach, Becky, don't fuss so with your old man. Look, even the cat you got scared. Here, Billy--here, kitty, kitty."

"Ain't I asked you often enough, Julius, not to feed on the carpet a piece of meat to the cat? 'Sh-h-h-h, Billy, scat! All that I'm good enough for is to clean up. How he talks to his wife yet!"

Miss Binswanger caught her breath on the crest of a sob and pushed her untouched plate toward the center of the table; tears swam on a heavy film across her eyes and thickened her gaze and voice.

"This--ain't--no--hole for--for a girl to live in."

"All I wish is you should never live in a worse."

"I ain't got nothin' here, papa, but sit and sit and sit on the porch every night with you and mamma. When Izzy comes out once a week to take me to a show, how he fusses and fusses you hear for yourselves. For a girl nearly--twenty--it ain't no joke."

"It ain't, papa; it ain't no joke for me to have to take her in and out every week, lemme tell you."

"Eat your supper, Poil; not eating don't get you nowheres with your papa."

"I--I don't want nothin'."

A tear wiggle--wagged down Miss Binswanger's smooth cheek, and she fumbled at her waist-line for her handkerchief.

"I--I--I just wish sometimes I--was dead."

Mr. Binswanger shot his bald head outward suddenly, as a turtle darts forward from its case, and rapped the table noisily with his fist clutched around an upright fork, and his voice climbing to a falsetto.

"I--I wish in my life I had never heard the name of the city."

"Now, Julius, don't begin."

"Ruination it has brought me. My boy won't stay by me in the store so he can't gallivant in the city; my goil won't talk to me no more for madness because we ain't in the city; my wife eats out of me my heart because we ain't in the city. For supper every night when I come home tired from the store all I get served to me is the city. I can't swallow no more! Money you all think I got what grows on trees, just because I give all what I got. You should know how tight--how tight I got to squeeze for it."

Mrs. Binswanger threw her arms apart in a wide gesture of helplessness.

"See, children, just as soon as I say a word, mad like a wet hen he gets and right away puts on a poor mouth."

"Mad yet I shouldn't get with such nonsense. Too good they both got it. Always I told you how we spoilt 'em."

"Don't holler so, pa."

"Don't tell me what to do! You with your pretty man suit and your hair and finger-nails polished like a shoe-shine. You go to the city, and I stay home where I belong in my own house."

"His house--always his house!"

"Ya, a eight-room house and running water she's got if she wants to have company. Your mamma didn't have no eight rooms and finished attic when she was your age. In back of a feed store she sat me. Too good you got it, I say. New hard-wood floors down-stairs didn't I have to put in, and electric light on the porch so your company don't break his neck? Always something new, and now no more I can't eat a meal in peace."

"Sh-h-h-h, Julius!"

"I should worry that the Teitlebaums and the Landauers live in a fine family hotel in Seventy-second Street. Such people with big stores in Sixth Avenue can buy and sell us. Not even if I could afford it would I want to give up my house and my porch, where I can smoke my pipe, and my comforts that I worked for all my life, and move to the city in rooms so little and so far up I can't afford to pay for 'em. I should give up my chickens and my comforts!"

"Your comforts, always your comforts! Do I think of *my* comforts?"

"Ma, don't you and pa begin now with your fussing. Like cats you are one minute and the next like doves."

"Don't boss me in my own house, Izzy! So afraid your papa is that he won't get all the comforts what's coming to him. I wish you was so good to me as you are to that cat, Julius--twice I asked you not to feed him on the carpet. Scat, Billy!"

"Pass me some noodles, maw."

"Good ones, eh, Izzy?"

"Fine, maw."

"I ask you, is it more comfortable, Julius, for me to be cooped up in the city in rooms that all together ain't as big as my kitchen? No, but of my children I think too besides my own comforts."

"Ya, ya; now, Becky, don't get excited. Look at your mamma, Pearlie; shame on her, eh? How mad she gets at me till blue like her wrapper her face gets."

"My house and my yard so smooth like your hand, and my big porch and my new laundry with patent wringer is more to me as a hotel in the city. But when I got a young lady daughter with no attentions and no prospects I can't think always of my own comforts."

"Ya, ya, Becky; don't get excited."

"Don't ya--ya me, neither."

"*Ach*, old lady, that only means how much I love you."

"We got a young lady daughter; do you want that she should sit and sit and sit till for ever we got a daughter, only she ain't young no more. I tell you out here ain't no place for a young goil--what has she got?"

"Yes, papa; what have I got? The trees for company!"

"Do you see, Julius, in the new bungalows any families moving in with young ladies? Would even your son Isadore what ain't a young lady stay out here when he was old enough to get hisself a job in the city?"

"That a boy should leave his old father like that!"

"Wasn't you always kickin' to me, pa, that there wasn't a future in the business after the transaction came--wasn't you?"

"No more arguments you get with me!"

"What chance, Julius, I ask you, has a goil like Poil got out here in Newton? To sit on the front porch nights with Meena Schlossman don't get her nowheres; to go to the moving--pictures with Eddie Goldstone, what can't make salt for hisself, ain't nothing for a goil that hopes to do well for herself. If she only looks out of the corner of her eye at Mike Donnelly three fits right away you take!"

"*Gott*, that's what we need yet!"

"See, even when I mention it, look at him, Poil, how red he gets! But should she sit and sit?"

"*Ach*, such talk makes me sick. Plenty girls outside the city gets better husbands as in it. Na, na, mamma, did you find me in the city?"

"*Ach*, Julius, stop foolin'. When I got you for a husband enough trouble I found for myself."

"In my business like it goes down every day, Becky, I ain't got the right to make a move."

"See, the poor mouth again! Just so soon as we begin to talk about things. A man that can afford only last March to take out a new five-thousand-dollar life-insurance policy--"

"Sh-h-h-h, Becky."

"For why shouldn't your children know it? Yes, up-stairs in my little green box along with my cameo ear-rings and gold watch-chain I got it put away, children. A new life-insurance policy on light-blue paper, with a red seal I put only last week. When a man that never had any insurance before takes it out so easy he can afford it."

"Not--not because I could afford it I took it, Becky, but with business low I squeeze myself a little to look ahead."

"Only since we got the new store you got so tight. Now you got more you don't let it go so easy. A two-story brick with plate-glass fronts now, and always a long face."

"A long face! You should be worried like I with big expenses and big stock and little business. Why you think I take out a policy so late at such a terrible premium? Why? So when I'm gone you got something besides debts!"

"Just such a poor mouth you had, Julius, when we wanted on the second story."

"I ask you, Becky: one thing that you and the children ever wanted ain't I found a way to get it for you? I ask you?"

"Ya, but a woman that was always economical like me you didn't need to refuse. Never for myself I asked for things."

"Ach, ma and pa, don't begin that on the one night a week I'm home."

"So economical all my life I been. Till Izzy was ashamed to go to school in 'em I made him pants out of yours. You been a good husband, but I been just as good a wife, and don't you forget it!"

"Na, na, old lady; don't get excited again. But right here at my table, even while I hate you should have to know it, Becky, in front of your children I say it, I--I'm all mortgaged up, even on this house I'm--"

"On the old store you was mortgaged, too. In a business a man has got to raise money on his assets. Didn't you always say that yourself? Business is business.."

"But I ain't got the business no more, Becky. I--I ain't said nothing, but--but next week I close out the trimmed hats, Becky."

"Papa!"

"Trimmed hats! Julius, your finest department."

"For why I keep a department that don't pay its salt? I ain't like you three; looks ain't everything."

"I know. I know. Ten years ago the biggest year what we ever had you closed out the rubber coats, too, right in the middle of the season. A poor mouth you'd have, Julius, if right now you was eating gold dumplings instead of chicken dumplings."

"Na, na, Becky; don't pick on your old man."

"Since we been married I--"

"Aw, ma and pa, go hire a hall."

Suddenly Miss Binswanger clattered down her fork and pushed backward from the table; tears streamed toward the corners of her mouth.

"That's always the way! What's the use of getting off the track? All we want to say, papa, is we got a chance like we never had before to sublet. Forty dollars a month, and no children. For three months we could live in the city on family rates, and maybe for three months I'd know I was alive. A--a girl's got feelings, papa! And, honest, it--it ain't no trip, papa--what's forty-five minutes on the car with your newspaper?--honest, papa, it ain't."

Mr. Isadore Binswanger drained a glass of water.

"Give 'er a chance, pa. The boys'll show her a swell time in the city--Max Teitlebaum and all that crowd. It ain't no fun for me traipsin' out after her, lemme tell you."

Mr. Binswanger pushed back his chair and rose from the table. His eyes, the wet-looking eyes of age and asthma, retreated behind a network of wrinkles as intricate as overhead wiring.

"I wish," he cried, "I was as far as the bottom of the ocean away from such nonsense as I find in my own family. Up to my neck I'm full. Like wolfs you are! On my neck I can feel your breath hot like a furnace. Like wolfs you drive me till I--I can't stand it no more. All what I ask is my peace--my little house, my little pipe, my little porch, and not even my peace can I have. You--you're a pack of wolfs, I tell you--even your fangs I can see, and--and I--I wish I was so far away as the bottom of the ocean."

He shambled toward the door on legs bent to the cruel curve of rheumatism. The sun had dropped into a bursting west, and was as red as a mist of blood. Its reflection lay on the smooth lawn and hung in the dark shadows of quiet trees, and through the fulvous haze of evening's first moment came the chirruping of crickets.

"I wish I was so far away as the bottom of the ocean."

The tight-sprung screen door sprang shut on his words, and his footsteps shambled across the wide ledge of porch. A silence fell across the little dining-table, and Miss Binswanger wiped at fresh tears, but her mother threw her a confident gesture of reassurance.

"Don't say no more now for a while, children."

Mr. Isadore Binswanger inserted a toothpick between his lips and stretched his limbs out at a hypotenuse from the chair.

"I'm done. I knew the old man would jump all over me."

"Izzy, you and Poil go on now; for the theater you won't catch the seven-ten car if you don't hurry. Leave it to me, Poil; I can tell by your papa's voice we got him won. How he fusses like just now don't make no difference; you know how your papa is. Here, Poil, lemme help you with your coat."

"I--I don't want to go, mamma!"

"Ach, now, Poil, you--"

"If you're coming with me you'd better get a hustle. I ain't going to hang around this graveyard all evening."

Her brother rose to his slightly corpulent five feet five and shook his trousers into their careful creases. His face was a soft-fleshed rather careless replica of his mother's, with a dimple-cleft chin, and a delicate down of beard that made his shaving a manly accomplishment rather than a hirsute necessity.

"Here on the sideboard is your hat, Poil--powder a little around your eyes. Just leave papa to me, Poil. *Ach*, how sweet that hat with them roses out of stock looks on you! Come out here the side way--*ach*, how nice it is out here on the porch! How short the days get--dark nearly already at seven! Good-by, children. Izzy, take your sister by the arm; the whole world don't need to know you're her brother."

"Leave the door on the latch, mamma."

"Have a good time, children. Ain't you going to say good-by to your papa, Poil? Your worst enemy he ain't. Julius, leave Billy alone--honest, he likes that cat better as his family. Tell your papa good-by, Poil."

"I--said--good-by."

"She should say good-by to me only if she wants to. Izzy, when you go out the gate drive back that rooster--I'll wring his little gallivantin' neck if he don't stop roosting in that bush!"

"Good night, children; take good care of the cars."

"Good night, mamma...papa."

The gate clicked shut, and the two figures moved into the mist of growing gloom; over their heads the trees met and formed across the brick sidewalk a roof as softly dark as the ceiling of a church. Birds chirped.

Mrs. Binswanger leaned her wide, uncorseted figure against a pillar and watched them until a curve in the avenue cut her view, then she dragged a low wicker rocker across the veranda.

"We can sit out on the porch a while yet, Julius. Not like midsummer it is for your rheumatism."

"Ya, ya. My slippers, Becky."

"Here."

"Ya, ya."

"Look across the yard, will you, Julius. The Schlossmans are still at the supper-table. Fruit gelatin they got. I seen it cooling on the fence. We got new apples on the side-yard tree, you wouldn't believe, Julius. To-morrow I make pies."

"Ya, ya."

The light tulle of early evening hung like a veil, and through it the sad fragrance of burning leaves, which is autumn's incense, drifted from an adjoining lawn.

"Sh-h-h-h, chickey--sh-h-h-h! Back in the yard I can't keep that rooster, Julius. And to-day for thirty cents I had that

paling in the garden fence fixed, too. Honest, to keep a yard like ours going is an expense all the time. People in the city without yards is lucky."

"In all Newton there ain't one like ours. Look, Becky, at that white-rose bush flowering so late just like she was a bride."

"When Izzy was home always, we didn't have the expense of weeding."

"Now when he comes home all he does is change neckties and make trouble."

"*Ach*, my moon vines! Don't get your chair so close, Julius. Look how those white flowers open right in your face. One by one like big stars coming out."

"M-m-m-m and smell, Becky, how good!"

"Here, lemme pull them heavy shoes off for you, papa. Listen, there goes that oriole up in the cherry-tree again. Listen to the thrills he's got in him. Pull, Julius; I ain't no derrick!"

"Ah-h-h, how good it feels to get 'em off! Now light my pipe, Becky. Always when you light it, better it tastes. Hold--there--make out of your hand a cup--there--pu-pu-pu--there! Now sit down by me, Becky!"

"Move over."

"*Ach*, Becky, when we got our little home like this, with a yard so smooth as my hand, where we don't need shoes or collars, and with our own fruit right under our noses, for why ain't you satisfied?"

"For myself, Julius, believe me it's too good, but for Poil we--"

"Look all what you can see right here from our porch! Look there through the trees at the river; right in front of our eyes it bends for us. Look what a street we live on. We should worry it ain't in the booming part. Quiet like a temple, with trees on it older as you and me together."

"The caterpillars is bad this year, Julius; trees ain't so cheap, neither. In the city such worries they ain't got."

"For what with a place like this, Becky, with running water and--"

"It's Poil, Julius. Not a thing a beau-ti-fool girl like Poil has out here."

"Nonsense. It's a sin she should want a better place as this. Ain't she got a plush parlor and a piano and--"

"It's like Izzy says, Julius: there's too many fine goils in the city for the boys to come out here on a forty-five-minute ride. What boys has she got out here, Mike Donnely and--"

"*Ach*!"

"That's what we need; just something like that should happen to us. But, believe me, it's happened before when a girl ain't got no better to pick from. How I worry about it you should know."

"Becky, with even such talk you make me sick."

"Mark my word, it's happened before, Julius! That's why I say, Julius, a few months in the city this winter and she could meet the right young man. Take a boy like Max Teitlebaum. Yourself you said how grand and steady he is. Twice with Izzy he's been out here, and not once his eyes off Poil did he take."

"Teitlebaum, with a store twice so big as ours on Sixth Avenue, don't need to look for us--twice they can buy and sell us."

"Is--that--so! To me that makes not one difference. Put Poil in the city, where it don't take an hour to get to be, and, *ach*, almost anything could happen! Not once did he take his eyes off her--such a grand, quiet boy, too."

"When a young man's got thoughts, forty-five minutes' street-car ride don't keep him away."

"Nonsense! I always say I never feel hungry till I see in front of me a good meal. If I have to get dressed and go out and market for it I don't want it. It's the same with marriage. You got to work up in the young man the appetite. What they don't see they don't get hungry for. They got to get eyes bigger as their stomachs first."

"Such talk makes me sick. Suppose she don't get married, ain't she got a good home and--"

"An old maid you want yet! A beau-ti-fool goil like our Poil he wants to make out of her an old maid, or she should

break her parents' hearts with a match like Mike Donnely--"

"Becky."

"Aw, Julius, now we got the chance to rent for three months. Say we live them three months at the Wellington Hotel. Say it costs us a little more; everybody always says what a grand provider you are, Julius; let them say a little more, Julius."

"I--I ain't got the money, Becky, I tell you. For me to refuse what you want is like I stick a knife in my heart, but I got poor business, Becky."

"Maybe in the end, Julius, it's the cheapest thing we ever done."

"I can't afford it, Becky."

"For only three months we can go, Julius."

"I got notes, Becky, notes already twice extended. If I don't meet in March God knows where--"

"Ya, ya, Julius; all that talk I know by heart!"

"I ain't getting no younger neither, Becky. Hardly through the insurance examination I could get. I ain't so strong no more. When I get big worries I don't sleep so good. I ain't so well nights, Becky."

"Always the imagination sickness, Julius."

"I ain't so well, I tell you, Becky."

"Last time when all you had was the neuralgia, and you came home from the store like you was dying, Dr. Ellenburg told me hisself right here on this porch that never did he know a man so nervous of dying like you."

"I can't help it, Becky."

"If I was so afraid like you of dying, Julius, not one meal could I enjoy. A healthy man like you with nothing but the rheumatism and a little asthma. Only last week you came home pale like a ghost with a pain in your side, when it wasn't nothing but where your pipe burnt a hole in your pants pocket to give me some more mending to do."

"Just for five minutes you should have felt that pain!"

"Honest, Julius, to be a coward like you for dying it ain't nice--honest, it ain't."

"Always, Becky, when I think I ain't always going to be with you and the children such a feeling comes over me."

"Ach, Julius, be quiet! Without you I might just as well be dead, too."

"I'm getting old, Becky; sixty-six ain't no spring chicken no more."

"That's right, Julius; stick knives in me."

"Life is short, Becky; we must be happy while we got each other."

"Life is short, Julius, and for our children we should do all what we can. We can't always be with them, Julius. We--we must do the right thing by 'em. Like you say we--we're getting old--together, Julius. We don't want nothing to reproach ourselves with."

"Ya, ya, Becky."

Darkness fell thickly, like blue velvet portieres swinging together, and stars sprang out in a clear sky.

They rocked in silence, their heads touching. The gray cat, with eyes like opals, sprang into the hollow of Mr. Binswanger's arm.

"Billy, you come to sit by mamma and me? Ni-ce Bil-ly!"

"We go in now, papa; in the damp you get rheumatism."

"Ya, ya, Becky--hear how he purrs, like an engine."

"Come on, papa; damper every minute it gets."

He rose with his rheumatic jerkiness, placed the cat gently on all fours on the floor, and closed his fingers around the curve of his wife's outstretched arm.

"When--when we go--go to the city, Becky, we don't sublet Billy; we--we take him with us, not, Becky?"

"Yes, papa."

"Ya, ya, Becky."

The chief sponsors for the family hotel are neurasthenia and bridge whist, the inability of the homemaker and the debility of the housekeeper.

Under these invasions Hestia turns out the gas-logs, pastes a To Let sign on the windows, locks the front door behind her, and gives the key to the auctioneer.

The family holds out the dining-room clock and a pair of silver candlesticks that came over on the stupendously huge cargo which time and curio dealers have piled upon the good ship *Mayflower*; engages a three-room suite on the ninth floor of a European-plan hotel, and inaugurates upon the sly American paradox of housekeeping in non-housekeeping apartments.

The Wellington Hotel was a rococo haven for such refugees from the modern social choler, and its doors flew open and offered them a family rate, excellent cuisine, quarantine.

Excellent cuisine, however, is a clever but spiceless parody on home cookery.

Mr. Binswanger read his evening menu with the furrow deepening between his eyes.

"Such a soup they got! Mulla-ga-what?"

"Shh-h-h, papa; mullagatawny! Rice soup."

"Mullagatawny! Fine mess!"

"Shh-h-h, Julius; don't talk so loud. Does the whole dining-room got to know you don't know nothing?"

Mrs. Binswanger took nervous resume of the red-and-gold, bright-lighted dining-room.

"For a plate of noodles soup, Becky, they can have all their mullagatawny! Fifteen cents for a plate of soup, Becky, and at home for that you could make a whole pot full twice so good."

"Sh-h-h-h, papa."

"Don't 'sh-h-h-h-h me no more neither, Pearlie. Five months, from October to February, I been shooed like I was one of our roosters at home got over in Schlossman's yard. There, you read for me, Izzy; such language I don't know."

Isadore took up a card and crinkled one eye in a sly wink toward his mother and sister.

"Rinderbrust und Kartoffel Salad, pa, mit Apful Kuchen und Kaletraufschmitt."

"Ya, ya, make fun yet! A square meal like that should happen to me yet in a highway-robbery place like this."

Mrs. Binswanger straightened her large-bosomed, stiff-corseted figure in its large-design, black-lace basque, and pulled gently at her daughter's flesh-colored chiffon sleeve, which fell from her shoulders like angels' wings.

"Look across the room, Poil. There's Max just coming in the dining-room with his mother. Always the first thing he looks over at our table. Bow, Julius; don't you see across the room the Teitlebaums coming in? I guess old man Teitlebaum is out on the road again."

Miss Binswanger flushed the same delicate pink as her chiffon, and showed her oval teeth in a vivid smile.

"Ain't he silly, though, to-night, mamma! Look, when he holds up two fingers at me it means first he takes his mother up to her pinochle club, and then by nine o'clock he comes back to me."

"How good that woman has got it! Look, Poil, another waist she's wearing again."

"Look how he pulls out the chair for his mother, Izzy. It would hurt you to do that for me and mamma, wouldn't it?"

"Say, missy, I learnt manners two years before you ever done anything but hold down the front porch out on Newton Avenue. I'd been meetin' Max Teitlebaum and Ignatz Landauer and that crowd over at the Young Men's Association before you'd ever been to the movie with anybody except Meena Schlossman."

"I don't see that all your good start got you anywheres."

"Don't let swell society go to your head, missy. You ain't got Max yet, neither. You ought to be ashamed to be so crazy about a boy. Wait till I tell you something when we get up-stairs that'll take some of your kink out, missy."

"Children, children, hush your fussing! Julius, don't read all the names off the bill of fare."

Miss Binswanger regarded her brother under level brows, and threw him a retort that sizzed across the table like drops of water on a hot stove-top.

"Anyways, if I was a fellow that couldn't keep a job more than two months at a time I'd lay quiet. I wouldn't be out of a job all the time, and beggin' my father to set me up in business when I was always getting fired from every place I worked."

"Children!"

"Well, he always starts with me, mamma."

"Izzy, ain't you got no respect for your sister? For Gawd's sakes take that bill of fare away from your papa, Izzy. He'll burn a hole in it. Always the prices he reads out loud till so embarrassed I get. No ears and eyes he has for anything else. He reads and reads, but enough he don't eat to keep alive a bird."

Mr. Binswanger drew his spectacles off his nose, snapped them into a worn-leather case and into his vest pocket; a wan smile lay on his lips.

"I got only eyes for you, Becky, eh? All dressed up, ain't you?--black lace yet! What you think of your mamma, children? Young she gets, not?"

"Ach, Julius!"

The little bout of tenderness sent a smile around the table, and behind the veil of her lashes Miss Binswanger sent the arrow of a glance across the room.

"Honest, mamma, I wonder if Max sees anything green on me."

"He sees something sweet on you, maybe, Poil. Izzy, pass your papa some radishes. Not a thing does that man eat, and such an appetite he used to have."

"Radishes better as these we get in our yard at home. Ten cents for six radishes! Against my appetite it goes to eat 'em, when in my yard at home--"

"Home, always home!"

"Papa, please don't put your napkin in your collar like a bib. Mamma, make him take it out. Honest, even for the waiter I'm ashamed. How he watches us, too, and laffs behind the tray."

"Leave me alone, Pearlie. My shirt-front I don't use for no bib! Laundry rates in this hold-up place ain't so cheap."

"Mamma, please make him take it out."

"Julius!"

"Look, papa, at the Teitlebaums and Schoenfeldts, laughing at us, papa. Look now at him, mamma; just for to spite me he bends over and drinks his soup out loud out of the tip of his spoon--please, papa."

Mr. Binswanger jerked his napkin from its mooring beneath each ear and peered across at his daughter with his face as deeply creased as a raisin.

"I wish," he said, low in his throat, and with angry emphasis quivering his lips behind the gray and black bristles of his mustache--"ten times a day I wish I was back in my little house in Newton, where I got my comfort and my peace--you children I got to thank for this, you children."

Mr. Isadore Binswanger replaced his spoon in his soup-plate and leaned back against his chair.

"Aw now, papa, for God's sakes don't begin!"

"You good-for-nothing, you! With your hair combed up straight on your head like a girl's, and a pleated shirt like I'd be ashamed to carry in stock, you got no put-in! If I give you five thousand dollars for a business for yourself you don't care so much what kind of manners I got. Five thousand dollars he asks me for to go in business when he ain't got it in him to keep a job for six months."

"The last job wasn't--"

"Right now in this highway-robbery hotel you got me into, I got to pay your board for you--if you want five thousand dollars from me you got to get rid of me some way, for my insurance policy is all I can say. And sometimes I wish you would--easier for me it would be."

"Julius!"

His son crumpled his napkin and tossed it toward the center of the table. His soft, moist lips were twisted in anger, and his voice, under cover of a whisper, trembled with that same anger.

"For what little board you've paid for me I can't hear about it no more. I'll go out and--"

"Sh-h-h, Izzy-'sh-h-h, papa, all over the dining-room they can hear you, 'sh-h-h!"

"Home I ain't never denied my children--open doors they get always in my house but in a highway-robbery hotel, where I can't afford--"

"We got the cheapest family rates here. Such rates we get here, children, and highway robbery your father calls it!"

"Five months we been in the city, and three months already a empty house standing out there waiting, and nothing from it coming in. A house I love like my life, a house what me and your mamma wish we was back in every minute of the day!"

"I only said, Julius, for myself I like my little home best, but--"

"I ain't got the strength for the street-car ride no more. I ain't got appetite for this sloppy American food no more. I can't breathe no more in that coop up-stairs. Right now you should know how my feet hurt for slippers; a collar I got to wear to supper when like a knife it cuts me. I can't afford this. I got such troubles with business I only wish for one day you should have 'em. I want my little house, my porch, my vines, and my chickens. I want my comforts. My son ain't my boss."

Isadore pushed back from the table, his jaw low and sullen.

"I ain't going to sit through a meal and be abused like--like I was a--"

"You ain't got to sit; stand up, then."

"Izzy--for God's sakes, Izzy, the people! Julius, so help me if I come down to a meal with you again. Look, Julius, for God's sake--the Teitlebaums are watching us--the people! Smile at me, Poil, like we was joking. Izzy, if you leave this table now I--I can't stand it! Laugh, Poil, like we was having our little fun among us."

The women exchanged the ghastly simulacrum of a smile, and the meal resumed in silence. Only small beads sprang out on the shiny surface of Mr. Binswanger's head like dewdrops on the glossy surface of leaves, and twice his fork slipped and clattered from his hand.

"So excited you get right away, Julius. Nervous as a cat you are."

"I--I ain't got the strength no more, Becky. Pink sleeping-tablets I got to take yet to make me sleep. I ain't got the strength."

"Shh-h-h, Julius; don't get excited. In the spring we go home. You don't want, Julius, to spoil everything right this minute. Ain't it enough the way our Poil has come out in these five months? Such a grand time that goil has had this winter. Do you want that the Teitlebaums should know all our business and spoil things?"

"I--I wish sometimes that name I had never heard in my life. In my days a young girl--"

"Shh-h-h, Julius; we won't talk about it now--we change the subject."

"I--"

"Look over there, will you, Poil? Always extras the Teitlebaums have on their table. Paprica, and what is that red stuff? Chili sauce! Such service we don't get. Pink carnations on their table, too. To-morrow at the desk I complain. Our money is just as good as theirs."

Miss Binswanger raised her harried eyes from her plate and smiled at her mother; she was like a dark red rose, trembling, titillating, and with dewy eyes.

"Don't stare so, mamma."

"Izzy, are you going to stay home to-night? One night it won't hurt you. Like you run around nights to dance-halls ain't nothing to be proud of."

"Now start something, mamma, so pa can jump on me again. If Pearlie and Max are going to use the front room this evening, what shall I do? Sit in a corner till he's gone and I can go to bed?"

"I should care if he goes to dance-halls or not. What I say, Becky, don't make no difference to my son. Take how I begged him to hold on his job!"

"If you're done your dessert wait till we get up-stairs, papa. The dining-room knows already enough of our business."

Miss Binswanger pushed back from the table to her feet. Tears rose in a sheer film across her eyes, but she smiled with her lips and led the procession of her family from the gabbling dining-room, her small, dark head held upward by the check-rein of scorched pride and the corner of her tear-dimmed glance for the remote table with the centerpiece of pink carnations.

By what seemed demoniac aforethought the Binswanger three-room suite was rigidly impervious to sunlight, air, and daylight. Its infinitesimal sitting-room, which the jerking backward of a couch-cover transformed into Mr. Isadore Binswanger's bedchamber, afforded a one-window view of a long, narrow shaft which rose ten stories from a square of asphalt courtyard, up from which the heterogeneous fumes of cookery wafted like smoke through a legitimate flue.

Mr. Binswanger dropped into a veteran arm-chair that had long since finished duty in the deluxe suite, and breathed onward through a beard as close-napped as Spanish moss.

He was suddenly old and as withered as an aspen leaf trembling on its rotten stem. Vermiculate cords of veins ran through the flesh like the chirography of pain written in the blue of an indelible pencil; yellow crow's-feet, which rayed outward from his eyes, were deep as claw-prints in damp clay.

"Becky, help me off with my shoes; heavy like lead they feel."

"Poil, unlace your papa's shoes. Since I got to dress for dinner I can't stoop no more."

Miss Binswanger tugged daintily at her father's boots, staggering backward at each pull.

"Ach, go way, Pearlie! Better than that I can do myself."

"See, mamma; nothing suits him."

Mrs. Binswanger regarded her husband's batrachian sallowness with anxious eyes; her large bosom heaved under its showy lace yoke, and her short, dimpled hands twirled at their rings.

"To-night, Julius, if you don't do like the doctor says I telephone him to come. That a man should be such a coward! It don't do you no good to take only one sleeping-tablet; two, he said, is what you need."

"Too much sleeping-powder is what killed old man Knauss."

"Ach, Julius, you heard yourself what Dr. Ellenburg said. Six of the little pink tablets he said it would take to kill a man. How can two of 'em hurt you? Already by the bed I got the box of 'em waiting, Julius, with an orange so they don't even taste."

"It ain't doctors and their *gedinks*, Becky, can do me good. Pink tablets can't make me sleep. I--ach, Becky, I'm tired--tired."

Isadore rose from the couch-bed and punched his head-print out of the cushion.

"Lay here, pa."

"Na, na, I go me to bed. Such a thing full of lumps don't rest me like a sofa at home. Na, I go me to bed, Becky."

Isadore relaxed to the couch once more, pillow'd his head on interlaced hands, yawned to the ceiling, blew two columns of cigarette-smoke through his nostrils, and watched them curl upward.

"This ain't so worse, pa."

"I go me to bed."

"For a little while, Julius, can't you stay up? At nine o'clock comes Max to see Poil. I always say a young man thinks more of a young girl when her parents stay in the room a minute."

Isadore fitted his thumbs in his waistcoat armholes and flung one reclining limb over the other.

"What Max Teitlebaum thinks of Pearlie I already know. To-day he invited me to lunch with him."

"Izzy!"

"Izzy! Why you been so close-mouthed?"

Mrs. Binswanger threw her short, heavy arm full length across the table-top and leaned toward her son, so that the table-lamp lighted her face with its generous scallop of chin and exacerbated the concern in her eyes.

"You had lunch to-day with Max Teitlebaum, and about Poil you talked!"

"That's what I said."

Miss Binswanger leaned forward in her low rocker, suddenly pink as each word had been a fillip to her blood, and a faint terra-cotta ran under the olive of her skin, lighting it.

"Like--fun--you--did!"

"All right then, missy, I'm lyin', and won't say no more."

"I didn't mean it, Izzy!"

"Izzy, tell your sister what he said."

"Well, right to my face she contradicts me."

"Please, Izzy!"

"Well, he--he likes you, all righty--"

"Did he say that about me, honest, Izz?"

Her breath came sweet as thyme between her open lips, and her eyes could not meet her mother's gaze, which burned against her lids.

"See, Poil! Wake up a minute, papa, and listen. When I mentioned Max Teitlebaum, papa, you always said a grand boy like one of the Teitlebaum boys, with such prospects, ain't got no time for a goil like our Poil. Always I told you that you got to work up the appetite. See, papa, how things work out! See, Poil! What else did he have to say, Izzy--he likes her, eh?"

Isadore turned on his side and flecked a rim of ash off his cigarette with a manicured forefinger.

"Don't get excited too soon, ma. He didn't come out plain and say anything, but I guess a boy like Max Teitlebaum thinks we don't need a brick house to fall on us."

"What you mean, Izzy?"

"What I mean? Say, ain't it as plain as the nose on your face? You don't need two brick houses to fall on you, do you?"

Mrs. Binswanger admitted to a mental phthisis, and threw out her hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"Believe me, Izzy, maybe I am dumb. So bad my head works when your papa worries me, but what you mean I don't know."

"Me neither, Izzy!"

"Say, there ain't much to tell. He likes Pearlie--that much he wasn't bashful to me about. He likes Pearlie, and he wants

to go in the general store and ladies' furnishing goods business. Just clothing like his father's store he hates. Why should he stay in a business, he says, that is already built up? His two married brothers, he says, is enough with his father in the one business."

"Such an ambitious boy always anxious to do for hisself. I wish, Izzy, you had some of his ambitions. You hear, Poil, in the same business as papa he wants to go?"

Mrs. Binswanger rocked complacently, a smile crawled across her lips, and she nodded rhythmically to the tilting of her rocking-chair, her eyes closed in the pleasant phantasmagoria of a dream.

Mr. Binswanger slumped lower in his chair.

"A good head for business that Max Teitlebaum has on him. Like your mamma says, Izzy, you should have one just half so good."

"There you go again, pa, pickin', pickin'! If you'd give a fellow a start and lend him a little capital--I'd have some ambition, too, and start for myself."

Mr. Binswanger leaped forward full stretch, as a jetty of flame shoots through a stream of oil.

"For yourself! On what? From where would I get it? Cut it out from my heart? Two months already I begged you to come out by me in the store and see if you can't help start something to get back the trade--How we need young blood in the store to get--"

"Aw, I--"

"Five thousand dollars I give you for to lose in the ladies' ready-to-wear. Another white elephant we need in the family yet. Not five thousand dollars outside my insurance I got to my name, and even if I did have it I wouldn't--"

"Julius!"

"I mean it, so help me! Even if I did have it, not a cent to a boy what don't listen to his old father."

"For God's sakes, pa, quit your hollering; if you ain't got it to your name I'm sorry for Pearlie."

"For me?"

"You think, pa, a boy like Max Teitlebaum, a boy that banker Finburg's daughter is crazy after, is getting married only because you got a nice daughter?"

"What do you mean, Izzy?"

"The woods are full of'em just as nice. I didn't need no brick house to fall on me to-day at lunch. He didn't come right out and say nothing, but when he said he wanted to get in a business he could build up, right away I seen what he meant."

"What?"

"Sure I seen it. I guess his father gives him six or seven thousand dollars to get his start, and just so much he wants from the girl's side. He can get it easy, too. If-if you'd fork over, pa, I-him and I could start maybe together and--"

"You--you--"

"Your papa, Izzy, can do for his girl just like the best can do for theirs Julius, can't you?"

"*Gott in Himmel!* I--I--you--you pack of wolfs, you!"

"Such names you can't call your wife, Julius! Just let me tell you that! Such names you can't call me!"

Anger trembled in Mrs. Binswanger's vocal cords like current running over a wire. But Mr. Binswanger sprang suddenly to his feet and crashed the white knuckles of his clenched fist down on the table with a force that broke the flesh. The red lights of anger lay mirrored in the pool of his eyes like danger lanterns on a dark bridge are reflected in black water.

"Wolfs--wolfs, all of you! You--you--to-night you got me where I am at an end! To-night you got to *know*--I--I can't keep it in no more--you got--to *know* to-night--to-night!"

His voice caught in a tight knot of strangulation; he was dithering and palsied.

"To-night--you--you got to know!"

A sudden trembling took Mrs. Binswanger.

"For God's sakes, know what, Julius--know what?"

"I'm done for! I'm gone under! Till it happened you wouldn't believe me. Two years I seen it coming, two years I been fightin' and fightin'--fightin' it by myself! And now for yourselves you look in the papers two weeks from to-morrow, the first of March, and see--I'm done for--I'm gone under, I--"

"Julius--my God, you--you ain't, Julius, you ain't!"

His voice rose like a gale.

"I'm gone under--I ain't got twenty cents on the dollar. I'm gone, Becky. Beat up! To-morrow two weeks the creditors, they're on me! My last extension expires, and they're on me. I been fightin' and fightin'. Twenty cents on the dollar I can't meet, Becky--I can't, Becky, I can't! I been fightin' and fightin', but I can't, Becky--I--can't! I'm gone!"

"Pa."

"Julius, Julius, for God's sakes, you--you don't mean it, Julius--you--don't--mean it--you're fooling us--Julius!"

Small, cold tears welled to the corners of his eyes.

"I'm gone, Becky--and now he--he wants the shirt off my back--he can have it, God knows. But--but--*ach*, Becky--I--I wish I could have saved *you*--but that a man twice so strong as his father--*ach*, *Gott*, what--what's the use? I'm gone, Becky, gone!"

Mr. Isadore Binswanger swung to his feet and regarded his parent with the dazed eyes of a sleepwalker awakening on a perilous ledge.

"Aw, pa, for--for God's sake, why didn't you tell a fellow? I--we--aw, pa, I--I can knuckle down if I got to. Gee whiz! how was a fellow to know? You--you been cuttin' up about everything since--since we was kids; aw, pa--please--gimme a chance, pa, I can knuckle down--pa--pa!"

He approached the racked form of his father as if he would throw himself a stepping-stone at his feet, and then because his voice stuck in his throat and ached until the tears sprang to his eyes he turned suddenly and went out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

The echo hung for a moment.

Miss Binswanger lay whitely in her chair, weakened as if the blood had flowed out of her heart. From the granitoid square at the base of the air-shaft came the rattle of after-dinner dishes and the babble of dialect. Mr. Binswanger wept the tears of physical weakness.

"I--I'm gone, Becky. What you want for Poil I can't do. I'm gone under. We got to start over again. It was the interurban done it, Becky. I needed new capital to meet the new competition. I--I could have stood up under it then, Becky, but--but--"

"*Ach*, my husband--for myself I don't care. *Ach*, my husband."

"I--I'm gone, Becky--gone."

He rose to his feet and shambled feebly to his bedroom, his fingers feeling of the furniture for support, and his breath coming in the long wheezes of dry tears. And in the cradle of her mother's arms Miss Binswanger wept the hot tears of black despair; they seeped through the showy lace yoke and scalded her mother's heart.

"Oh, my baby! *Ach*, my husband! A good man like him, a good man like him!"

"Don't cry, mamma, don't--cry."

"Nothing he ever refused me, and now when we should be able to do for our children and--"

"Don't cry, mamma, don't cry."

"If--if he had the money--for a boy like Max--he'd give it, Poil. Such a good husband--such--*ach*, I go me in to papa now--poor papa. I've been bad, Poil; we must make it up to him; we--"

"Sh-h-h!"

"We got to start over again, Poil--to the bone I'll work my fingers, I--"

"Shh-h-h, mamma,'sh-h-h--somebody's knocking."

They raised their tear-ravaged faces in the attitude of listening, their eyes salt-bitten and glazed.

"It's--it's Izzy, baby. See how sorry he gets right away. He ain't a bad boy, Poil, only always I've spoilt him. Come in, my boy--come in, and go in to your papa."

The door swung open and fanned backward the stale air in a sharp gust, and the women sprang apart mechanically as automatons, the sagging, open-mouthed vacuity of surprise on Mrs. Binswanger's face, the tears still wet on her daughter's cheeks and lying lightly on her lashes like dew.

"Mr. Teitlebaum."

"Max!"

Mr. Teitlebaum hesitated at the threshold, the flavor of his amorous spirit tasty on his lips and curving them into a smile.

"That's my name! Hello, Pearlie girlie! How-dye-do, Mrs. Binswanger--what what--"

He regarded them with dark, quiet eyes, the quick red of embarrassment running high in his face and under his tight-fitting cap of close-nap black hair.

"Ah, excuse me; I might have known. I--I'm too early. Like my mother says, I was in such a hurry to--to get back here again I--I nearly got out and pushed the Subway--I--you must excuse me. I--"

"No, no; sit down, Mr. Teitlebaum. Pearlie ain't feelin' so well this evening; she's all right now, though. Such a cold she's got, ain't you, Poil?"

"Yes--yes. Such a cold I got. Sit--sit down, Max."

He regarded her with the rims of his eyes stretched wide in anxiety.

"Down at supper so well you looked, Pearlie; I says to my mother, like a flower you looked."

A fog of tears rose sheer before her.

"Her papa, Mr. Teitlebaum, he ain't so well, neither. Just now he went to bed, and he--he said to you I should give his excuses."

"So! Ain't that too bad, now!"

"Sit down, Max, there, next to mamma."

He leaned across the table toward the little huddle of her figure, the gentle villanelle of his emotions writ frankly across his features.

"Pearlie--"

"She'll be all right in a minute, Mr. Teitlebaum--like her papa she is, always so afraid of a little sickness."

"Pearlie, ain't you going to look at me?"

She sprang from his light hand on her shoulder, and the tears grew to little globules, trembled, fell. Then a sudden rod of resolution straightened her back.

"We--I been lying to you, Max; I ain't--sick!"

"Poil!"

"I--I think I know, little Pearlie!"

"Poil!"

"No, no; it's best we tell the truth, mamma."

"Ya, ya. Oh, my--"

"We--we're in big trouble, Max. Business trouble. The store, ever--ever since the traction--it ain't been the same."

"I know, little Pearlie. I--"

"Wait a minute, Max. We--we ain't what you maybe think we are. To-morrow two weeks we got to meet creditors and extension notes. We can't pay with even twenty cents on the dollar. We're gone under, Max!"

"I--"

"We ain't got it to meet them with. Papa--if a man like papa couldn't make it go nobody could--"

"Such a man, Mr. Teitlebaum, so honest, so--"

"Shh-h-h, mamma."

"It's our--my fault, Max. He was afraid even last year, but I--even then I was the one that wanted the expense of the city. Mamma didn't want it--he didn't--it--was me--I--I--"

"My fault, too, Poil--ach, Gott, my fault! How I drove him! How I drove him!"

"We--we got to go back home, Max. We're going back and help him to begin over again. We--we been driving him like a pack of wolves. He never could refuse nobody nothing. If he thought mamma wanted the moon up he was ready to go for it; even when we was kids he--"

"Ach, my husband, such a good provider he's always been! Such a husband!"

"Always we got our way out of him. But to-night--to-night, Max, right here in this chair all *little* he looked all of a sudden. So little! His back all crooked and all tired and--and I done it, Max--I ain't what you think I am--oh, God, I done it!"

"Ach, my--"

"Don't cry, mamma. 'Sh-h-h-h! Ain't you ashamed, with Mr. Teitlebaum standing right here? You must excuse her, Max, so terrible upset she is. 'Sh-h-h-h, mamma--'sh-h-h-h! We're going back home and begin over again. 'Sh-h-h-h! You won't have to dress for supper no more like you hate. We'll be home in time for your strawberry-preserves season, mamma, and rhubarb stew out of the garden, like papa loves. 'Sh-h-h-h! You must excuse her, Max--you must excuse me, too, to-night--you--come some other time--please."

"Pearlie!" He came closer to the circle of light, and his large features came out boldly. "Pearlie, don't you cry neither, little girl--"

"I--I ain't."

"All what you tell me I know already."

"Max!"

"Mr. Teitlebaum!"

"You must excuse me, Mrs. Binswanger, but in nearly the same line of business news like that travels faster than you think. Only to-day I heard for sure--how--shaky things stand. You got my sympathies, Mrs. Binswanger, but--but such a failure don't need to happen."

Mrs. Binswanger clutched two hands around a throat too dry to swallow.

"He can't stand it. He isn't strong enough. It will kill him. Always so honest to the last penny he's been, Mr. Teitlebaum, but never when he used to complain would I believe him. Always a great one for a poor mouth he was, Mr. Teitlebaum, even when he had it. So plain he always was, and now I--I've broke him--I--I--"

"'Sh-h-h-h, mamma! Do you want papa should hear you in the next room? 'Sh-h-h-h! Please, you must excuse her, Max!"

"Pearlie"--he placed his hand lightly on her shoulder--"Pearlie--Mrs. Binswanger, you must excuse me, too, but I got to say it--while--while I got the courage. Can't you guess it, little Pearlie? I'm in love with you. I'm in love with you, Pearlie, since the first month you came to this hotel to live."

"Max!"

"Ach, Gott!"

"I only got this to say to you: I love you, little Pearlie. To-day, when I heard the news, I was sorry, Pearlie, and--and glad, too. It made things look easier for me. Right away I invited Izzy to lunch so like a school-boy I could hint. I--two years I been wanting to get out of the store, Pearlie, where there ain't a chance for me to build up nothing. Like I told Izzy to-day, I want to find a run-down business that needs building up where I can accomplish things."

"Max!"

"I wanted him to know what I meant, but like--like a school-boy so mixed up I got. Eight thousand dollars I got laying for a opening. This failure--this failure don't need to happen, Pearlie. With new capital and new blood we don't need to be afraid of tractions and competitions--with me and Izzy, and my eight thousand dollars put in out there, we--we--but this ain't no time to talk business. I--you must excuse me, Mrs. Binswanger, but--but--"

"Poil, my baby! Max!"

"I love you, Pearlie girlie. Ever since we been in the same hotel together, when I seen you every day fresh like a flower and so fine, I--I been heels over head in love with you, Pearlie. You should know how my father and my married brothers tease me. I--I love you, Pearlie--"

She relaxed to his approaching arms, and let her head fall back to his shoulder so that her face, upturned to his, was like a dark flower, and he kissed her where the tears lay wet on her petal-smooth cheeks and on her lips that trembled.

"Max!"

"My little girlie!"

Mrs. Binswanger groped through tear-blinded eyes.

"This--this--ain't no place for a--old woman, children--this--this--*ach*, what I'm sayin' I don't know! Like in a dream I feel!"

"Me, too, mamma; me, too. Like a dream. Ah, Max!"

"I tiptoe in and surprise papa, children. I surprise papa. *Ach*, my children, my children, like in a dream I feel."

She smiled at them with the tears streaming from her face like rain down a window-pane, opened the door to the room adjoining gently, and closed it more gently behind her. Her face was bathed in a peace that swam deep in her eyes like reflected moonlight trailing down on a lagoon, her lips trembled in the hysteria of too many emotions. She held the silence for a moment, and remained with her wide back to the door, peering across the dim-lit room at the curve-backed outline of her husband's figure, hunched in a sitting posture on the side of the bed.

Beside him on the white coverlet a green tin box with a convex top like a miniature trunk lay on one end, its contents, bits of old-fashioned jewelry, and a folded blue document with a splashy red seal, scattered about the bed.

She could hear him wheeze out the moany, long-drawn breaths that characterized his sleepless nights, his face the color of old ivory, wry and etched in the agony of carrying his trembling palm closer, closer to his mouth.

Suddenly Mrs. Binswanger cried out, a cry that was born in the unexplored regions of her heart, wild, primordial, full of terror.

It was as if fear had churned her blood too thick to flow, and through her paralysis tore the spasm of a half-articulate shriek.

"Jule--Jule-ijs--Jule-ijs!"

His hand jerked from his lips reflexly, so that the six small pink tablets in the trembling palm rolled to the corners of the room. His blood-driven face fell backward against the pillow, and he relaxed frankly into short, dry sobs, hollow and hacking like the coughing of a cat. His feet lay in the little heap of jewelry and across the crumpled insurance policy.

"Becky--it--it's all what I--I could do--it's--it--"

"Oh, my God! Oh, my God!"

She dragged her trembling limbs across the room to his side. She held him to her so close that the showy lace yoke transformed its imprint from her bosom to the flesh of his cheek. She could feel his sobs of hysteria beating against her breast, and her own tears flowed.

They racked her like a storm tearing on the mad wings of a gale; they scalded down her cheeks into the furrows of

her neck. She held him tight in the madness of panic and exultation, and his arm crept around her wide waist, and his tired head relaxed to her breast, and her hands were locked tight about him and would not let him go.

"We--we're going *home*, Julius--we--we're going home."

"Ya, ya, Becky, it's--it's all right. Ya, ya, Becky."

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SUPERMAN

THE canker of the city is loneliness. It flourishes--an insidious paradox--where men meet nose to nose in Subway rushes and live layer on layer in thousand-tenant tenement houses. It thrives in three-dollars-a-week fourth-floor back rooms, so thinly partitioned that the crumple of the rejection-slip and the sobs of the class poetess from Molino, Missouri, percolate to the four-dollars-a-week fourth-floor front and fuddle the piano salesman's evening game of solitaire. It is a malignant parasite, which eats through the thin walls of hall bedrooms and the thick walls of gold bedrooms, and eats out the hearts it finds there, leaving them black and empty, like untenanted houses.

Sometimes love sees the To Let sign, hangs white Swiss curtains at the window, paints the shutters green, plants a bed of red geraniums in the front yard, and moves in. Again, no tenant applies; the house mildews with the damp of its own emptiness; children run when they pass it after dark; and the threshold decays. The heart must be tenanted or it falls out of repair and rots. Doctors called in the watches of the night to resuscitate such hearts climb out of bed reluctantly. It is a malady beyond the ken of the stethoscope.

One such heart beat in a woman's breast so rapidly that it crowded out her breath; and she pushed the cotton coverlet back from her bosom, rose to her elbow, and leaned out beyond her bed into the darkness of the room.

"Jimmie? Essie? That you, Jimmie?"

The thumping of her heart answered her, and the loud ticking of a clock that was inaudible during the day suddenly filled the third-floor rear room of the third-floor rear apartment. The continual din of the street slumped to the intermittent din of late evening; the last graphophone in the building observed the nine-o'clock silence clause of the lease at something after ten, and scratched its last syncopated dance theme into the tired recording disk of the last tired brain. An upholstered chair, sunk in the room's pool of darkness, trembled on its own tautened springs, and the woman trembled of that same tautness and leaned farther out.

"Who's there? That you, Jimmie?"

Tick-tock-tick-tock-tick-tock!

She huddled the coverlet up under her chin and lay back on her pillow, but with her body so rigid that only half her weight relaxed to the mattress; and behind her tight-closed eyes flaming wheels revolved against the lids. Tears ran backward toward her ears like spectacle-frames and soaked into the pillow, a mouse with a thousand feet scurried between the walls.

"Essie? Jimmie, that you?"

Tick-tock-tick-tock-tick-tock!

More tears leaked out from her closed eyes and found their way to her mouth, so that she could taste their salt. Then for a slight moment she dozed, with her body at full stretch and hardly raising the coverlet, and her thin cheek cupped in the palm of her thin hand. The mouse scurried in a light rain of falling plaster, and she woke with her pulse pounding in her ears.

"Jimmie? Jimmie? Who's there?"

Tick-tock-tick-tock-tick-tock-tick-tock!

Sobs trembled through her and set the bed-springs vibrating, and she buried her head under her flat pillow and fell to counting the immemorial procession of phantom sheep that graze the black grasses of the Land of Wakeful Hours and

lead their sleepless shepherds through the long, long, long pastures of the night.

"Three hundred 'n' five; three hundred 'n' six; three hundred 'n' seven; three hundred 'n'--Jimmie?"

A key scratched at the outer lock, and she sprang two-thirds from the bed, dragging the coverlet from its moorings.

"Jimmie, that you?"

"Sure, ma! 'Smatter?"

She relaxed as though her muscles had suddenly snapped, her tense toes and fingers uncurled, and the blood flowed back.

"I--Nothin', Jimmie; I was just wondering if that was you."

"No, ma; it ain't me--it's my valet coming home from a dance at his Pressing Club. You ain't sick, are you, ma?"

"No. What time is it, Jimmie? It's so dark."

"You been havin' one of your spells again, ma?"

"No, no, Jimmie."

"Didn't you promise to keep a light going?"

"I'm all right."

"Ouch! Geewhillikins, ma, if you'd burn half a dime's worth of gas till me and Essie get home from work nights we'd save it in wear and tear on our shins. I ain't got no more hips left than a snake."

"It's a waste, Jimmie boy; gas comes so high."

"You should worry, ma! Watch me light 'er up!"

"Be careful in there, Jimmie! Stand on a chair. I got a little supper spread out on the table for Essie and her friend. You take a sandwich yourself--"

"Forty cents in tips to-day, ma."

"Forty cents!"

"Yeh; and a dame in Seventieth Street gimme a quarter and hugged the daylights out of me till my brass buttons made holes in me and cried brineys all over the telegram, and made me read it out loud twice, once for each ear: 'Unhurt, Sweetheart, and homeward bound--Bill.' Can you beat it? Five cents a word!"

"Jimmie, wasn't you glad to carry her a message like that?"

"It's a paying business, ma, if you're lucky enough to deal only in good news."

A chair squealed on its castors, a patch of light sprang through the transom, and the chocolate-ocher bedroom and its chocolate-ocher furniture emerged into a chocolate-ocher half-light.

"Jimmie?"

"Huh?"

"I'm--I wish--Oh, nothin'!"

"Ain't you feelin' right, in there, ma?"

"Yes, Jimmie; but--but come in and talk to your old mother awhile, my boy."

"Surest thing you know! Say, these are some sandwiches! You must 'a' struck pay-dirt in your sardine-mine, ma."

"They're for her gen'lman friend, Jimmie."

The door flung open and threw an island of light pat on the bed. In the gauzy stream the face on the pillow, with the skin drawn over the cheeks tight as a vellum on a snare-drum, was vague as a head by Carriere after he had begun to paint through the sad film of his growing blindness.

"Jimmie, my boy!"

"Hello, ma!"

"Ain't your cheeks cold, though, Jimmie? It's right sharp out, ain't it? And Essie in her thin coat! You--you're a little late to-night, ain't you, Jimmie?"

He drew his loose-jointed figure up from over the bedside; and his features, half-formed as a sculptor's head just emerging from the marble, took on the easy petulance of youth, and he wiped the moist lips' print off his downy cheek with the back of his hand.

"Ah, there you go again! You been layin' here frettin' and countin' the minutes again, ain't you? Gee, it makes a fellow sore when he just can't get home no sooner!"

"No, no, Jimmie; I been layin' here sleepin' sound ever since I went to bed. I woke up for the first time just now. I'm all right, Jimmie, only--only--"

"Honest, ma, you ought to ask the company to put me in short-pants uniform, day duty, carrying telegrams of the day's catechism to Sunday-school classes."

"I--Don't fuss at me, Jimmie! I--I guess I must 'a' had one of them smothering spells, and I didn't wait up for Essie and Joe to-night. I'm all right now, Jimmie--all right."

He placed his heavy hand on her brow in half-understanding sympathy.

"Geewhillikins, why don't you tell a fellow? You want some of that black medicine, ma. You--gee!--you ain't lookin' kinda blue-like round the gills, are you? Old man Gibbs said we should send for him right away if--"

"No, no, Jimmie; I'm all right now."

"Look! I brought you a carnation one of the operators gimme--one swell little queen, too. You want some of that black medicine, ma?"

"I'm all right now, Jimmie. It was just earlier in the evening I kinda had a spell. Ain't that pink pretty, though! Here, put it in the glass, and gimme a French kiss. Always ashamed like a big baby when it comes to kissin', ain't you? Ashamed to even kiss your old ma!"

"Aw!" He shuffled his feet and bent over her, with the red mounting above the gold collar of his uniform.

"And such a mamma-boy you used to be before you had to get out and hustle--such a mamma-boy, and now ashamed to give your old ma a kiss!"

"Ashamed nothin'! Here, ma, I'll smooth your hair for you the wrong way like Essie used to do when you came home from the store dead after the semiannual clearings."

"No, no, Jimmie; these days I ain't got no more hair left to smooth."

"You look good to me."

"Aw, Jimmie, quit stringing your old ma. How can a stack o' bones look good to anybody?"

"You do."

"Your papa used to say so, too, Jimmie; but in them days my hair was natural curly--little cute, springy curls like Essie's. The first day he seen me he fell for 'em; and the night before he died, Jimmie, with you and Essie asleep in your folding-cribs and me little thinkin' that the next week I'd be back in the department clerking again, he took me in his arms and--"

"Yes, yes; I know, ma--but didn't old man Gibbs say not to get excited? Lay back and don't talk, ma. I can feel your heart beatin' way down in your hands."

"You're all tired out, ain't you, Jimmie?--too tired to listen to my talk; but you're going to wait up for your sister's young man to-night, ain't you, my boy? Go wet your hair and smooth it down. You'll wanna see him, Jimmie."

"Fine chance."

"Sure he's coming to-night, Jimmie. I got their supper all waitin'; and, see, there's my flowered wrapper at the foot of the bed, so I can get up and go in when--"

"Aw, cut out the comedy, ma! She ain't comin' straight home after the show any more'n a crooked road; and if she

does he ain't coming with her."

"Jimmie, she promised sure to-night."

"Didn't she promise last night and the night before and the night before that?"

"But this afternoon when she left for the matinee, Jimmie, I wasn't feelin' so well, and she promised so sure."

"Them girl ushers down there is too lively a bunch for her, ma. Ushin' in a theayter is next to bein' in the chorus--only--"

"Jimmie!"

"Sure it is--only it ain't so good one way, and it ain't so bad another. This new-fangled girl ushin' gets my goat, anyways. It ain't doin' her any good."

"Oh, Gawd, Jimmie, don't I know it? I hated to see her take it--her so little and cute and pretty and all! Night-work ain't nothin' for our Essie."

"Sure it ain't!"

"But what could we do, Jimmie? After I gave out, her six a week in the notions wasn't a drop in the bucket. What else could we do, Jimmie?"

"Just you wait, ma! This time next year life'll be one long ice-cream soda for you and her. Wait till my dynamo gets to charging like I want her to--I'll be runnin' this whole shebang with a bang!"

"You're a good boy, Jimmie; but a kid of seventeen ain't expected to have shoulders for three."

"Just the samey, I showed a draft of my dynamo to the head operator, ma, and he's comin' up Sunday to have a look. Leave it here on the table just like it is, ma. You'll be ridin' in your Birdsong self-charging electric automobile yet!"

She let her fingers wander up and down his cheek and across his shoulders and into his uneven nappy hair.

"Poor Jimmie! If only you had the trainin'! Miss Maisie was up from the store to-day in her noon-hour and seen it standing here next to my bed; and she thought it was such a pretty-lookin' dynamo, with its copper wires and all."

"You didn't let her--"

"No--honest, Jimmie! See--it ain't been touched; I didn't even let her go near the table's edge. She wanted to know when I was comin' back to the store--she says the corsets have run down since they got the new head saleslady, Jimmie."

"If I'd 'a' been here I'd 'a' told her you ain't going back."

"Sometimes I--I think I ain't, neither, Jimmie."

"What?"

"Nothin'."

"When you get well, ma, then I--"

"Then I'm going back on my job, Jimmie. Eighteen years--not countin' the three years your papa lived--at doing one thing sort of makes you married to it. I got my heart as set as always, Jimmie, on gettin' you in at the Electric Training School next door. If I hadn't broke down--"

"Nix for mine, ma!"

"Every day I sit by the window, Jimmie, and see the young engineers and electricians who board there goin' to work; and it breaks my heart to think of you, with your mind for inventions, runnin' the streets--a messenger boy--just when I was beginnin' to get where I could do for you."

"Aw, cut that, ma! Don't I work round on my dynamo every morning till I go on duty? Wouldn't I look swell with an electricity book under my arm? I'd feel like Battling John drinking tea out of an egg-shell."

"The trainin'-school's the place for you, Jimmie. If you'd only take the dynamo over to the superintendent and show him where you're stuck he'd help you, Jimmie. I been beggin' you so long, and if only you wasn't so stubborn!"

"I ain't got the nerve buttin' in over there; it's for fellows who got swell jobs already."

"There's classes for boys, too, Jimmie; the janitor told me. Just go to-morrow and show your dynamo. It won't hurt nothin', and maybe they'll know just what the trouble is--it's only a little thing, Jimmie--three times in succession it worked last night, didn't it? It won't hurt to go, Jimmie--just to go and show it."

"Nix; I ain't got the nerve. You just wait! I ain't got the trainin'; but didn't I sell my double lens the day after I got the patent? Didn't I make that twenty-five just like battin' your eye?"

"The janitor says you was robbed in it, Jimmie."

"We should worry! Didn't we get a rockin'-chair and a string of beads and a tool-chest out of it?"

"It ain't you worries me so much, Jimmie. Here, put your head here on the pillow next to me, Jimmie. My heart's actin' up to-night. It ain't you worries me you're a man like your papa was and can hit back; but Essie--if only Essie--"

"You don't handle her right, ma; you're too easy-going with her. Since she went on her new job she's gettin' too gay--too gay!"

"Jimmie!"

"Sure she is. Like I told her last night when she came in all hours from dancing--if she didn't take that war-paint off her face I'd get her in a corner and rub it off till--"

"I've begged her and begged her, Jimmie, just as hard as I ever begged you about the dynamo, to wash her face of it. It's eatin' me, Jimmie--eatin' me! There wasn't a girl in the store that didn't envy that girl her complexion. Oh, Gawd, Jimmie, it ain't paint alone--it's where it can lead to."

"She needs an old-time spankin'!"

"Them girls down at the theayter where she works put them ideas in her head. It's only of late with her, Jimmie. Wasn't she like a little baby when I had her across from me in the notions?"

"She's gotta keep her face clean or I'll--"

"She needs somebody strong like her papa was to handle her, Jimmie. She's stubborn in ways, like you, and needs somebody older, my boy--somebody strong that can handle her and love her all at once."

"She's gotta quit sneakin' home at all hours. She don't pay no attention to me; but she's gotta quit or I--I'll go down and smash up that whole theayter crowd of'em!"

"If she'd 'a' had a father to grow up under it would 'a' been different. He was one of the strongest men in the power-house, Jimmie. Mechanics make strong men, my boy, and that's why my heart's set on you, Jimmie, takin' up where he left off."

"It's that job of hers, ma; it ain't no hang-out for her down there round the lights. She's gettin' too gay. I'll smash that ticket-speculator to gelatin if he don't show up or leave her alone!"

"Sh-h-h, Jimmie! He's her young man; she says he's a upright and honorable young man with intentions."

"Where she hidin' him, then?"

"He--he's bashful about comin', Jimmie. Last night on her knees right here by this bed she told me, Jimmie, with her eyes like saucers, that he's said everything but come right out and ask her."

"What's the matter? Is he tongue-tied?"

"A fine fellow, she says, Jimmie--up to date as a new dime, makin' from thirty to forty a week. Get that, Jimmie? Gawd--forty a week! On forty a week, Jimmie, what they could do for themselves and for you!"

"I wanna look him over first. I knew a fellow in that game got forty a week and ninety days once, too."

"Jimmie!"

"There's a bunch of speculators used to hang round the Forty-second Street telegraph office, with one eye always on the cop and the other always open for rubes. They was all hunchbacks from dodging the law."

"He ain't one of them kind, Jimmie."

"Then why don't he have a roof over his head instead of doing sidewalk business?"

"Ticket-speculatin' is like any other business, Essie says. Profit is profit, whether you make it on a sheet of music, a washboard, or a theayter ticket."

"Then why don't he show his face round here, instead of runnin' her round night after night when she ought to be home sleepin'?"

"Gawd, Jimmie! I don't know, except what she says. I just feel like I couldn't stand her not bringing him to-night--like--like I couldn't stand it, Jimmie."

"Lay easy there, ma."

"They're young, I guess, and gotta have life; but I lay here with it in front of me all night, long after she gets home and is sleepin' here next to me as light as a daisy. She's so little and pretty, Jimmie."

"I wanna get my glims on him--"

"What, Jimmie?"

"I wanna see him."

"Me, too, Jimmie. I wouldn't care much about anything else if I could see him once; and if he is big and strong like your father was--"

"That gang don't come big and strong. They got big heads and little necks."

"The kind of fellow that would know how to treat you when you got stubborn, and would put his hand on your shoulder and not try to drive you. If he was a man like that, Jimmie, the kind you and Essie needs, I--I'd stop fightin'; I'd fold my hands and say to God: 'Ready! Ready right this minute!'"

"Ready for what, ma?"

"Ready, Jimmie, my boy. Just hands folded and ready--that's all."

"Aw, cut it, can't you, ma? I--ma, quit scarin' a fellow. Quit battin' your eyes like that. Tryin' to flirt with me, ain't you, ma? Quit it, now! Lemme get you some of that black medicine--you're gettin' one of your spells. Lemme run down-stairs and send Lizzie Marks for old man Gibbs?"

"No, no, Jimmie--don't leave me! Hold me, my boy, so I can feel your face. Don't cry, Jimmie; there ain't nothin' to cry about."

"Cut the comedy, ma! I ain't cryin'; I'm sweatin'."

"Jimmie, are--you--there? I feel so--so heavy."

"Sure I am, ma--right here, holding you in my arms. Feel! There's the scar where old Gibbs sewed my face the time I got hit with a bat--feel, ma--see, it's me."

"What's that, Jimmie, on the foot of the bed movin'?"

"See, ma--that's your flowered glad-rag. You're go-goin' to put it on when Essie and her gen'l'man friend come in. It ain't movin'; I shoved it."

"Don't muss it, Jimmie."

"No. See, I smoothed out its tail--it's a sash for you, ma."

"Jimmie, you won't leave me? It gets so dark and--the mice--"

"You couldn't pry me away with a crowbar, ma! I'll hold you till you yell leggo. Lemme go for old Gibbs, ma; you're breathing heavy as a pump."

"No, no, Jimmie; don't leave me."

"Sure I won't; but you're all twitchin' and jumpin', ma. Just leave me run down and send Lizzie Marks for him."

"No, no, Jimmie; I'm all right."

"Sure, ma? You--you're actin' up so funny."

"It ain't nothin'--only I'm an old woman, Jimmie. All of a sudden I got old and broke. It ain't the same in the department, Jimmie, with Essie gone from the notions across the aisle. Always when we were overstocked in the corsets she--she--Essie--"

"Aw, ma, you ain't talkin' straight. Lemme have old man Gibbs."

"I'm talking straight, Jimmie. Ain't I layin' right here in your arms and ain't my hair caught round one of your brass buttons?--quit pullin', Jimmie! Essie's hair is so bright, Jimmie. I can see it shinin' in the dark when she's sleepin'!"

"Some hair the kid's got! Remember the night you took me and her to--"

""Sh-h-h-h! Ain't that them coming? Ain't it, Jimmie? I ain't equal to gettin' up, Jimmie. Bring 'em in here and tell--"

"Like fun it's them! Whatta you bet right now they're holding down a table for two at the Palais du Danse? Swell joint!"

"Oh, Gawd, Jimmie!"

"I was kiddin', ma--only kiddin'. Open your eyes, ma. Gwan! Be a sport and open up! Remember, ma, when I was a kid, how I used to make you laff and laff, makin' a noise like a banjo--plunka-plunk-plunk-plunka-plunk?"

"Yes, Jimmie."

"I knew I'd get a laff out of you--plunka-plunk-plunka-plunk!"

"Yes, Jimmie, my boy! Go on! I like to lay here and remember back. Essie was always grabbin' your spoon--I used to slap her little hands and--"

"Ma, open your eyes! Don't go off in one of'em again."

"See, they're open, Jimmie! I can see your gold buttons shinin' and shinin'--I ain't sleepin'; I'm only waitin'."

"She ain't had time to get home yet, ma. They gotta pick up programs and turn in lost articles and all."

"Put your arms round me, Jimmie. I keep slippin' and slippin'."

"Lemme run for old man Gibbs, ma? Please!"

"No, no, Jimmie. Sing like you used to when you was a little kid, Jimmie; I used to laff and laff."

"Plunka-plunk-plunk-plunk!"

""Sh-h-h! There's the chimes--you won't never tell me the right time nights, when I ask you, Jimmie."

"It ain't late, ma."

""Sh-h-h! What time is that? Listen!"

"It's early. Don't you count chimes, ma--it's a sign of snow to count 'em, and Essie's got her thin jacket on. Listen! This is a swell one I know: Plunk! Plunk! Plunk! Plunk!"

""Sh-h-h, Jimmie! One--two--three--four--five--six--seven--eight--nine--ten--"

"See, it ain't late."

"Leven! You can't cheat me; I heard the last one."

"Leven already? Well, whatta you know about that? Them chimes is always ahead of themselves."

"Jimmie, my boy, quit playin' with your old ma."

"They'll be comin' soon now."

"Don't leave me, Jimmie."

"Sure, I won't--see!"

"Jimmie! Jim-mie--"

"Ma! Ma, for Gawd's sakes, open your eyes! Ma darlin'--please--please--"

"Sing, Jimmie, like--a banjo."

"Plunka-plunk-plunka-plunk!"

On that last boom of eleven the Stuyvesant Theater swung its doors outward as the portals of a cuckoo clock fly open on the hour, and women in fur-collared, brocaded coats, which wrapped them to the ankles, and carefully curved smiles that Watteau knew so well and Thackeray knew too well, streamed out into the radium-white flare of Broadway, their delicate fingers resting lightly on the tired arms of tired business men, whose faces were like wood-carving and whose wide white shirt-fronts covered their hearts like slabs.

Almost before the last limousine door had slammed, and the last tired business man had felt the light compelling pressure of the delicate finger-tips on his arm and turned his tired eyes from the white lights to the whiter lights of cafes and gold-leaf hotels, the interior of the Stuyvesant Theater, warm and perfumed as the interior of a jewel-box, blinked into soft darkness. Small figures, stealthy *espions* of the night, padded down thick-carpeted aisles flashing their pocket searchlights now here, now there, folding rows of velvet seats against velvet backs, reaching for discarded programs and seat-checks, gathering up the dainty debris of petals fallen from too-blown roses, an occasional webby handkerchief, an odd glove, a ribbon.

Then the dull-red eyes above the fire-exits blinked out, the sea of twilight deepened, and the small searchlights flashed brighter and whiter, glow-worms in a pit of night.

"For Pete's sakes! Tell Ed to give back them lights; my lamp's burnt out."

"Oh, hurry up, Essie! You girls up there in the balcony would kick if you was walkin' a tight rope stretched between the top stories of two Flatiron Buildings."

"It's easy enough for you to talk down there in the orchestra, Lulu Pope. Carriage shoes don't muss up the place like Subway shoes."

"Gimme the balcony in preference to the orchestra every time."

"What about us girls 'way up here in the chutes? Whatta you say about us, Lulu Pope--playin' handmaids to the gallery gods?"

"Chutes the same. I used to be in the chutes over at the Olympic, and six nights out of the week I carried water up the aisles without a stop. Lookin' each row in the eye, too!"

"Like fun!"

"Sure's my name's Lulu Pope! Me an' a girl named Della Bradenwald used to play Animal or Vegetable Kingdom every entr'acte with the fireman."

"Oh-h-h! Say, Loo, you oughta see what I found up here in Box E!"

"Leave it to Essie Birdsong for a find! What is it this time--the diamond star the blonde queen in Upper E was wearin'?"

"A right-hand, number five and a half--white stitchin'!"

"Can you beat it? And you ain't never had a claim yet at the box-office."

"I knew my luck would break, Lulu. My little brother Jimmie says if you break a comb your luck breaks with it. I broke one this morning. Whatta you bet now I begin to match every one of my five left-hand gloves, without a claim from the office?"

"Lucky kid!"

Conversation curved from gallery to loge box, and from loge to balcony.

"Gee! Look at this amber butterfly! I seen it in her hair when I steered her down the aisle. She must be stuck on something about this show--third time this week, and not on paper, neither."

"Amber, is it, Sadie? I'll trade you for the tortoise-shell one I found in G 4; amber'll go swell with my hair."

"Whatta you bet she claims it?"

"Nix."

"Say, did you hear Wheelan flivver her big scene to-night? I was dozin' in the foyer and she tripped over her cue so hard she woke me up."

"I should say so! I was standing next to the old man, and he let out a line of talk that was some fireworks; he said a super in the mob scene could take her place and beat her at pickin' up cues."

"Ready, Sadie?"

"Yes; wait till I turn in one gent's muffler and a red curl."

"Are you done up there, too, Essie?"

"Yes; but you needn't wait for me, Loo. If you're in a hurry I'll see you down in the locker-room."

Seats slammed; laughter drifted; searchlights danced and flashed out as though suddenly doused with water; and the gold, crystal, velvet, and marble interior of the Stuyvesant Theater suddenly vanished into its imminent wimple of blackness.

In the bare-walled locker-room Miss Essie Birdsong leaned to her reflection in the twelve-inch wavy mirror and ran a fine pencil-line along the curves of her eyebrows.

"Is this right, Loo?"

"Swell! Your eyes look two shades darker."

"Gee!"

Miss Birdsong smiled and leaned closer.

"The girls all out, Loo?"

"Yeh; hurry up and lemme have that mirror, Ess--Harry gets as glum as glue if I keep him waiting."

Miss Pope adjusted a too-small hat with a too-long pheasant's wing cocked at a too-rakish angle on her brass-colored hair, and powdered at her powdered cheek-bones.

"Here--you can have the mirror first, Loo. I--I ain't in a hurry to-night. You and Harry better go on and not wait round for me."

Miss Pope placed her long, bird-like hands on her slim hips and slumped inward at the waist-line; her eyes had the peculiar lambency of the blue flame that plays on the surface of cognac and leaves it cold.

"What's hurtin' you, Ess? The whole week you been makin' this play to dodge me and Harry. If you don't like our company, Doll-doll, me and Harry can manage to worry along somehow."

"Oh, Lulu, it--it ain't that, and you know it."

"You're all alike. Didn't my last chum, Della Bradenwald, do the same thing? I interdooced her to a gen'l'man friend of mine, a slick little doorman for a two-day show, and what did she do? Scat! After the second day it was good-by, Loo-Loo! They went kitin' it off together and dropped me and Harry like parachutes!"

"Loo, darlin', honest, me and Joe just love goin' round dancin' with you and Harry; but--but--"

"Then what's hurtin' you?"

"It's ma again, Loo. She looked like she was ready for one of her spells when I left; she's been worse again these two days, and the doctor says we mustn't get her excited--her heart's bum, Loo."

"Say, I used to have heart failure myself, and I know a swell cure--Hartley's Heart's Ease. Honest, when I was over at the Olympic I used to go dead like a tire. Lend me your eyestick, Ess."

"You'll laff, Loo; but she's daffy for me and Joe to come home after the show; she's never seen him at all, and--"

"Oh, Gawd, I gotta flashlight of Joe!"

"When ma and I was clerkin' the girls and fellows always used to come to our flat, Loo; and, say, for fun! Ma was as

lively as any of us in those days; and we'd have sardine sandwiches, and my kid brother used to imitate all kinds of music and actors; and we used to laff and laff until they'd knock on the ceiling from up-stairs and ma'd pack the whole lot of'em home. Why don't you and Harry come up to-night, too, Loo? And we'll have a little doin's."

"Nothin' doin', Beauty. There's a Free-for-All Tango Contest round at the Poppy Garden to-night; and, believe me, I wouldn't mind winning that pink ivory manicure set. All I gotta ask is one thing, Ess! Bring me a snapshot of Joe doing the fireside act!"

The glaze of unshed tears sprang over Miss Birdsong's eyes like gauzy clouds across a summer sky.

"I--that's just it, Loo. I can't get him to come. Sometimes I think maybe it's just because he's stringing me along; and I--he--he was your friend first, Loo. Ain't he ever said anything to you about me--about--aw, you know what I mean, Loo?"

"He's hipped on you, girl. I know Joe Ullman like I know the floor-plan of this theater."

"Honest, Loo, do you think so?"

"Sure! Gawd! I knew Joe when I was making sateen daisies in a artificial-flower loft on Twenty-second Street; and him and my brother was clerkin' in a cigar store on Twenty-third and running a neat little book on the side."

"A book?"

"Yes, dearie--a pretty picture-book."

"Joe never told me."

"He ain't always been the thirty-dollar-a-week kid he is now--take it from me. Just the same, you can thank me for interdoocing you to the sharpest little fellow that's selling tickets on the sidewalks of this great and wicked city."

"I always tell him he ought to save more--taxis and all he has to have, that spendy he is!"

"Sidewalk speculatin' is a good pastime if you're sharp enough; and I always tell Joe he's got a edge on him like a razor."

"Like a razor! Aw, Loo, you talk like he was a barber."

"Sure, he's that sharp! Take Harry now: he's as slick as a watermelon-seed when it comes to pickin' a sheet of music with a whistle in it; but put him in a game like Joe's, with the law cross-eyed from winkin' and frownin' at the same time, and he'd lose his nerve."

"It ain't a game, Loo. Joe says there ain't a reason why a fellow can't sell a theater ticket at a profit, just like Harry sells a sheet of music. Sidewalks are free for all."

"Leave it to Joe to stretch the language like a rubber band. His middle name is Gutta-Percha."

"He was your friend first."

"He is yet, Beauty--even if you have grabbed him. I like him--he's one good sport; but with Joe's gift for tongue-work he could make a jury believe a Bowery jewelry store ought to have a *habeas corpus* for every body it snatches; he could rob a cradle and get a hero medal for it."

"I--sometimes I--I don't know how to take him, Loo. We've been goin' together steady now; and sometimes I think he--he likes me, and sometimes I think he don't."

"Take it from me, you got him going. I never knew him to take a five-evenings-a-week lease on anybody's time."

"Six"

"Six! For all I know, you--you're keepin' things from me. Lemme see your left hand--whatta you blushing for, Beauty? Whatta you blushing for?"

"Aw, Loo!"

"Say, how does this jacket look, Ess? Half them judges over there at the Poppy watch your clothes more'n your feet."

"Swell!"

"Well, is this where me and Harry exit, Beauty?"

"Yeh; you go ahead, Loo. I--I'll tell Joe you and Harry went on ahead to-night."

"I gotta half bottle of Hartley's Heart's Ease at home, Ess. Tell your old lady to have it on me. Don't you worry, kiddo. I used to have heart trouble so bad I'd breathe like a fish at a shore dinner--and look at me now! I'll bring it to-morrow--a tablespoonful before meals."

"Good night, Loo. I'll see you Monday."

"Put on a little more color there, Doll, or you'll never get nothin' out of him. You look as scared as an oyster. Lordy, you can handle him easy! Lemme know what happens. S'long! S'long!"

"Good night, Loo!"

Miss Birdsong brushed at her soft cheeks with the pink tip of a rabbit's foot, and the color sprang out to match the rose-colored sateen facing of her hat. Her lips opened in a faint smile; and after a careful interval she scrambled into her jacket, flung a good-night kiss to the doorman, and hurried through the gloomy foyer.

No sham like the sham of the theater! Its marble facade is classic as a temple, and its dirty gray-brick rear opens out on a cat-infested alley. The perfumes of the auditorium are the fumes of the wings. Thespis wears a custom-made coat of many colors, but his undershirt is sackcloth.

Miss Birdsong stepped out of a gold and mauve hallway, through a grimy side-door, and into an area as black as a pit; and out from its blackest shadows a figure rose to meet her.

"Joe?"

"Yeh; where's Loo and Harry?"

"I dunno; they--they went on."

"Hurry up, Beauty. I ain't so much of a favorite round this theater that I can bask in this sunny spot."

"I didn't mean to keep you waitin' so long, Joe."

"Believe me, you're the foist little girl I ever hung round an usher's exit for."

"Honest, am I, Joe?"

"Surest thing! The stage-door is my pace, and for nothing short of head-liners, neither. I gotta like a girl pretty well to hang round on the wrong side of the footlights for her, sweetness."

"Joe, I--I wish I knew if you was kiddin'!"

"Kiddin' nothin'!"

They emerged into the white shower from a score of arc-lights; and Mr. Joe Ullman, an apotheosis of a classy-clothes tailor's dearest dream, in his brown suit, brown-bordered silk handkerchief nicely apparent, brown derby hat and tan-top shoes, turned his bulldog toes and fox-terrier eyes to the north, where against a fulvous sky the Palais du Danse spelled itself in ruby and emerald incandescents with the carefully planned effect of green moonlight floating in a mist of blood.

"Joe"--she dragged gently at his coat-sleeve, and a warm pink spread out from under the area of rouge--"Joe, you know what you promised for to-night?"

"What, kiddo? The sky's my limit. I'll taxi you till the meter gives out. I'll buy you--"

"You have promised so long, Joe. Come on! Let's go up home to-night. Be a sport, and let's go. Ma's got a midnight supper waitin', and--"

"The doctor says home cookin's bad for me, sweetness."

He cocked his hat slightly askew, stroked a chin as blue as a priest's, and winked down at her.

"Honest, sweetness, I'm going to buy you a phonograph record of 'Home Sweet Home Ain't Sweet Enough for Me'--"

"She's waitin' up for us, Joe; she ain't hardly able to be up, but she's waitin', Joe."

"Ain't I told you I'm going up with you some night when I'm in the humor for it? I feel like a ninety-horse-power

dancer to-night, Doll. Whatta you bet I sold more seats for your show to-night than the box-office? Whatta you bet?"

"Joe--you promised."

"Sure, and I'm going to keep it; but I'm wearin' a celluloid collar to-night, hon, and the fireside ain't no place for me. I wouldn't wanna blow your mamma to smithereens."

"Joe!"

"I wouldn't--honest, sweetness, I wouldn't."

"Joe, comin' to our house ain't like bein' company--honest! When the boys and girls from the store used to come over we'd roll back the carpets, and ma'd play on an old comb and Jimmie'd make a noise like a banjo, and--"

"Hear! Hear! You sound like 'Way Down East' gone into vaudeville."

"Come on up to-night, Joe--like you promised."

"We'll talk it over a little later, sweetness. Midnight ain't no time to call on your best girl's dame. What'll she be thinkin' of us buttin' in there for midnight supper? To-morrow night's Sunday--that'll be more like it."

"She got it waitin' for us, Joe. All week she been fixing every night, and us not comin'. She knows it's the only time we got, Joe. She says she'd rather have us come home after the show than go kiting round like this. Honest, Joe, she's regular sport herself. She used to be the life of her department; the girls used to laff and laff at her cuttings-up. She's achin' to see you, Joe. She knows I we--she don't talk about nothin' else, Joe; and she's sick--it scares me to think how sick maybe she is." He leaned to her upturned face; tears trembled on her lashes and in her voice. "Please, Joe!"

"To-morrow night, sure, little Essie Birdsong. Gawd, what a name! Why didn't they call you--"

"They always used to call us the Songbirds at the store."

"Look, will you? Read--'Tango Contest next Monday night!' Are you game, little one? We'd won the last if they'd kept the profesh off the floor. Come on! Let's go in and practise for it."

"Not to-night, Joe, please. We're only four blocks from home, and it ain't right, our keepin' company like this every night for three months and not goin'. It ain't right."

He paused in the sea of green moonlight before the gold threshold of the Palais du Danse, whose caryatides were faun-eyed Maenads and AEgipans. The gold figure of a Cybele in a gold chariot raced with eight reproductions of herself in an octagonal mirror-lined foyer, and a steady stream of Corybantes bought admission tickets at twenty-five cents a Corybant.

Phrygian music, harlequined to meet the needs of Forty-second Street and its anchorites, flared and receded with the opening and closing of gilded doors.

"Come on, girlie! To-morrow night we'll do the fireside proper."

"You never--nev-er do anything I ask you to, Joe. You jolly me along and jolly me along, and then--do nothing."

He released her suddenly, plunged his hands into his pockets, and slumped in his shoulders.

"I don't, don't I? That's the way with you girls--a fellow ties hisself up like a broken arm in a sling, and that's the thanks he gets! Ain't I quit playin' pool? Didn't I swear to you on your little old Sunday-school book to cut out pool? Didn't the whole gang gimme the laff? Ain't I cuttin' everything--ain't I?--pool and cards--pool and all?"

"I know, Joe; but--"

"You gotta quit naggin' me about the fireside game, sis. I'm going to meet your dame some day--sure I am; but you gotta let me take my time. You gotta let me do it my way--you gotta quit naggin' me. A fellow can't stand for it."

"She's sick, Joe."

"Sure she is; and to-morrow night we'll buy her an oyster loaf or something and take it home to her. How's that, kiddo?"

"That ain't what she wants, Joe--it's us."

"I just ain't home-broke--that's all's the matter with me. Put me in a parlor, and I get weak-kneed as a cat--bashful as a banshee! You gotta let me do it my way, Peaches and Cream. Just like a twenty-five-cent order of 'em you look, with

them eyes and cheeks and hair. To-morrow night, sweetness--huh?"

"Honest, Joe?"

"Cross my heart and bet on a dark horse!"

She slid her hand into the curve of his elbow, her incertitude vanishing behind the filmy cloud of a smile.

"All right, Joe; to-morrow night, sure. You walk as far as home with me now, and--"

"Gawd bless my soul! You ain't going to leave me at the church, are you?"

"I gotta go right home, Joe."

"Gee! Why didn't you tell a fellow? I could have tied up ten times over for a Saturday night. There's a little dancer over at the Orpheum would have let out a six-inch smile for the pleasure of my company to-night. Gee! you're a swell little sport--nix!"

"Joe!"

"Come on in for ten minutes, and if you're right good I'll shoot you home in a taxi-cab just as quick as if we went now. Just ten minutes, sweetness."

"No more, Joe."

"Cross my heart and bet on a dark horse--just ten minutes."

She smiled at him from the corners of her shadowed eyes and stepped into the tessellated foyer.

"Satisfied now, Mr. Smarty?" she said, smiling at eight reflections of herself and swaying to the rippling flute notes and violin phrases that wandered out to meet them.

"You're all right, sweetness!"

Within the Sheban elegance of the overlighted, overheated, overgilded dining and dance hall his pressure of her arm tightened and the blood ran in her veins a searing flame.

"Gee! Look at the jam, Joe!"

"Over there's a table for two, sweet--right under them green lights."

"Say, whatta you know about that? There's that same blonde girl, Joe, we been seein' everywhere. Honest, she follows us round every place we go--her and that fellow that was dancing up at the Crescent last night--remember?"

They drew up before a marble-topped table, one of a phalanx that flanked a wide-open space of hard-wood floor, like coping round a sunken pool; and his eyes took a rapid resume of the polyphonic room.

"Good crowd out to-night, sweetness. They all know us, too."

"Yes."

"Wanna dance and show 'em we're in condition?"

"No, Joe."

The music flared suddenly; chairs were pushed back from their tables, leaving food and drink in the attitude of waiting. A bolder couple or two ventured out on the shining floor-space, hesitant like a premonitory ripple on the water before the coming of the wind; another and yet another. And almost instanter there was the intricate maze of a crowded floor--women swaying, men threading in, out, around.

"What'll you have to drink, sweetness?"

"Lemonade, please."

"I know a better one than that."

"What?"

"Condensed milk!"

"Silly! I just can't get used to them bitter-tasting things you try out on me."

"You're all right, little Lemonade Girl!"

He leaned across the table and peered under the pink sateen. Its reflection lay like a blush of pleasure across her features, and she kept her gaze averted, with a pretty *malaise* trembling through her.

"You're all right, little Peaches and Cream."

"You--you're all right, too, Joe."

"You mean that, sweetness?"

"I mean it if you mean it."

"Do I mean it! Say, do I give a little queen like you my company eight nights out of seven for the fun of kiddin' myself along?"

"I know you ain't, Joe; that's what I keep tellin' ma."

"Sittin' there screwing your lips at me like that! You got a mouth just like--just like red fruit, like a cherry that would bust all over the place if a bird took a peck at it."

Her bosom, little as Juliet's, rose to his words, and she giggled after the immemorial fashion of women.

"Oh, Joe! If only--if only--if only--"

"If only what, sweetness?"

"If only--"

"Huh?"

"Aw, I can't say it."

"Whistle it, then, sweetness."

"It don't do us no good to talk about things, Joe. We--we never get anywhere."

"What's the use o' talking, then, sweetness? Here's your lemonade. I wish I was in the baby-food class--'pon my soul I do! Look, sweetness; this is the stuff, though. Look at its color, will you? Red as a moonshiner's eye! Here, waiter, leave that siphon; I might wanna shoot up the place."

"You promised, Joe, not--"

"Sure; I ain't goin' to, neither. Did I keep my pool promise? Ain't heard a ball click for weeks! Will I keep this one? Watch! Two's my limit, Peaches. I'd swear off sleepin' if you wanted me to."

"Would you, Joe? That's what I want you to tell ma when--"

"Aw, there you go again! Honest, the minute a fellow feels hisself warming up inside you begin tryin' to reach up to the church-tower and ring the bells."

"Joe!"

"Sure you do."

"You make me ashamed when you talk like that."

"Then cut it, sweetness. Come on; let's finish out this dance."

"It worries her so, Joe. She asks and asks till I--I don't know what to say no more when I see her wastin' away and all. I--Gawd, I don't know!"

"For Gawd's sakes, don't leak any tears here, Ess! This gang here knows me. Ain't I told you I like you, girl? I like you well enough to do anything your little heart de-sires; but this ain't the place to talk about it."

"That's what you always say, Joe; no place is the place."

"Gee, ain't it swell enough just the way we are--just like it is, us knocking round together? I ain't your settling-down

kind, sister. You're one little winner, and I like your style o' sweetness, but I ain't what you'd call a homesteader."

"Joe!"

"Sure; I mean it. I like you well enough to do any little thing your heart desires; but I never look far ahead, hon. I'm near-sighted."

"What--what about me?"

"I ain't got nothing saved up--not a dime. You tell your dame--you tell her we--we just understand each other. Huh? How's that? That's fair enough, ain't it?"

"Whatta you mean, Joe? You always say that; but please, Joe, please tell me what you mean?"

"Listen, kiddo. Say, listen to that trot they're playin', will you? Come on, sis; be a sport! To-morrow night we'll talk about anything your little heart desires. Come on, one round! Don't make me sore."

"Aw, no, Joe; I gotta go."

"One round, sweetness--see, I'll pay the check. See, two rounds round, and we'll light out for home. Look, they're all watchin' for us--two rounds, sweetness."

"One, you just said, Joe."

"One, then, little mouse."

They rose to the introductory titillation of violins; she slid into his embrace with a little fluid movement, and they slithered out on the shining floor. A light murmur like the rustle of birds' wings went after them, and couples leaned from their tables to watch the perfect syncopation of their steps. His slightly crepuscular eyes took on the sheen of mica; the color ran high in her face, and her lips parted.

"They sit up and take notice when we slide out, don't they, little one?"

"Yes."

"Some class to my trotting, ain't there, sweetness?"

"Yeh. Look, Joe; we gotta go after this round--it's nearly twelve."

"Twice round, sweetness, and then we go. If we ain't got the profesh beat on that Argentine Dip I'll give ten orchestra seats to charity and let any box-office in this town land me for what I'm worth."

"Joe!"

"Aw, I was only kiddin'. They got as much chance with me as a man with Saint Vitus's dance has of landing a trout. Gee, you're pretty to-night, sweetness!"

"Sweetness yourself!"

"Peaches and Cream!"

"Come on, Joe; this is twice round."

"Once more, sweetness--just once more! See, you got me hypnotized; my feet won't stop. See, they keep going and going. See, I can't stop. Whoa! Whoa! Honest, I can't quit! Whoa! We gotta go round once more, sweetness. I--just--can't--stop!"

"Just once more, Joe."

At one o'clock the gas-flame in the hallway outside the rear third-floor apartment flared sootily and waned to a weary bead as the pressure receded. Through the opacity of the sudden fog the formal-faced door faded into the gloom, and Miss Essie Birdsong pushed the knob stealthily inch by inch to save the squeak.

"Plunk-plunk-plunka-plunka-plunk! Essie?"

"Sh-h-h-h! Yes, Jimmie--it's only me. Why you makin' that noise? Why's the light burning? What's--"

"Essie! Essie, is that you and--"

"Ma dearie, you--What's the matter? You ain't sick, are you? What's--what's wrong, Jimmie? Please, what's wrong?"

She stood with her back to the door, her face struck with fear suddenly, as with white forked lightning, and her breath coming on every alternate heart-beat.

"Ma! Jimmie! For Gawd's sakes, what's the matter?"

The transitional falsetto of her brother's voice came to her gritty as slate scratching slate, and cold, prickly flesh sprang out over her.

"Don't come in here! You--you and your friend stay out there a minute till ma kinda gets her breath back; she--she's all right--ain't you, ma? You and your friend just wait just a minute, Ess."

"Me and--"

"Yeh; both of you wait. Nothing ain't wrong--is it, ma? There, just lay back on the pillow a minute, ma. Gwan; be a sport! Look, your cheek's all red from restin' on my shoulder so long. Lemme go a minute and bring Essie and her gen'l'man friend in to see you. Gee! After you been waitin' and waitin' you--you ain't goin' to give out the last minute. There ain't nothin' to be scared about, ma. Lemme go in just a minute. Here it is, ma; don't break it--seven years' bad luck for smashin' a hand-mirror. Here; you look swell, ma--swell!"

"Tell him it ain't like me to give out like this. Take them bottles and that ice away, Jimmie--throw my flowered wrapper over my shoulders. There! Now tell him, Jimmie, it ain't like me."

"Surest thing, ma. Watch me!"

He emerged from the bedroom suddenly, his face twisted and his whispering voice like cold iron under the stroke of an anvil, and Essie trembled as she stood.

"Jimmie!"

"You--you devil, you! Where is he?"

She edged away from him with limbs that seemed as though they took root at every step and she must tear each foot from the carpet.

"To-morrow night he's comin' sure, Jimmie; he couldn't to-night, he--couldn't."

Jimmie's lips drew back from his gums as though too dry to cover them.

"You--you street-runner, you!"

"Jimmie!"

"You--you--you--"

"For Gawd's sakes, she'll hear you, Jimmie!"

"You devil, you! You've killed her, I tell you! I've been holdin' her in there for two hours, with the sweat standing out on her like water--you--"

"Oh, Gawd! Jimmie, lemme run for old man Gibbs; lemme--"

"Oh no, you don't! Lizzie Marks down-stairs is gone for him--but that ain't goin' to help none; what she wants is *you*--you and your low-down sneaking friend; and she's goin' to have him, too."

"He's gone, Jimmie. What--"

"You can't come home here to-night without him--you can't! You better run after him, and run after him quick. You can't come home here to-night without him, I tell you! Whatta you going to do about it--huh? Whatta you going to do? Quick! What?"

She trembled so she grasped the back of a chair for support, and tears ricocheted down her cheeks.

"I can't, Jimmie! He's gone by now; he's gone by now--out of sight. I can't! Please, Jimmie! I'll tell her! I'll tell her!"

Don't--don't you dare come near me! I'll go, Jimmie--I'll go. 'Sh-h-h!"

"You gotta get him--you can't come here to-night without him. I ain't goin' to stand for her not seeing him to-night. I--I don't care how you get him, but you ain't going to kill her! You gotta get him, or I'll--"

"Jimmie--'sh-h-h!"

"Jimmie, tell him it ain't like me to give out like this. Tell--"

"Yes, ma."

"Yes, ma--we're comin'. Joe's waitin' down at the door. I'll run down and bring him up; he--he's so bashful. In a minute, ma darlin'!"

She flung open the door and fled, racing down two flights of stairs, with her steps clattering after her in an avalanche, and out into a quiet street, which sprung echoes of her flying feet.

After midnight every pedestrian becomes a simulacrum, wrapped in a black domino of mystery and a starry ephod of romance. A homeward-bound pedestrian is a faun in evening dress. Fat-and-forty leans from her window to hurtle a can at a night-yelling cat and becomes a demoiselle leaning out from the golden bar of Heaven.

In the inspissated gloom of the street occasional silhouettes hurried in silent haste; and a block ahead of her, just emerging into a string of shop lights, she could distinguish the uneven-shouldered outline of Joe Ullman and the unmistakable silhouette of his slightly askew hat.

She sobbed in her throat and made a cup of her hands to halloo; but her voice would not come, and she ran faster.

A policeman glanced after her and struck asphalt. A dog yapped at her tall heels. Even as she sped, her face upturned and her mouth dry and open, the figure swerved suddenly into a red-lighted doorway with a crescent burning above it; and, with her eyes on that Mecca, she pulled at her strength and gathered more speed.

The crescent grew in size and redness, and its lettering sprang out; and suddenly she stopped, as suddenly as an engine jerking up before a washout.

CRESCENT POOL AND BILLIARD ROOM--
Open All Night

And her heart folded inward like the petals of a moonflower.

Stretched to the limit of their resilience, the nerves act reflexly. The merest second of incertitude, and then automatically she swung about, turned her blood-driven face toward the place from whence she came and groped her way homeward as Polymestor must have groped after being blinded in the presence of Hecuba.

Tears hot from the geyser of shame and pain magnified her eyes like high-power spectacle-lenses; and when she reached the dim entrance of the cliff dwelling she called home an edge of ice stiffened round her heart and her feet would not enter.

A silhouette lurched round a black corner and zigzagged toward her, and she held herself flat as a lath against the building until it and its drunken song had lurched round another corner; a couple hurried past with interlinked arms; their laughter light as foam. More silhouettes--a flat-chested woman, who wore her shame with the conscious speciousness of a prisoner promenading in his stripes; a loutish fellow, who whistled as he hurried and vaulted up the steps of the Electric Institute three steps at a bound; an old man with an outline like a crooked finger; a shawled woman; a cab lined with vague faces, and streamers of laughter floating back from it; and, standing darkly against the cold wall, Essie, with the tears drying on her cheeks, and her whole being suddenly galvanized by a new thought.

A momentary lull in the drippy streamlet of pedestrians; she leaned out into the darkness and peered up, then down the aisle of street. A shadow came gliding toward her, and she stepped forward; but when the street-lamp fell on the cold eyes and cuttlefish stare she huddled back into her corner until the steps had receded like the stick-taps of a blind man.

Two women in the professional garb of nurses twinkled past, twitting each to each like sparrows; a man whose face was narrow and dark, bespeaking in his ancestry a Latin breed, kept close to the shadow of the buildings; and, with her finger-nails cutting her palms, she stepped out from her lair directly in his path and clasped her hands tighter to keep them from trembling.

"You--please!"

He glanced down at her yellowish face, with the daubed-on red standing out frankly, tossed her a sneer and a foreign expression, and brushed by. She darted back as though he had struck at her, and panic closed her in.

A young giant, tall as a Scandinavian out of Valhalla, with wide shoulders, a wide stride, and heavy-soled, laced-to-the-knee boots that clattered loudly, ran up the steps of the Electric Institute, and she flashed across the sidewalk, her arm reaching out.

"You--please!"

He paused, with the street lamp full on his smiling mouth and wide-apart, smiling eyes, one foot in the act of ascending, after the manner of tailors' fashion-plates, which are for ever in the casual attitude of mounting stairs.

"You--please! Please--"

"Aw, little lady, go home and go to bed. This ain't no time and place for a little thing like you. Here, take this and go home, little girl."

She arrested his arm on its way to his pocket, her breath crowding out her words, and the stinging red of shame burning through her rouge.

"No, no! For Gawd's sakes, no! It's--my mother--"

He brought his feet down to a level.

"Your mother?"

"Yes; she's sick--maybe dyin'. I--please--she wants to see somebody that can't--can't--"

"What, little lady?"

"She's sick--dyin' maybe. She wants to see somebody that can't--can't--"

"Take your time, little lady--can't *what*?"

"Can't come."

"Who can't come?"

"He--my young--he's a young man. She's never seen him; and if--please, if you'd come and act super--just like you was fillin' in at a show; if you'd act like my young man just for a minute--please! My friend, he can't come--he can *never* come; but she--she wants him. You come, please! You come, please!"

She tugged at his arm, and he descended another step and peered into the exacerbated anxiety of her face.

"On the level, little lady?"

"Please--just for a minute! For somebody that's sick--maybe dyin'. Just tell her you're my young man--tell her everything's all right--everything's comin' all right for all of us, for her and--and my little brother, and--and me--you and me--like you was my young man, please, lovin' and all. And tell her how pretty her poor hair is and how everything's goin'--goin' to be all right. Come, please--it's just next door."

"Why, you poor little thing! I ain't much on play-actin'; and look at my hands all black from the power-house!"

"Please! That ain't nothin'. It'll be only a minute. Just kinda say things after me and don't let her know--don't let her know that I--I ain't got any young man. Don't let her know!"

"You poor little thing, you--shaking like a leaf! Lead the way; but not so fast, little lady--you'll give out."

She cried and laughed her relief and dragged him across the sidewalk; and every step up the two flights she struggled to keep her hysterical voice within the veil of a whisper.

"Just say everythin' right after me. You--you're my young man and real sweet on me; and we're going to get--you know; everythin' is goin' to be fine, and my little brother's going to the Electric Institute, and everythin's goin' to be swell. Be right lovin' to her, sir--she's so sick. Oh, Gawd, I--"

"Don't cry, little girl."

"I ain't cryin'."

"Careful; don't stumble."

"Don't *you* stumble. Can you see? The landing's so dark."

"Yes; I can see by the shine of your hair, little lady."

"Sh-h-h-h!"

The door stood open at the angle she had left it, and by proxy of the slab of mirror over the mantelpiece she could see her mother's head propped against her brother's gold-braided shoulder, and the bright eyes shining out like a gazelle's in the dark.

"Essie?"

"We are here, ma--me and Joe." She threw a last appeal over her shoulder and led the way into the bedroom; her companion followed, stooping to accommodate his height to the doorway.

"Ma dearie, this is Joe."

"Joe! It ain't like me, Joe, not to get up; but I just ain't got the strength--to-night, Joe."

He bent his six-feet-two over the bed and smiled at her from close range.

"Well, well, well! So this is ma dear, dearie?"

"That's her, Joe."

"This won't do one bit, ma. Me and the little lady's got to get you cured up in a hurry--don't we, little lady?"

"Ma dearie, Joe's been wantin' and wantin' to come for so long."

"For so long I been wantin' to come, ma dearie; but--"

"But he's so bashful. Ain't you, Joe? Bashful as a banshee."

"Bashful ain't no name for me, ma. I'd shy at a baby."

"Honest, ma dearie, he's as shy as anything."

"If I wasn't, wouldn't I have been up to see my little lady's mother long ago--wouldn't I? Ain't you going to shake hands with me, ma dearie?"

She held up a hand as light as a leaf, and he took it in a wide, gentle clasp that enveloped it.



SHE HELD UP A HAND AS LIGHT AS A LEAF, AND HE TOOK IT IN A WIDE, GENTLE CLASP THAT ENVELOPED IT

"Ma dearie!"

Her violet lids fluttered, and she lay back from the gold-braided shoulder to her pillow, but smiling.

"I like your hand, Joe; I like it."

"I want you to, ma."

"We--I was afraid, Joe, I wouldn't, you never comin' at all. Shake it, Jimmie, and see."

"Aw!"

"It's a strong hand, like your papa's was, Essie. Shake it, Jimmie. I feel just like cryin', it's so good. Shake it, Jimmie."

Across the chasm of youth's prejudice Jimmie held out a reluctant hand.

"And this is the big brother, is it, little lady?"

"That's what he calls hisself, Joe--he calls me his little sister."

"He's gotta be a big brother to her, Joe; she's so--so little."

"Shake, old man; and take off that grouch. Over where I live a fellow'd be fined ten cents for that scowl. If we got anything to square, you and me'll square it outside after school. What do you say to that, ma dearie? Ain't it right?"

"Jimmie's tired out, Joe."

"Like fun I am!"

"He's been proppin' me up all these hours so I could breathe easier--plunkin' and doin' all his funny kid stunts for his old ma, Essie--plunkin' like a banjo, and plunkin'. I liked it. Sometimes it was like I was floatin' in a skiff with your papa on Sunday afternoons in the park, Essie. I liked it. He's all tired out--ain't you, Jimmie, my boy?"

"Naw!"

"He's sore at his sister, Joe. But he's a good boy and *smart*; you wouldn't believe it, Joe, but when it comes to

mechanics he--he's just grand."

"Aw, cut it, ma! I ain't strikin' to make a hit."

"He's only tired, Joe, and don't mean nothin' he says."

"Naw; I'm only tryin' my voice out for grand opery!"

"You're a regular sorehead with me, ain't you, old man?"

"Aw!"

"He ain't easy at makin' up with strangers, Joe; but he's a smart one. See that on the table? That's his self-chargin' dynamo; it's a great invention, Joe, the janitor says. You tell him about it, Jimmie."

"There ain't nothin' to tell."

"Don't believe it, Joe; the janitor's a electrician, and he says--"

"Aw!"

"See! There it is, Joe."

"Aw, I don't want everybody pokin' and nosin'!"

"Lemme have a look at it, old man. I know something about dynamos myself. Say, that looks like a neat little idea. How does she work?"

"See--you generate right down in here. See? She worked that time, ma."

"Jimmiecracks! Where'd you get your juice and--Well, well! Whatta you know about that? Don't even have to reverse. I guess that storage down there ain't some stunt!"

"See, Jimmie, my boy! I told you it was a grand invention. Hear what Joe says?"

"Say, kid, you bring that--take that over to the Institute to-morrow. I know a fellow over there'll protect your rights and work that out with you swell."

"See, Jimmie, your--your old ma was right!"

"Aw, the generator don't always work like that--only about four times out of six. I'm kinda stuck on the--"

"Say, kid, what you wanna do is protect your rights on that, and--and bring it over--take it over to the Institute. You'll give 'em the jolt of their lives over there. I know a fellow's been chasin' this idea ten years, and you're fifty per cent. closer to the bull's-eye than he is."

"Hear, Jimmie! Hear, Essie! Just like I been sayin'. I been beggin' and beggin' him, Joe, but he--he's so stubborn; and--"

"Aw, ma, cut it, can't you?"

"He's so stubborn about it, Joe."

"There's no use tryin' to force him, ma; but he's gotta good idea there if he handles it right."

"Aw, she ain't finished yet--she don't spark right."

"That what I'm telling you, kid. What you need is a laboratory, where you've got the stuff to work with and men who can give you a steer where you need it, and--"

"Aw!"

"I'll go over with you. I know a fellow over there--he's the guy that helped Kinney win his transmitter prize. You'll give him the jolt of his life, old man. Huh, kid? Wanna go over?" He placed his hand on the gold-braided shoulder and smiled down. "Huh? You on, old man?"

"Aw, I ain't much for buttin' in places."

"Are you on, Jimmie? It's your chance, old man."

"Aw!"

"Jimmie! Jimmie, my boy, I--"

"Aw, I said I was on, didn't I, ma?"

"Sure, he said he was on, ma dearie. Shake on it, old man!"

"Jimmie! Jimmie, my boy--honest!--it's just like your papa was talkin'! Don't leggo my hand, Joe. Layin' here with my eyes shut, it's just like he was talkin' hisself. He's--he's like your papa was, Essie, big and strong."

"Yes, darlin'."

"Is that the doctor? Is Lizzie Marks come back? Is that--"

"No; not yet, ma."

"You're all tired out, Essie baby. Look at your little face! Go wash it, baby, and cool it off before old man Gibbs comes."

"It ain't hot, ma."

"He brought you into the world, Essie baby, and I don't want him to see it--to see it all--all--"

"I'm all right, ma. Lemme stay by you."

"Go wash your face, Ess. Ma says go wash your face."

"You shut up, Jimmie Birdsong--it ain't your face!"

"You know all righty, missy, why she wants you to wash it--you know--"

"Ma, he keeps fussin' with me! Jimmie, please don't."

"Aw, I ain't, neither, ma. She's always peckin' at me. I--I ain't mad at her; but I want her to wash that--that stuff off her face."

"Jimmie!"

Her lips quivered, and she glanced toward the stranger, with her lips drooping over her eyes like curtains to her shame; and he smiled at her with eyes as soft as spring rain, his voice a caress.

"Go, little lady. You're all tired out and too pretty and too sweet not to wash your face and--cool it off."

"She's gotta go, or I'll get her in a corner and rub--"

"I'm goin', ain't I, Jimmie? Honest, the minute we make up you begin pickin' a fuss again."

"Oh, my children!"

"Oh, Gawd, there she goes off again! Why don't old man Gibbs come? Lay her down, Joe; she can't breathe that way. Look! Her hands are all blue-like. Hold her up, Joe! Oh, Gawd, why don't old man Gibbs come? She's all shakin'--all shakin'!"

"No, I ain't. What you cryin' there at the foot of the bed for, Essie? It ain't no time to cry now, darlin'. It's like it says on the crocheted lamp-mat your papa's aunt did for us--'God is Good!' Where is that mat, Essie? I--I ain't seen it round for--so--long. God is good! God--is--good! Where is that mat, Essie?"

"It's round somewhere, ma. It's old and worn out--in the rag-bag, maybe."

"Well get it out, Essie."

"Yes, ma."

"Promise, Essie!"

"Sure, ma; we'll get it out and keep it out."

"Oh, Joe, why did you keep us waitin' and waitin'? She's so little and pretty. Look at her dimples, Joe, even when she's cryin'. The prettiest girl in the notions, she was; and I--I been so scared for her, Joe. Why did you keep us waitin'

and waitin'?"

"Me and the little girl was slow in getting here, ma; but we--we're here for good now--ain't we, little lady? Little lady with the hair just like ma's!"

"She gets it from me, Joe. Her papa used to say her hair was like the copper trimmings of his machines. Such machines he kept, Joe! His boss told me hisself they were just like looking-glasses, Essie, come closer, darlin'. You won't forget the lamp-mat, will you, darlin'--the lamp-mat?"

"Oh no, ma. Oh, Gawd! Ma, you ain't mad at me? Please--please! Honest, ma, your little Essie didn't know."

"Ma knows we didn't know, little lady. She ain't mad at us. She's glad that everything's going to be all right now; and you and her and Jimmie and me are--"

"Oh, my children!"

She smiled and slipped her fingers between her daughter's face and the coverlet.

"Look up, Essie! I feel so light! I feel so light! It's like it says on the lamp-mat--just like it says, Essie."

"Ma! Ma darlin', open your eyes!"

"Ma!"

"Here, Jimmie, lend a hand! Lemme hold her up--so! No; don't give her any more of that black stuff, Jimmie, old man. Wait till the doctor comes. Let her lie quiet on my arm--just like that; and hand me that ammonia-bottle there, Essie, like a sweet little lady. See there! She's coming round all right. Who says she ain't coming to? Now, ma--now!"

"Joe, don't leggo me!"

"Sure I won't, ma dearie."

She warmed to life slightly, and the tears seeped through her closed eyes, and she felt of his supporting arm down the length of his sleeve.

"Joe! Essie, that you?"

"Ma darlin', we're all here."

"Don't cry, little lady. See, she's coming out of it all right. Here, gimme a lift, Jimmie. See there! She's got her breath all right again."

They laid her back on the pillow, and she folded her hands lightly, ever so lightly, like lilies, one atop the other.

"Children! Children, I'm ready."

"Ready for what, ma? Some more black medicine?"

"Just *ready*, Jimmie, my boy! Here, Joe; hold my hand. It's like his was, children--big and strong."

"Aw, ma! Come on! Perk up!"

"I am, Jimmie, my boy."

"Perk up for sure, I mean. Gee, ain't there enough to perk about? Look at Joe and Ess--enough to give a fellow the Willies, pipin' at each other like sugar'd melt in their mouths!"

"My Jimmie's a great one for teasin' his sister, Joe."

"And look at me, ma--ain't I going to take my dynamo over to the Institute? And ain't the whole bunch of us right here next to your bed? And just look, ma--look at the two of 'em turning to sugar right this minute from lovin' each other! Ain't it the limit? Look at us, ma--all here and fine as silkworms."

"Yes, yes, Jimmie; that's why I feel so light. I never felt so light before. It's like it says on the lamp-mat, Jimmie--just like it says. I'm ready for sure, my darlin's."

"Oh, Gawd, ma--ready for what? Look at us, ma dearie--all three of us standing here--ready for what, dearie?"

"You tell 'em, Joe; you--you're big and strong."

"I--I don't know, ma. I don't think I--I know for sure, dearie."

"Ready for what, ma? Tell us, darlin'."

She turned her face toward them, a smile printed on her lips.

"Just ready, children."

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THE PARADISE TRAIL

At five o'clock the Broadway store braced itself for the last lap of a nine-hour day. Girls with soul-and-body weariness writ across their faces in the sure chirography of hair-line wrinkles stood pelican-fashion, first on one leg and then on the other, to alternate the strain.

Floor-walkers directed shoppers with less of the well-oiled suavity of the morning; a black-and-white-haired woman behind the corset-counter whitened, sickened, and was revived in the emergency-room; the jewelry department covered its trays with a tan canvas sheeting; the stream of shoppers thinned to a trickle.

Across from the notions and buttons the umbrella department suddenly bloomed forth with a sale of near-silk, wooden-handled umbrellas; farther down, a special table of three-ninety-eight rubberette mackintoshes was pushed out into mid-aisle.

Miss Tillie Prokes glanced up at the patch of daylight over the silk-counters--a light rain was driving against the window.

"Honest, now, Mame, wouldn't that take the curl out of your hair?"

"What's hurtin' you?"

"Rainin' like a needle shower, and I got to wear my new tan coat to-night, 'cause I told him in the letter I'd wear a tannish-lookin' jacket with a red bow on the left lapel, so he'd know me when I come in the drug store."

Mame placed the backs of her hands on her hips, breathed inward like a soprano testing her diaphragm, and leaned against a wooden spool-case.

"It *is* rainin' like sixty, ain't it? Say, can you beat it? Watch the old man put Myrtle out in the aisle at the mackintosh-table--there! Didn't I tell you! Gee! I bet she could chew a diamond, she's so mad."

"She ain't as mad as me; but I'm going to wear my tan if it gets soaked."

Tillie sold a packet of needles and regarded the patch of window with a worried pucker on her small, wren-like face.

"Honest, ain't it a joke, Til?--you havin' the nerve to answer that ad and all! You better be pretty white to me, or I'll snitch! I'll tell Angie you're writin' pink notes to Box 25, *Evenin' News*--Mr. Box 25! Say, can you beat it!"

Mame laughed in her throat, smoothed her frizzed blonde hair, sold a paper of pins and an emery heart.

"Like fun you'll tell Angie! I got it all fixed to tell her I'm going to the picture-show with you and George to-night."

"Before I'd let a old grouch like her lord it over me! It ain't like she was your sister or relation, or something--but just because you live together. Nix on that for mine."

"She don't think a girl's got a right to be young or nothin'! Look at me--a regular stick-at-home. Gee! a girl's got to have something."

"Sure she does! Ain't that what I've been tryin' to preach to you ever since we've been chumming together? You ain't a real old maid yet--you got real takin' ways about you and all; you ought to be havin' a steady of your own."

"Don't I know it?"

"Look how you got to do now--just because she never lets you go to dances or nothin' with us girls."

"She ain't never had it, and she don't want me to have it."

"Say, tell it to the Danes! She ain't got them snappy black eyes of hers for nothin'. Whatta you live with her for? There ain't a girl up in the corsets that's got any use for her."

"She's been pretty white to me, just the samey--raised me and all when I didn't have no one. She's got her faults; but I kinda got the habit of livin' with her now--I got to stick."

"Gee! even a stepmother like Carrie's'll let her have fun once in a while. It's Angie's own fault that you got to meet 'em in drug stores and take chances on ads and all."

"I'm just answerin' that ad for fun--I ain't in earnest."

"I've always been afraid of matrimonial ads and things like that. You know I was the first one to preach your gettin' out and gettin' spry--that's me all over! I believe in bein' spry; but I always used to say to maw before I was keepin' steady with George, 'Ads ain't safe.'"

"I ain't afraid."

"Lola Flint, over in the jewelry, answered one once--'Respectable young man would like to make the acquaintance of a genteel young lady; red hair preferred.' And when she seen him he had only one eye, and his left arm shot off."

"I ain't afraid. Say, if Effie Jones Lipkind can answer one, with her behind-the-counter stoop and squint, and get away with it, there ain't no reason why there ain't more grand fellows like Gus Lipkind writin' ads."

"Come out of the dark room, Til! Effie had two hundred saved up."

"I ain't ashamed of not havin' any steadies. Where's a straight-walkin' girl like me goin' to get 'em? Look at that rain, will you!--and me tellin' him I'd be there in tan, with red ribbon on the lapel!"

"Paper says rain for three days, too. Angie's a old devil, all-righty, or you could meet him in your flat."

"He's going to wear a white carnation and a piece of fern on his left coat lapel; and if he don't look good I ain't going up."

"What did he call hisself--a bachelor of refined and retiring habits? Thank Gawd!--if I do say it--George is refined, but he ain't over-retirin'. It's the retirin' kind that like to sit at home in their carpet slippers instead of goin' to a picture-show. Straighten that bin of pearl buttons, will you, Til? Say, how my feet do burn to-night! It's the weather--I might 'a' known it was goin' to rain."

Tillie ran a nervous finger down inside her collar; there was a tremolo in her quail-like voice.

"A fellow that writes a grand little letter like him can't be so bad--and it's better to have 'em retirin'-like than too fresh. Listen! It's real poetry-like: 'Meet me in the Sixth Avenue Drug Store, Miss 27. I'll have a white carnation and a piece of fern in my left buttonhole, and a smile that won't come off; and when I spy the yellow jacket I'm comin' up and say, "Hello!" And if I look good I want you to say "Hello!" back.' ... The invisible hair-pins only come by the box, ma'am. Umbrellas across the aisle, ma'am.... That ain't so bad for a start, is it, Mame?... Ten cents a box, ma'am."

"You got your nerve, all-righty, Til--but, gee! I glory in your spunk. If I was tied to a old devil like Angie I'd try it, too. Is the back of my collar all right, Til? Look at Myrtle out there, will you--how she's lovin' that mackintosh sale!"

"Water spots tan, don't it?" said Tillie, balancing her cash-book.

At six o'clock the store finished its last lap with a hysterical singing of electric bells, grillingly intense and too loud, like a woman who laughs with a sob in her throat.

Tillie untied her black alpaca apron, snapped a rubber band about her cash-book, concealed it beneath the notion-shelves, and brushed her black-serge skirt with a whisk-broom borrowed from stock.

"Good night, Mame! I guess you're waitin' for George, ain't you? See you in the morning. I'll have lots to tell you, too."

"Good night, Til! Remember, if he turns out to be a model for a classy-clothes haberdashery, it was me put you on to the idea."

Tillie pressed a black-felt sailor tight down on her head until only a rim of brown hair remained, slid into her black

jacket, and hurried out with an army of workers treading at her slightly run-down heels and nerves.

Youth, even the fag-end of Youth, is like a red-blooded geranium that fights to bloom though transplanted from a garden bed to a tin can in a cellar window. A faint-as-dawn pink persisted in flowing underneath the indoor white of Miss Prokes's cheeks--the last rosy shadow of a maltreated girlhood, which too long had defied the hair-line wrinkles, the notion-counter with the not-to-be-used stool behind it, nine hours of arc-light substitute for the sunshine on the hillside and the green shade of the dell.

At the doors a taupe-colored dusk and a cold November rain closed round her like a wet blanket. She shrank back against the building and let the army tramp past her. They dissolved into the stream like a garden hose spraying the ocean.

Broadway was black and shining as polished gunmetal, with reflections of its million lights staggering down into the wet asphalt. Umbrellas hurried and bobbed as if an army of giant mushrooms had suddenly insurrected; cabs skidded, honked, dodged, and doubled their rates; home-going New York bought evening papers, paid as it entered, and strap-hung its way to Bronx and Harlem firesides.

The fireside of the Bronx is the steam-radiator. Its lullabies are sung before a gilded three-coil heater; its shaving-water and kettle are heated on that same contrivance. It is as much of an epic in apartment living as condensed milk and folding-davenports.

All of which has little enough to do with Miss Tillie Prokes, except that in her lifetime she had hammered probably a caskful of nails into the tops of condensed-milk cans. Also she could unfold her own red-velours davenport; cold-cream her face; sugar-water her hair and put it up in kids; climb into bed and fall asleep with a despatch that might have made more than one potentate, counting sheep in his hair-mattressed four-poster, aguish with envy.

Miss Prokes yawned as she waited and regarded a brilliantly illuminated display window of curve-fingered ladies in exquisite waxen attitudes and nineteen-fifty crepe-de-Chine gowns. Her breath clouded the plate-glass, and she drew her initials in the circle and yawned again.

With the last driblet of employees from the store a woman cut diagonally through a group and hurried toward Miss Prokes.

"Come on, Tillie!"

"Gee! I was afraid you wouldn't have a umbrella, Angie. What made you so late? The rest of the corsets have gone long ago."

"Oh, I just stopped a minute to take a milk-and-rose-leaves bath--they're doin' it in our best families this year."

Tillie glanced at her companion sharply.

"What's the matter, Angie? You ain't had one of your spells again, have you? Your voice sounds so full of breath and all."

Angie pushed a strand of black-and-white hair up under her nest-like hat. Her small, black eyes were too far back; and her face was slightly creased and yellow, like an old college diploma when it is fished out of the trunk to show the grandchildren.

"I just keeled over like a tenpin--that's all! It came on so sudden--while I was sellin' a dame a dollar-ninety-eight hipless--that even old Higgs was scared and went up to the emergency-room with me hisself."

"Oh, Angie--ain't that a shame, now!"

Tillie linked her arm in the older woman's and, with their joint umbrella slanted against the fine-ribbed rain, they plunged into the surge of the street. Wind scuddled the rain along the sidewalks; electric signs, all blurred and streaky through the mist, were dimmed, like gas-light seen through tears.

"We better ride home to-night, Angie--you with one of your spells, and this weather and all."

"You must 'a' been clipping your gilt-edge bonds this afternoon instead of sellin' buttons! It would take more'n only a bad heart and a rainstorm and a pair of thin soles to make me ride five blocks."

"I--I'll take your turn to-night for fixin' supper. You ain't feelin' well, Angie--I'll take your turn to-night."

They turned into a high-walled, black, cross-town street. The wind turned with them and beat javelin-like against their backs and blew their skirts forward, then shifted and blew against their breathing.

"Gawd!" said the older woman, lowering their umbrella against the onslaught. "Honest, sometimes I wish I wuz dead and out of it. Whatta we get out of livin', anyway?"

"Aw, Angie!"

"I do wish it!"

They leaned into the wind.

"I--I don't mind rain much. Me and Mame and George are going to the Gem to-night--they're showing the airship pictures over there. I ain't goin' unless you're feelin' all right, though. They've got the swellest pictures in town over there."

"It's much you care about leavin' me alone or not when you can run round nights like a--like a--"

"Don't begin, Angie. A girl's got to have fun once in a while! Gee! the way you been holding on to me! I--I ain't even met the fellows like the other girls. All you think I like to do is sit home nights and sew. Look at the other girls. Look at Mamie Plute--she's five years younger'n me--only twenty-three; and she--"

"That's the thanks I get for protectin' and watchin' and raisin' and--"

"Aw, Angie, I--"

"Don't Angie me!"

"I--I ain't a kid--the way you fuss at me!"

They turned into their apartment house. A fire-escape ran zigzag down its front, and on each side of the entrance ash-cans stood sentinel. At each landing of their four flights up a blob of gas-light filled the hallway with dim yellow fog, and from the cracks of closed doors came the heterogeneous smells of steam, hot vapors, and damp--the intermittent crying of children.

After the first and second flights Miss Angie paused and leaned against the wall. Her breath came from between her dry lips like pants from an engine, and beneath her eyes the parchment skin wrinkled and hung in small sacs like those under the eyes of a veteran pelican.

"You take your time comin', Angie. I'll go ahead and light up and put on some coffee for you--some real hot coffee."

Tillie ran lightly up the stairs. Through the opacity of the fog her small, dark face was outlined as dimly as a ghost's, with somber eyes burning in the sockets. Theirs was the last of a long hall of closed doors--drab-looking doors with perpendicular panels and white-china knobs.

Tillie fitted in her key, groped along the shadowy mantel for a match, and lighted a side gas-bracket. Her dripping umbrella traced a wet path on the carpet. She carried it out into the kitchenette and leaned it in a corner of the sink. When Angie faltered in a moment later a blue-granite coffee-pot was already beginning to bubble on the two-burner gas-stove and the gentle sizzle of frying bacon sent a bluish haze through the rooms.

"Say, Angie, how you want your egg?"

"I don't want none."

"Sure you do! I'll fry it and bring it in to you." Angie flopped down on the davenport. Her skirt hung thick and dank about her ankles, and the back of her coat and her sleeve-tops were rain-spotted and wet-wool smelling where the umbrella had failed to protect her.

She unbuttoned the coat and the front of her shirt-waist, unlaced her shoes and kicked them off her feet. In the sallow light her face, the ocher wallpaper, the light oak center-table, the matting on the floor, and the small tin trunk were of a color. She took up her shoes in one hand, her coat in the other, and slouched off to a small one-window box of a room, with an unmade cot and a straight chair two-thirds filling it.

Happy the biographers whose Desdemonas burrow damask cheeks into silken pillows, whose Prosperines limp on slim ghost-feet through Lands of Fancy! Angie limped, too; but in her flat-arched, stockinginged feet, and to an unmade, tousled bed. And all the handmaids of her sex--Love, Romance, and Beauty--were strangely absent; or could the most sybaritic of biographers find them out?

Only half undressed she tumbled in, pulled the coverings tight up about her neck, and turned her face to the wall. Poor Angie! Neither Prosperine, Desdemona, nor any of the Lauras, Catherines, or Juliets, had ever sold corsets, faced

the soul-racking problem of eight dollars a week, or been untouched by the golden wand that transforms life into a phantasmagoria of love.

Tillie spread her little meal on the golden-oak table in the front room.

"Come on, Angie--or if you ain't feeling well I'll bring you in a bite."

"I ain't sick."

"Well, if you ain't sick, for Gawd's sake, where did you get the grouch?"

"I'm comin' in if you give me time. Where's my wrapper?"

They dined in a desultory sort of way, with Tillie up and down throughout the meal for a bread-knife, a cup of water, sugar for Angie's strong coffee.

"If you ain't feelin' good to-night I won't go, Angie."

"I'm feelin' all right--I'm used to sittin' home alone."

"If you talk like that--I won't go, then."

"Sure! You go on! Don't mind me."

"There's another corset sale advertised for to-morrow, ain't there? Gee! They don't care how many sales they spring on the girls down there, do they? Didn't you just have your semi-annual clearin'?"

"Yes; but they got a batch of Queenly shapes--two-ninety-eight--they want to get rid of. They're goin' to discontinue the line and put in the Straight-Front Flexibles."

Angie sipped her coffee in long draughts. Her black flannel wrapper fell away at the neck to reveal her unbleached throat, with two knobs for neck-bones.

"Let the dishes be, Angie--I'll do 'em in the morning. I wonder if it's raining yet? It's sure too cold to wear my old black. I'll have to wear my tan."

Rain beat a fine tattoo against the windows. Tillie crossed and peered anxiously out, cupping her eyes in her hand and straining through the reflecting window-pane at the undistinguishable sky; her little wren-like movements and eyes were full of nerves.

"It'll be all right with an umbrella," she urged--"eh, Angie?"

"Yes."

Tillie hurried to the little one-window room. There were two carmine spots high on her cheek-bones; as she dressed herself before a wavy mirror her lips were open and parted like a child's, and the breath came warm and fast between them.

"I'll be home early to-night, Angie. You sleep on the davenport. I don't mind the lumps in the cot."

She frizzed her front hair with a curling-iron she heated in the fan of the gas-flame, and combed out the little spring-tight curls until they framed her face like a fuzzy halo. Her pink lawn waist came high up about her neck in a trig, tight-fitting collar; and when she finally pressed on her sailor hat, and slid into her warm-looking tan jacket the small magenta bow on her left coat-lapel heaved up and down with her bosom.

"Say," she called through the open doorway, "I wish you'd see those seventy-nine-cent gloves, Angie--already split! How'd yours wear, huh?"

Silence.

"You care if I wear yours to-night, Angie?"

Silence.

"Aw, Angie, if you're sick why don't you say so and not go spoilin' my evening? Gee! If a girl would listen to you she'd have a swell time of it--she would! A girl's gotta have life."

She fastened a slender gold chain with a dangling blue-enamel heart round her neck.

"Aw, I guess I'll stay home. There ain't no fun in anything, with you poutin' round like this."

Tillie appeared in the doorway, gloves in hand. Angie was still at the uncleared table; her cheek lay on the red-and-white table-cloth, and her face was turned away.

"Angie!"

The room was quiet with the ear-pressing silence of vacuum. Tillie crossed and, with hands that trembled a bit, shook the figure at the table. The limp arms slumped deeper, and the waist-line collapsed like a meal-sack tied in the middle.

"Angie, honey!" Tillie's hand touched a cheek that was cold, but not with the chill of autumn.

Then Tillie cried out--the love-of-life cry of to-day and to-morrow, and all the echoing and re-echoing yesterdays--and along the dim-lit hall the rows of doors opened as if she had touched their secret springs.

Hurrying feet--whispers--far-away faces--strange hands--a professional voice and cold, shining instruments--the silence of the tomb--a sheet-covered form on the red-velvet davenport! The fear of the Alone--the fear of the Alone!

Miss Angie's funeral-day dawned ashen as dusk--a sodden day, with the same autumn rain beating its one-tone tap against the windows and ricochetting down the panes, like tears down a woman's cheeks.

At seven three alarm-clocks behind the various closed doors down the narrow aisle of hallway sounded a simultaneous call to arms; and a fourth reveille, promptly muffled beneath a pillow, thridded in the tiny room with the rumpled cot and the wavy mirror.

Miss Mamie woke reluctantly, crammed the clock beneath the pillow of her strange bed, and burrowed a precious moment longer in the tangled bedclothes. Sleep tugged at her tired lids and oppressed her limbs. She drifted for the merest second, floating off on the silken weft of a half-conscious dream. Then memory thudded within her, and the alarm-clock again thudded beneath the pillow.

She sprang out of bed, brushed the yellow mat of hair out of her eyes, and wriggled into her clothes in tiptoe haste.

"Til!" she cried, peering into the darkened room beyond and pitching her voice to a raspy little whisper. "Why didn't you wake me?"

She veered carefully round the gloom-shrouded furniture and dim-shaped, black-covered object that occupied the center of the room, into the kitchenette.

"I didn't mean to fall asleep, Til; honest, I didn't. Gee! Ain't I a swell friend to have, comin' to stay with you all night and goin' dead on you? But, honest, Til--may I die if it ain't so--with you away from the counter all day yesterday, and the odds-and-ends sale on, I was so tired last night I could 'a' dropped."

Tillie raised the gas-flame and pushed the coffee-pot forward. Through the wreath of hot steam her little face was far away and oyster-colored.

"Come on, Mame; I got your breakfast. Ain't it a day, though? Poor Angie--how she did hate the rain, and her havin' to be buried in it!"

"Ain't it a shame?--and her such a good soul! Honest, Til, ain't it funny her being dead? Think of it--us home from the store and Angie dead! Who'd 'a' thought one of them heart spells would take her off?"

"I ain't goin' to let you stay here only up to noon, Mame. There's no use your gettin' docked a whole day. It's enough for me to go out to the cemetery. You report at noon for half a day."

"Like fun I'm goin' to work at noon! You think I'm goin' to quit you and leave you here alone? If Higgs don't like two of us being away from the counter the old skinflint knows what he can do! He can regulate our livin' with his stopwatch, but not our dyin'!"

"There ain't nothin' for you to do round here, Mame--honest, there ain't--except ride 'way out there in the rain and lose half a day. She--she's all ready in her black-silk dress--all I got to do is follow her out now."

"Gawd! What a day, too!"

"Carrie and Lil was going to stay with me this morning, too; but I says to them, I says, there wasn't any use gettin' 'em down on us at the store. What's the use of us all getting docked when you can't do any good here? The undertaker's a nice-mannered man, and he'll ride--ride out with me."

"You all alone and--"

"Everything's fixed--they sent up her benefit money from the store, and I got enough for expenses and all; and she--she wouldn't want you to. She was a great one herself for never missin' a day at the store."

Large tears welled in Tillie's eyes.

"She was a grand woman!" said Mame, warm tears in her own eyes, taking a bite out of her slice of bread and washing it down with a swab of coffee. "There--there wasn't a girl in the corsets wasn't crying yesterday when they was gettin' up the collection for her flowers."

Tillie's lower lip quivered, and she set down her coffee untasted.

"She might have been a man-hater and strict with me, and all that--but what did she have out of it? She was nothing but a drudge all her life. Since I was a cash-girl she stuck to me like she--was my mother, all-righty; and once, when I--I had the mumps, she--she--"

Tillie melted into the wide-armed embrace of her friend, and together they wept, with the tap-tapping of the rain on the window behind them, and the coffee-pot boiling over through the spout, singing as it doused the gas-flames.

"She used to mend my s-stockings on--on the sly."

"She was always so careful and all about you keepin' the right company--it was a grand thing for you that you had her to live with--I always used to say that to maw. And what a trade she had! She could look at your figure and lace you up in a straight-front quicker'n any of the young girls in the department."

"I--I know it. Why, even in the Subway she could tell by just lookin' at a hip whether it was wearin' one of her double bones or girdle tops. If ever a soul deserved a raise it was Angie. She'd 'a' got it, too!"

"She was a grand woman, Til!"

"You tell the girls at the store, Mame, I--I'm much obliged for the flowers. Angie would have loved 'em, too; but gettin' 'em when she was dead didn't give her the chance to enjoy them."

"She's up in Heaven, sitting next to the gold-and-ivory throne, now; and she knows they're here, Til--she can look right down and see 'em."

"I'm glad they sent her carnations, then--she loved 'em so!"

"I kinda hate to leave you at noon, Til--the funeral and all."

"It's all right, Mame. You can look at her asleep before you go."

They tiptoed to the front room and raised the shades gently. Angie lay in the cold sleep of death, her wax-like hands folded on her flat breast, and quiet, as if the grubbing years had fallen from her like a husk; and in their place a madonna calm, a sleep, and a forgetting. They regarded her; the sobs rising in their throats.

"She looks just like she fell asleep, Til--only younger-like. And, say, but that is a swell coffin, dearie!"

Like Niobe all tears, Tillie dabbed at her eyes and dewy cheeks.

"She was always kicking--poor dear!--at having to pay a dime a week to the Mutual Aid; but she'd be glad if she could see--first-class undertaking and all--everything paid for."

"I've kicked more'n once, too, but I'm glad I belong now. Honest, for a dime a week--silver handles and all. Poor Angie! Poor Angie!"

Poor Angie, indeed! who never in all the forty-odd years of her life had been so rich; with her head on a decent satin pillow, and a white carnation at her breast; her black-and-white dotted foulard dress draped skilfully about her; and her feet, that would never more ache, resting upward like a doll's in its box!

"Oh, Gawd, ain't I all alone, though; ain't I, though?"

"Aw, Til!"

"I--I--Oh--"

"Watch out, honey--you're crushing all the grand white carnations the girls sent! Say, wouldn't Angie be pleased! 'Rest in Peace,' it says. See, honey! Don't you cry, for it says for her to rest in peace; and there's the beautiful white

dove on top and all--a swell white bird. Don't you cry, honey."

"I--I won't."

"Me and George won't forget you. Honest, you never knew any one more sympathizing-like than George; there ain't a funeral that boy misses if he can help it. He's good at pall-bearing, too. If it was Sunday instead of Friday that boy would be right on tap. There, dearie, don't cry."

Again Mame's tears of real sympathy mingled with her friend's; and they wept in a tight embrace, with the hot tears seeping through their handkerchiefs.

At eleven o'clock a carriage and a black hearse embossed in Grecian urns drew up in the rain-swept street. Windows shrieked upward and heads leaned out. A passing child, scuttling along the bubbly sidewalks, ran his forefinger along the sweating glass sides of the hearse, and a buttoned-up, oilskinned driver flecked at him with his whip. Street-cars grazed close to the carriage-wheels, and once a grocery's delivery automobile skidded from its course and bumped smartly into the rear. The horses plunged and backed in their traces.

Mame reached her yellow head far out of the window.

"They're here, Til. I wish you could see the hearse--one that any one could be proud to ride in! Here, let me help you on with your coat, dearie. I hope it's warm enough; but, anyway, it's black. Say, if Angie could only see how genteel everything is! The men are comin' up--here, lemme go to the door. Good morning, gen'l'men! Step right in."

Miss Angie's undertaker was all that she could have wished--a deep-eyed young man, with his carefully brushed hair parted to the extreme left and swept sidewise across his head; and his hand inserted like a Napoleon's between the second and third buttons of his long, black broadcloth coat.

"Good morning, Miss Prokes! It's a sad day, ain't it?"

Tears trembled along her lids.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Lux; it's a sad day."

"A sad, sad day," he repeated, stepping farther into the room, with his two attendants at a respectful distance behind him.

There were no rites. Tillie mumbled a few lines to herself out of a little Bible with several faded-ribbon bookmarks dangling from between the pages.

"This was poor Angie's book. I'll keep it for remembrance."

"Poor Angie!" said Mame.

"In the midst of life we are in death," said Mr. Lux. "If you're all ready now we can start, Miss Prokes. Don't be scared, little missy."

There was a moment of lead-heavy silence; then the two attendants stepped forward, and Tillie buried her face and ears on Mame's sympathetic shoulder. And so Angie's little procession followed her.

"I'm all for going along, Mr. Lux; but Tillie's that bent on my going back to the store for the half-day. I--I hate to let her go out there alone and all."

"I'm going out in the carriage myself, missy. There ain't a thing a soul could do for the little girl. I'll see that she ain't wantin' for nothin'--a Lux funeral leaves no stone unturned."

"You--you been awful good to me, Mame! I'll be back at the store Monday."

"Good-by, honey! Here, let me hold the umbrella while you get in the carriage. Gawd! ain't this a day, though? I'll go back up-stairs and straighten up a bit before I go to the store. Good-by, honey! Just don't you worry."

A few rain-beaten passersby huddled in the doorway to watch the procession off. Heads leaned farther from their windows. Within the hearse the Dove of Peace titillated on its white-carnation pillow as they moved off.

Tillie sank back against a soft corner of the carriage's black rep upholstery, which was punctured ever so often with deep-sunk buttons. There was a wide strap dangling beside the window for an arm-rest, and a strip of looking-glass between the front windows.

"I hope you are comfortable, little missy. If I say it myself, our carriages are comfortable--that's one thing about a Lux

funeral. There ain't a trust concern in the business can show finer springs or better tufting. But it's a easy matter to take cold in this damp. I've seen 'em healthy as a herring go off just like that!" said Mr. Lux, snapping his fingers to emphasize the precipitousness of sudden death.

"I ain't much of a one to take cold--neither was poor Angie. There wasn't a girl in the corsets had a better constitution than poor Angie. She always ailed a lot with her heart; but we never thought much of it."

"I thought she was your sister; but they say she was just your friend."

"Yes; but she was all I had--all I had."

"Such is life."

"Such is life."

They crept through the city streets, stopping to let cars rumble past them, pulling up sharply before reckless pedestrians; then a smooth bowling over a bridge as wide as a boulevard and out into the rain-sopped country, with leafless trees stretching their black arms against a rain-swollen sky, and the wheels cutting the mud road like a knife through cold grease.

"Angie would have loved this ride! She was always hatin' the rich for ridin' when she couldn't."

"There ain't a trust company in town can beat my carriages. I got a fifty-dollar, one-carriage funeral here that can't be beat."

"Everything is surely fine, Mr. Lux."

"Lemme cover your knees with this rug, missy. We have one in all the carriages. You look real worn out, poor little missy. It's a sad day for you. Here, sit over on this side--it's quit rainin' now, and I'll open the window."

The miles lengthened between them and the city, the horses were mud-splashed to their flanks. They turned into a gravel way and up an incline of drive. At its summit the white monuments of the dead spread in an extensive city before them--a calm city, with an occasional cross standing boldly against the sky.

"Lots of these were my funerals," explained Mr. Lux. "That granite block over there--this marble-base column. I buried old man Snift of the Bronx last July. They've been four Lux funerals in that family the past two years. His cross over there's the whitest Carrara in this yard."

Tillie turned her little tear-ravaged face toward the window, but her eyes were heavy and without life.

"I--I don't know what I'd do if you wasn't along, Mr. Lux. I--I'm scared."

"I'm here--don't you worry. Don't you worry. I'm just afraid that little lightweight jacket ain't warm enough."

"I got a heavier one; but this is mournin', and it's all I got in black."

"It's not the outside mournin' that counts for anything, missy; it's the crape you wear on your heart."

They buried Angie on a modest hillside, where the early sun could warm her and where the first spring anemones might find timid place. The soggy, new-turned earth filled up her grave with muffled thumps that fell dully on Tillie's heart and tortured her nerve-ends.

"Oh! oh! oh!" Her near-the-surface tears fell afresh; and when the little bed was completed, and the pillow of peace placed at its head, she was weak and tremble-lipped, like a child who has cried itself into exhaustion.

"Ah, little missy!" said Mr. Lux, breathing outward and passing his hand over his side-swept hair. "Life is lonely, ain't it? Lonely--lonely!"

"Y--yes," she said.

The rain had ceased, but a cold wind flapped Tillie's skirts and wrapped them about her limbs. They were silhouetted on their little hilltop against the slate-colored sky, and all about them were the marble monoliths and the Rocks of Ages of the dead.

"Goodbye, Angie!" she said, through her tears. "Goodbye, Angie!" And they went down the hillside, with the wind tugging at their hats, into their waiting carriage, and back as they had come, except that the hearse rolled swifter and lighter and the raindrops had dried on the glass.

"Oh--ah!" said Mr. Lux, breathing outward again and blinking his deep-set eyes. "Life is lonely--lonely, ain't it?--for those like you and me?"

"Lonely," she repeated.

He patted her little black handbag, that lay on the seat beside her, timidly, like a man touching a snapping-turtle.

"You poor, lonely little missy--and, if you don't mind my saying it, so pretty and all."

"My nose is red!" she said, dabbing at it with her handkerchief and observing herself in the strip of mirror.

"Like I care! I've seen a good many funerals in my day--and give me a healthy red-nose cry every time! I've had dry funerals and wet ones; and of the two it's the wet ones that go off easiest. Gimme a wet funeral, and I'll run it off on schedule time, and have the horses back in the stable to the minute! It's at the dry funerals that the wimmin go off in swoons and hold up things in every other drug store. I'm the last one to complain of a red nose, little missy."

"Oh," she said, catching her breath on the end of a sob, "I know I'm a sight! Poor Angie--she used to say a lot of women get credit for bein' tender-hearted when their red noses wasn't from cryin' at all, but from a small size and tight-lacin'. Poor Angie--to think that only day before yesterday we were going down to work together! She always liked to walk next to the curb, 'cause she said that's where the oldest ought to walk."

"In the midst of life we are in death," said Mr. Lux. The wind stiffened and blew more sharply still. "Lemme raise that window, little missy. It's gettin' real Novemberry--and you in that thin jacket and all. Hadn't we better stop off and get you a cup of coffee?"

"When I get home I'll fix it," she said. "When--I--get--home." She lowered her faintly purple lids and shivered.

"Poor little missy!"

Toward the close of their long drive a heavy dusk came early and shut out the dim afternoon; the lights of the city began to show whimsically through the haze.

"We're almost--home," she said.

"Almost; and if you don't mind I ain't going to leave you all alone up there. I'll go up with you and kinda stay a few minutes till--till the newness wears off. I know what them returns home mean. I'd kinda like to stay with you awhile, if you'll let me, Miss Prokes."

"Oh, Mr. Lux, you're so kind and all; but some of the girls from the store'll be over this evening--and Mame and George."

"I'll just come up a minute, then," said Mr. Lux, "and see if the boys got all the things out of the flat. Only last week they forgot and left a ebony coffin-stand at a place."

The din of the city closed in about them: the streets, already lashed dry by the wind, spread like a maze as they rolled off the bridge; then the halting and the jerking, the dodging of streetcars, and finally her own apartment building.

Mr. Lux unlocked the door and held her arm gently as they entered. The sweet, damp smell of carnations came out to meet them, and Tillie swayed a bit as she stood.

"Oh!--oh!--oh!"

"Easy there, little one. It'll be all right. It's pretty bleak at first, but it'll come round all right." He groped for a match and lit the gas. "There--you set a bit and take it easy."

A little blue-glass vase with three fresh white carnations decorated the center of the small table.

"See!" said Mr. Lux, bent on diverting. "Ain't they pretty? A gentleman friend, I guess, sent them to cheer you up--not? My! ain't they pretty, though?"

"Just think--Mame doin' all that for me! Straightening up and going out and getting me them flowers before she went to work! And--and Angie not here!"

"Little missy, you need to drink somethin' hot. Ain't there some coffee round, or somethin'?"

"Yes," she said; "but I-I got to get used to bein' here--bein' here without Angie--oh!"

"Come now--the carriage is downstairs yet, and there's a little bakeshop, with a table in the back, over on Twentieth

Street. If you'll let me take you over there it'll fix you up fine, and then I'll bring you back; and by that time your friends'll be here, and it won't be so lonesome-like."

She rose to her feet.

"I wanna go," she said. "I don't wanna stay here."

"That's the way to talk!" he said, smiling and showing a flash of strong, even teeth. "We'll fix you up all right!"

She looked up at him and half smiled.

"You're so nice to me and all," she said.

He felt of her coat-sleeve between his thumb and forefinger.

"Ain't you got somethin' warmer? It's gettin' cold, and you'll need it."

"Yes; but not--not mournin'!"

"It's the crape of the heart that counts," he repeated.

"All right," she said, like a child. "I'll wear my heavier one." And she walked half fearfully into the little room adjoining.

When she returned her face was freshly powdered and the pink rims about her eyes fainter. Her tan jacket was buttoned snugly about her. She stood for a moment under the bracket of light and smiled gratefully at him.

"I'm ready."

Mr. Lux stepped toward her and hooked his arm, like a cotillion leader asking a debutante into the dinner-hall; then stopped, took another step, and paused again. A quick wave of red swept over his face.

"Why!" he began; "why! Well!"

She looked down at her skirt with a woman's quick consciousness of self.

"I told you," she said, with her words falling one over the other; "I told you it wasn't mournin'! I--I--"

She followed his gaze to her coat-lapel and to the magenta bow. A hot pink flowed under her skin.

"Oh!" she cried. "Ain't I the limit? That--that bow was on, and I forgot--me wearin' a red bow on poor Angie's funeral day! Me--oh--"

Her fingers fumbled at the bow, and smarting tears stung her eyes. But Mr. Lux stepped to the blue-glass vase on the table, snapped a white carnation at the neck, and stuck it in his left coat-lapel; then he tore off a bit of fern and added it as a lacy background. His deep-set eyes were as mellow as sunlight.

"Hello!" he whispered, extending both hands and smiling at her until all his teeth showed. "Hello!"

"Hello!" she said, like one in a dream.



"HELLO!" HE WHISPERED, EXTENDING BOTH HANDS AND SMILING AT HER UNTIL
ALL HIS TEETH SHOWED

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THE SQUALL

LILLY raised the gas-flame beneath the coffee-pot and poked with a large three-pronged fork at the snapping chops in the skillet. The spark-spark of frying and the purl of boiling water grew madder and merrier, and a haze of blue smoke and steam rose from the little stove.

"I don't see why you can't stay for supper, Loo."

Miss Lulu Tracy opened her arms wide--like Juliet greeting the lark--and yawned.

"What's the use stickin' round?" she said, in gapey tones. "What's the use stickin' round where I ain't wanted? Charley ain't got no use for me, and you know it. I'll go over to the room and wait for you."

"Well, I like that! I guess I can have who I want in my own flat; he isn't bossin' me round--let me tell you that much." But she did not urge further.

"Oh, my feelin's ain't hurt, Lil. I jest dropped in on my way home from the store to see how things was comin' with you."

Lilly banged the little oven door shut with the toe of her shoe and, holding her brown-checked apron against her hand for protection, drained hot water from off a pan of jacketed potatoes--a billow of steam mounted to the ceiling, enveloping her.

"I've made up my mind, Loo. There's a whole lot of sense in what you've been saying--an' I'm going to do it."

"Now remember, Lil, I ain't buttin' in--I ain't the kind that butts into other people's business; but, when you come down to the store the other day and I seen how blue you was I got to talkin' before I meant to. That's the way with me when I get to feelin' sorry for anybody; I ain't always understood."

"You're just right in everything you said. It ain't like I was a girl that wasn't used to anything. If I do say so myself, there never was a more popular girl in the gloves than I was--you know what refined and genteel friends I had, Loo."

"That's what I always say--some girls could put up with this all right; but a person that had the swell time an' friends you did--to marry an' have to settle down like this--it just don't seem right. I always said, the whole time we was chumming together, you was cut out for a society life if ever a girl was. Of course, I ain't saying nothing against Charley, but no fellow can expect a girl like you to stick to this."

Miss Tracy fanned herself with a folded newspaper; her large, even-featured face glistened with tiny globules of perspiration; her blond hair had lost some of its crimp.

"Nobody can say I haven't done my duty by Charley, Loo. If ever a girl had a slow time it's been me; but I have been holdin' off, hoping he might get into something else. He ain't never wanted to stick himself; but it just seems like poundin' ragtime is all he's cut out for."

"A girl's gotta have life--that's what I always say. Just because you're married ain't no sign you're an old woman; but I don't want to poke into your business. If you make up your mind just you come over tonight after he leaves, and you can bunk with me in the old room, just like we used to. Lordy! wasn't them good old times?"

"Don't be surprised to see me, Loo. I ain't never let on to Charley, but it's been in my head a long time. I'd a whole lot rather be back in the department again than watchin' these four walls--I would."

"It's a darn shame! Why, I'd go clean daffy, Lil, if I had to stick round the way you do. What's the use o' bein' married, I'd like to know!"

"It won't be so easy to get back in the department, I'm afraid."

"Easy? Why, you can get your old job back like that!" Miss Tracy snapped her fingers with gusto. "It was only yesterday that an ancient dame with a glass eye bought a pair of chamois and asked for you--and Skinny heard her, too. He knows you had a good, genteel trade--and watch him grab you back! You ain't no dead one if you have been buried nearly two years."

"Ain't it so, Loo? Here I have been married going on two years! I ain't never let on even to you what I've been through. Charley's all right, but--"

"Yes, but I could tell. You can ask any of the girls down at the store if I wasn't always sayin' it was a shame for a girl with your looks to 'a throwed herself away."

Lilly dabbed and swabbed at the inside of a stew-pan; the irises of her eyes were unnaturally large--a wisp of hair, dry and electric, drifted across her face. She blew at it, pursing out her lower lip.

"I've been a fool!" she said.

"There's Maisie--been married just as long as you; and honest, Lil, I ain't been to a dance that I ain't seen her and Buck. Of course, Buck has got his faults, but when he's sober there ain't nothin' he won't do to give Maisie a swell time."

Lilly bristled. "One thing I will say for Charley--I believe in givin' everybody his dues--Charley's never laid a hand on me; and that's more'n Maisie Cloot can say!" She finished with some asperity.

"I guess there ain't none of them perfect when it comes right down to it--ain't it so? I seen Maisie the week after she had that bad eye, and I never see a sweller seal-ring than she was wearin'. Buck's rough, but he tries to make up for it--not that I got anything against Charley."

Miss Tracy took a few steps that were suggestive of departure.

"I always say, Lil, it ain't so much the feller as how he treats you. It ain't none of my put-in, but I'd like to see the man that could make me sit at home alone seven nights in the week--that's what I would!"

"Well, if you gotta go, Loo, you gotta go. I'm so excited-like I kind o' hate to have you leave."

"There's nothin' to get excited about. It's just like you say: you've been thinkin', and now you've made up your mind. Now all you got to do is act--you got the note written, ain't you?"

Lilly took a small square of yellow paper from her blouse and passed it to her friend.

"Are you sure it reads all right, Loo?"

Miss Tracy read carefully:

DEAR CHARLIE,—You do not need to come after me, as I am
not coming back. I could not stand it—no girl could.

Yours truly,

LIL.

"Yes; that's great. So long as you ain't sore at him for no other reason, there ain't no use kickin' up. That just shows him where he stands. There ain't no use fightin'—just quit!"

Lilly slipped the bit of paper back into her blouse.

"I'll see you later," she said, with new determination.

"Now don't let me influence you. Make up your mind and do what you think is best. Then don't be a quitter--when I start a thing I always see it through. Give me a girl with backbone every time. I glory in your spunk!"

"Oh, I got the spunk, all right, Loo." They linked arms and went through the little bedroom into the parlor. At the door Miss Tracy lingered.

"Your flat's got the room beat by a long shot; but I always say it don't make no difference whether you live in a palace or a cottage, just so you're happy. Gimme one room and what I want, and you can have all your swell marble-entrance apartments. Ain't that right?"

"You've hit it, Loo. Take this here red parlor set--when me and Charley went down to pick it out I couldn't hardly wait till we got it up in the flat; and now just look! I can't look red plush in the face no more."

"That's the way of the world," said Loo. She sucked in her breath and cluck-clucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth.

"I'll be over about eight, then--after he goes."

"All right. Bring what you need, and send for the other stuff. You better put in a party dress; we might get a date for to-night, for all I know. You know you always brought me luck when it come to dates. I ain't had a chum since that could bring them round like you."

"Oh, Loo! I ain't thinkin' about such things."

"Sure you ain't; but it won't hurt you to know you're livin', will it?—and to chaperon your friend?"

"No," admitted Lil.

"Well, so long! I'll see you later. Don't let on to Charley I was over. He ain't got no truck for me."

They embraced.

"Good-by for a little while, Loo."

"Good-by, dearie."

Lilly watched her friend pass down the narrow hall, then she closed the door. Left alone, she crossed to the window and leaned out well beyond the casement—a *Demoiselle* whose three lilies were despair, anger, and fear. The stagnant air, savored with frying pork, weighted her down with its humidity; her brow puckered into tiny lines.

Do not, reader, construe this setting too lightly. The most pungent essay in all literature is devoted to the succulence of roast pig; Sappho was most lyric after she had rubbed her wine goblet with garlic-flavored ewe meat. But such kindly reflection was not Lilly's—fleshpots and life alike were unsavory.

The Nottingham lace curtains hung limp and motionless round her, and waves of heat deflected from the asphalt came up heavy as fog. Three stories beneath, Third Avenue spluttered on the griddle of a merciless August—an exhausted day was duskening into a scarcely less kind twilight; she could feel the brick wall of the building exhaling like a furnace.

It was characteristic of Lilly that, with the thermometer up in three figures and her own mental mercury well toward

the top of the tube, she should strike the one note of relief in a Saharan aridness. She suggested the drip of clear water in a grotto or the inmost petals of a tight-closed rose. If her throat ached and strained to keep down the tears, her neck, where the sheer white collar fell away, was cold and chaste; if anger and resentment were pounding through her veins the fresh firmness of her flesh did not betray it.

She leaned her head against the window-frame and looked down with a certain remoteness upon the human caldron three stories removed. Lights were beginning to prick out wanly; the bang and clang of humanity, distant, but none the less insistent, came up to her in a medley of street-car clangs, shouts, and hum-hum. Children cried.

Upon a fire-escape level with her own window a child, with bare feet extended over the iron rail, slept on an improvised bed; from the interior of that same apartment came the wail of a sick infant. A woman nude to the waist passed to and fro before the open window, crooning to the bundle she carried in the crook of her arm. Lilly's mouth hung at the corners.

Came darkness, she passed out into the kitchen and covered the slow-cooking chops with a tin lid, lighted the gas-jet, turning the flame down into a mere bead, and resumed her watch at the front window.

Clear like a clarion a familiar whistle ripped through the din of the street and came up to her sharp and undiverted--two clean calls and a long, quavering ritornelle. At that signal, for the year and a half of their married life, Lilly had unfailingly fluttered a white handkerchief of greeting from the three flights up. Her arm contracted reflexly, but she stayed it and stepped back into the frame of the window, leaning straight and tense against the jamb. Her pulse leaped into the hundreds as she stood there, her arms hugging her sides and her blouse rising and falling with the heave of her bosom, her handkerchief a tight little wad in the palm of her hand.

Again the call, tearing straight and true to its destination! She remained taut as stretched elastic. There was a wondering interim--and a third time the signal split the air, sharp-questioning, insistent. Then a silence.

Lilly darted into the kitchen and stooped absorbed over the burbling coffee. A key rattled the front-room lock, and she bent lower over the stove. She heard her name called sharply; a door slammed, and her husband bounded into the kitchen, his face streaming perspiration and his collar like a rag about his neck.

"Hello, honey! Gee! You gimme a scare there fer a minute. I thought the heat might 'a' got you."

He gathered her in his arms, pushed back her head, and looked into her reluctant eyes.

"What's the matter, hon? You ain't sick, are you?"

She wriggled herself free of his arms and turned to the stove.

"No," she said, in a monotone, "I ain't sick."

He regarded her with a worried pucker between his eyes.

"Aw, come on, Lil--tell a fellow what's the matter, can't you? It ain't like you to be like this."

"Nothin'!" she insisted.

"You gimme a swell turn there fer a minute. They're droppin' like flies to-day--hottest day in five summers."

Silence.

"Whew!" He peeled off his coat and hung it, with his imitation Panama hat, behind the door; his pink shirt showed dark streaks of perspiration; and he tugged at the rear button of his limp collar.

"Be-e-lieve me, the pianner business ain't what it's cracked up to be! There ain't a picture house in town got the Gem beat when it comes to heat. Had to take off the Flyin' Papinta act to-day and run in an extry picture because two of the kids give out with the heat. I've played to over ten thousand feet o' films to-day; and be-e-lieve me, it was some stunt!"

He sluiced his face with cold water at the sink, and slush-slashed his head in a roller-towel, talking the while.

"I never seen the--extry picture--they--run in to cover the--Papinta act; and before I--could keep up--with the film--I was givin' ragtime fer a funeral. You oughta heard Joe squeal!" He laughed and threw his arms affectionately across his wife's shoulder. "Eh--ragtime fer a funeral! Fine pianner-player you got fer a husband, honey!"

Given a checked suit, a slender bamboo cane, and a straw Katy slightly askew, Charley might have epitomized vaudeville. He had once won a silver watch-fob for pre-eminent buck-dancing at a Coney Island informal, and could sing "Oh, You Great Big Beautiful Doll!" with nasal perfection.

"Yes, sirree, Lil; you got a fine pianner-player fer a husband!"

She squirmed away from his touch and carried the coffee-pot to the little set-for-two table. The chops steamed from a blue-and-white plate. Her husband, unburdened with subtleties, straddled his chair and scraped up to the table; his collapsed collar, with two protruding ends of red necktie, lay on the window-sill; the sleeves of his pink shirt were rolled back to the elbow.

The meal opened in a silence broken only by the clat-clat of dishes and the wail of suffering babies.

"Poor kiddies, they ain't got a chance in a hundred. Gee! If I had the coin, wouldn't I give them a handout of fresh air and milk? I'd give every one of the durn little things a Delmonico banquet. I'd jest as soon get hit in the head as hear them kids bawl."

Suddenly he glanced up from his plate and pushed himself from the table; his wife was making bread-crumbs out of her bread.

"Say, Lil, I ain't never seen you like this before! Ain't you feeling good? Come on--tell a feller what's the matter with you."

He rose and came round to her chair, leaning over its back and taking her cheeks between thumb and forefinger.

"Come on, Lil; what's the matter? You ain't sore at me, are you?"

"Can't a girl get tired once in a while?" she said.

"Poor little pussy!" He patted her hair and returned to his place. "Guess what I got!" groping significantly in the direction of his hip-pocket. "Something you been havin' your heart set on fer a long time. Guess!"

"I dunno," she said.

"Aw, gwan, kiddo! Give a guess."

"I can't guess, Charley."

"Well, then, I'll give you three guesses."

"I dunno."

"Look--now can you?"

He showed her the top of a small, square box tied with blue cord. It bore a jeweler's mark.

"Can you guess now, Lil? It's something you been aching fer."

"Lemme alone!" she said.

He looked at her in frank surprise, slowly replacing the box in his hip-pocket.

"Durned if I know what's got you!" he muttered.

"Nothing ain't got me," she insisted.

He brightened.

"Poor little girl! Never mind; next summer I'm goin' to grab that Atlantic City job I been tellin' you about. The old man said again yesterday that, jest as sure as he opens his sheet-music bazar down there next season, it's me fer the keyboard."

"His schemes don't ever turn out. I know his talk," his wife objected.

"Sure they will this time, Lil; he's got a feller to back it. He dropped in special to hear me play the 'Louisanner Rusticanner Rag' to-day; an' honest, Lil, he couldn't keep his feet still! I sprung that new one on him, too--the 'Giddy Glide'--an' I had to laugh; the old man nearly jumped over the pianner--couldn't sit quiet! Just you wait, Lil. I got that job cinched--no more picture-show stuff fer me! It'll be us fer the board-walk next summer!"

"That's jest what you said about grabbin' that Coney Island job this season."

"I couldn't help it that they cut out the pianner at the Concession, could I? The films ain't no more fun fer me than fer you, honey."

"It's pretty lonesome for a girl sitting here alone every night. It was bad enough before you took the twelve-to-two job; but I never have no evenin's nohow."

He looked at her with wide-open eyes.

"I didn't know you were sore, Lil--on the real, I didn't! I jest took that cafe job fer a few weeks to help along the surprise." His hand went to his hip-pocket.

"Oh," she said, her lips curling, "I'm sick of that line of talk."

"Lil!"

There was a count-five pause; and then the old cheeriness came back into his voice.

"I'm going to cut out the cafe job, anyway, now that--"

"Oh, never mind," she said, indifferently. "What's it matter whether you are home at twelve or two? I ain't had no evenin's for a good long time, anyhow."

"I guess you're right. Don't I wish I had some steady clerkin' job, like Bill! But it don't seem like I am cut out fer anything but pounding ragtime--you knew that, honey, before we was--" He stopped, reddening.

"No, I didn't! If I'd known before we was married what I know now, things might be different. How was I to know that you was goin' to be changed from matinee work to all-night shows? How was I to know you was goin' to make me put up with a life like this? When I see other girls that's married out of the department, and me, I jest wanna die! Look at Sally Lee and Jimmy--they go to vaudyville every week and to Coney Saturdays. You even kick if I wanna go over to Loo's to spend a evening!"

"I don't kick, Lil; I jest don't like to have you running round with that live wire. She ain't your style."

"That's right--run down my friends that I worked next to in the gloves fer four years! She was good enough fer me then. Me and her is old friends, and jest 'cause I'm married don't make me better'n her."

"I'm sorry I kicked up about it, honey. Maybe I was wrong."

"She can tell you that I had swell times when I was in the gloves--even when I was in the notions, too. There wasn't a night I didn't have a bid for some dance or something."

"Well, if this ain't a darn sight better'n pushing gloves at six per I'll--I'll--"

"I'll give you to understand, Charley Harkins, that I was making eight dollars when I married you, and everybody said that I'd 'a' been promoted to the jewelry in another year."

She rose, gathered a pyramid of dishes, and clattered them into the dish-pan as he talked. He followed after her.

"Aw, quit your foolin', Lil, can't you? Don't treat a feller like this when he comes home at night. I'll get Shorty to take the piano next Saturday, and we'll do Coney from one end to the other. We only live once, anyway. Come on, Lil; be nice and see what I got fer you, too."

"Don't treat me like I was a kid! When I was in the gloves I didn't think nothin' of goin' to Coney every other night, and you know it, all right."

The red surged back into his face.

"Yes, you had a swell time shooting gloves! You used to tell me yourself you was ready to drop at night."

"Ain't I ready to drop here?" she flashed back at him. "Am I any better off here doin' my work in the hottest flat on Third Avenue?"

"Things'll come out all right, honey. Come on and kiss me before I go."

She submitted to his embrace passively enough, and at his request retied his necktie round a fresh collar for him.

"Good night, pussy! I'll come in soft so as not to wake you--there ain't goin' to be no more of this two-o'clock business. I'm goin' to cut out the cafe. Put a glass of milk out fer me, honey. I'm near dead when I get in."

He struggled into his coat before the little dressing-table mirror of their bedroom and with a sly smile slipped the blue-corded box into a top drawer.

"I got a surprise fer you, Lil--only you ain't in no mood fer it right now."

"I ain't in no humor for nothin'," she said.

"It's going to be a scorcher. You take it easy and get rid of these blues you been gettin' here lately. You ain't got no better friend than your old man or any one who wants to do more of the right thing by you."

"I'll take a car-ride over to Loo's to cool off," she said, apathetically.

He opened his lips to speak; instead he nodded and kissed her twice. Then he hurried out.

After he left her she sank down on the little divan of highly magnetized red plush and stared into space. Face to face with her weeks-old resolve, her courage fainted, and a shudder like ague passed over her. She could hear herself wheeze in her throat; and her petal-like skin, unrelieved by moisture, was alternately hot and cold.

The low-ceiled room, dark except for a reflected slant of yellow gas-light coming in from the kitchen, closed down like an inverted bowl. She went to the window.

On the fire-escape opposite, the child still slept, one little ghost of a bare foot extending over the rail. As she watched, a woman's voice from within the apartment cried out sharply--a panicky cry filled with terror; then a silence--more pregnant than the call itself. Lily knew, with a dull tugging at her heartstrings, that the babe had died. Only a week before she and Charley had seen a little life snuffed out in the apartment above, and she knew the mother-cry. Charley had dressed the child and cried hot, unashamed tears; then, as now, her own eyes were dry, but her throat ached.

East Side tradition has it that every tenth year exacts the largest share of human toil--this might have been Death's Oberammergau!

Trembling, Lilly turned and groped her way into the little bedroom; drawers slid open and slammed shut, tissue-paper rattled, the hasps of a trunk snapped; then came the harsh sing of water pouring from a faucet. Presently she reappeared in the doorway in a fresh white blouse and a dark-blue skirt; there were pink cotton rosebuds on her hat and a long pair of white silk gloves dangling from one hand. In the other she carried a light wicker hand-satchel.

By the shaft of light she reread the small square of yellow paper and impaled it carefully, face up, on the pincushion of their little dressing-table. It poised like a conspicuous butterfly. Then she went out into the kitchen, poured a glass of milk, placed it beside a small cake of ice in a correspondingly small refrigerator, turned off the gas-light, and went out of the apartment without once glancing behind her.

Miss Lulu Tracy lived in a lower West Side rooming-house. Lily had once dwelt in that same dingy-fronted building, in a room which, like her friend's, was reduced to its lowest terms. The familiar cryptic atmosphere met her as she crossed the threshold. Loo greeted her effusively.

"Lordy, Lil, I was afraid you was gettin' cold feet! Sit right down there on the trunk till I get some of this cold-cream off. I'm ready to drop in my tracks, I am. Three of the lace-girls fainted to-day and had to be took home. Ain't this room awful?"

Lilly sank in a little heap on the trunk.

"It *is* hot," she admitted.

"Hot? You look like a cucumber. Wait'll I get this cold-cream off, and tell me all about it. I'm here to tell you that you're all right, you are. Give me a game one every time! But wait till I tell you what's up."

Miss Tracy laved her face with layers of cold-cream, which she presently removed with a towel.

"Don't I wish I had your skin, Lil!"

Lilly brightened.

"Quit your kiddin', Loo," she said. "I ain't used to jollying no more."

"You know yourself you was the best looker we ever had at the counter. Skinny calls you The Lily to this day."

"I ain't got the looks I once had, Loo." But her fair face flushed.

"Wait till you get round a little--you'll look five years younger." Lilly giggled. "On the real, Lil, there wasn't a girl in the department didn't expect you to marry some swell instead of Charley Harkins. If I'd 'a' had your looks I wouldn't been satisfied with nothin' but the real thing. Look at Tootsie grabbin' old man Rickman! She can't hold a candle to you."

"Just the samey, she'd 'a' rather had Charley if she could 'a' got him. I know a thing or two about that."

Cold-cream removed, Miss Tracy enveloped her friend in an embrace.

"So you're goin' to bunk with me to-night! Seems like old times, don't it?"

"Just like old times," said Lilly.

"Now tell me how you got away. He didn't get wise, did he?"

"No; I just left the note, Loo."

"That'll hold him for a while. You're the real thing, you are! Not that I want to make any trouble, but a blind man could see that you're a fool to spend your time that way. Huh! Sellin' gloves ain't no cinch, but if it ain't got being buried alive beat by a long shot I'll eat my hat!"

Impressed by her friend's gastronomic heroism, Lilly acquiesced. "You're right. I'll try to get my job back to-morrow. Maybe it won't be so easy."

"Easy?" cried Loo. "Why, the easiest thing you ever tried! The gloves haven't forgot you."

"I hope not," sighed Lilly.

"You're game, all right! I like to see a girl stand up for her rights--there ain't no man livin' could boss me! I'd like to see the King of Germany hisself coop me up seven nights in the week an' me stand for it. Not muchy! I got as much fight in me as any man. That's the kind of a hair-pin I am!"

"I'm like you, Loo. I got to thinking over what you told me the other day, and you're right: there ain't no girl would stand for it. Girls gotta have life."

"Of course they do! And you're going to have some to-night--that's what I got up my sleeve. Mr. Polly, in the laces, is comin' to take me to the Shippin' Clerks' dance up at the One Hundred and Fifteenth Street Hall--and you're coming right along with us."

Lilly lowered her eyes like a debutante.

"Oh, Loo, I--I can't go to no dances. I--Charley--I didn't mean--"

"I'd like to know what harm there is goin' to a dance with me and my gentleman friend? Didn't Aggie go with us all the time Bill was doin' night-work? Before she got her divorce there wasn't a week she wasn't somewhere with us. Besides, Polly is a perfect gentleman."

"But I ain't got nothin' to wear, Loo."

"Didn't you bring what I told you?"

"Yes; but--"

"Well, then, you're goin'. If Charley Harkins don't like it he should have taken you to dances hisself."

"I ain't been to a dance since the Ladies' Mask me and Charley went to when he was still playing matinees. I've almost forgot how."

Her eyes were like stars.

"Swell dancers like you used to be don't forget so easy."

"My dress is old, but it is low-neck."

"It's all right; and you can wear my forget-me-not wreath in your hair--it'll just match your dress."

They took the frock from the wicker bag and held it up.

"That's just fine, Lil; and you can carry my old fan--I got a new one from a gentleman friend for Christmas."

"Loo!"

Lulu piled her hair into an impressive coiffure.

"Oh, Loo, you look just like that picture that's on cigar-boxes!"

"You got the littlest waist I ever seen," reciprocated Lulu, regarding Lilly's sylphid figure with admiring eyes.

"You ought to have seen me the first year I was working, Loo. I ain't got such a little waist any more, but I did have some figure then."

They dressed in relays, taking turns about before the splotched mirror.

"Here, Lil, let me pin up them sleeves a little. Mame says all the swell waists up in the ready-to-wears have short sleeves."

"I've had my eye on a swell silver bracelet in Shank's window, Loo, for a long time; they are so pretty with elbow-sleeves."

They pecked at each other like preening birds. At seven Lulu's suitor arrived. They took final dabs at themselves.

"He ain't such a nifty looker, Lil, but he sure knows how to treat a girl swell. He ain't none of your piker kind that runs past a drug store like the soda-fountain was after him. Why, I've known him to treat to as many as three sodas in an evenin'! And say, kid, he is some classy dresser--latest jewelry and black-and-white initials worked on his shirt-sleeves. I met him at a mask, and he give me his card."

"Does he know you work?"

"Yes; but he said he'd rather have a girl tell him she's workin' like I did than to have her stuff him."

"That's what I used to say; they find out, anyway."

"Sure they do; the only time I told a guy I didn't work was that time with you."

"That time you told Mr. Evans you was goin' to school?"

"Yes; and he up and said: 'Yes; you go to school! You wrestle with pots, you do, sis.'"

They laughed reminiscently.

"We sure used to have swell times together, Lulu."

"Swell times--well, I guess yes! I never did have the same good times with no chum of the department since you left."

They descended to meet Mr. Polly in the lower hall. That gentleman rose from the hat-tree. Four fingers of a tan glove protruded with studied intent from the breast-pocket of his coat; his trousers and sleeves were creased as definitely as paper. Mr. Polly's features were strictly utilitarian--it was his boast that by a peculiar muscular contraction he could waggle his ears with fidelity to asinine effect.

His mouth was of such proportions that the slightest smile revealed his teeth back to the molars. He smiled as he rose from the hat-tree.

"Howdy-do, Mr. Polly? Is it warm enough for you? I want to make you acquainted with my friend, Lilly Harkins."

"Pleased to meet you," said Mr. Polly.

"I didn't think you'd mind my bringin' a lady friend along to-night. I thought maybe you could find her a friend up at the hall, Mr. Polly."

He bowed with alacrity.

"Always ready to do the ladies a favor," he said, extending both arms akimbo and stepping between them.

Lilly hung back with becoming reticence.

"I'm afraid I'm butting in--two's company an' three's a crowd."

They hastened to reassure her.

"You just make yourself right at home. I'm always ready to do the ladies a favor, Miss Harkins."

A startled expression flashed across Lilly's face. Her friend sprang into the breach like a life-saver off a pier.

"Miss Harkins ain't the kind of a girl to sponge on nobody. Mr. Polly knows if she's my friend she's all right."

"That's the idea," agreed Mr. Polly. "I like to see girls good friends." The trio swung down the street.

"That's what I always say. Why, before Lil was mar--Why, me and Lil never are stingy with our gentlemen friends. I was always the first one to introduce you--wasn't I, Lil?"

"Yes; and me the same way," amended Lilly. "I think it's the right way to be."

"I got a friend comin' up to the dance to-night, just about your style of a fellow, Miss Harkins. One nice chap--he's been in the stock-room at Tracy's for years; some little sport, too."

"Ain't that grand!" beamed Lulu. "Two couple of us!"

Lilly hummed a little air as they walked along, both girls receiving the slightest of Mr. Polly's sallies with effusion.

"Oh, dear; it's just like going to a show to be with you, Mr. Polly," gasped Lulu, after the gentleman had waggled his ears beneath his hat until it rose from his head with magician's skill. "How can you be so comical! You ought to be on the stage."

"That ain't nothin'. You ought to see me keep all the girls in the laces laughin'! I believe in laughin', not cryin'. By the way," he said, elated with success, "guess this riddle: Why is a doughnut like a life-preserved?"

Both puckered their brows and sought in vain for a similarity between those widely diversified objects. After breathless volunteers the girls owned themselves outwitted; then Mr. Polly relieved the situation.

"A doughnut is like a life-preserved," he explained, "because they're both sinkers."

The two gasped with laughter, Lulu placing a helpful hand on her left hip.

"Oh, Mr. Polly," she panted, "you're simply killin'!"

"Sim-ply kill-in'" echoed Lilly.

They turned into the dance-hall. Lilly's nostrils widened; the pink flew into her cheeks.

"Oh, say!" she cried; "I'd rather dance than eat."

Mr. Polly excused himself and hastened away to find his friend. He returned with a dark young man, whose sartorial perfection left nothing to be desired. He had been dancing, and wiped about the edge of his tall collar with a purple-bordered silk handkerchief.

"Ladies," announced Mr. Polly, "I want to introduce you to the swellest dancer on the floor to-night--you may think I'm kiddin', but I'm not. Miss Tracy and Miss Harkins, this is my friend, Mr. George Sippy."

Mr. Sippy pirouetted on one tan oxford and cast his eyes upward. "I'm all fussed," he said; "but pleased to meet you, ladies."

The girls laughed again. Then they strolled toward the dance-hall, where the gentleman bought tickets. Dancing at the One Hundred and Fifteenth Street Hall was five cents the selection.

The music struck up. Lulu crossed both hands upon her chest, Mr. Polly clasped her round the waist, and they moved off with that sinew tension peculiar to dance-halls. Mr. Sippy turned to Lilly.

"Will you go round, Miss Harkins?"

They melted into the embrace of the dance and moved off. When Mr. Sippy danced every faculty was pressed into service--his head was thrown back and his feet glided like well-trained automatons.

"Wasn't that just grand!" breathed Lilly, when the music ceased. She was softly radiant.

"Swell!" agreed Mr. Sippy, applauding for an encore. "Swell!" He regarded her with new interest. "You're some dancer, kid," he said.

"Oh, Mr. Sippy, who could help dancin' good with you?"

They glided away again. After the waltz they sought the side-lines, where soft drinks were served. A waiter dabbed at the table-top; Lilly fanned herself and ordered sarsaparilla.

"You don't look hot--you look cool," said Mr. Sippy, admiringly.

She took a dainty draught through her straw.

"I'm just happy--that's all," she replied.

The misery, the monotony, the wail of the mother, her own desperation--were away back in the experience of another self. Life had turned on its axis and swung her out of darkness into light. Girls in lacy waists and with swagger hips laughed into her eyes; men looked at her with frank admiration. George Sippy leaned toward her and looked intimately into her face.

"Say," he said, "Polly must have known I like blondes."

"Oh, and I'm always wishin' to be a brunette!"

"You're my style, all right."

"I'll bet you say that to every girl."

"Nix I do. You can ask Polly if I ain't hard to suit. I know just what style of girl I like."

"There's a lot in knowin' just what you like," she said, archly.

"That's some yellow hair you got," he observed, irrelevantly. "My sister used to have hair like that."

She felt of her coiffure.

"Do you like 'em? You ought to see 'em just after they been washed."

Mr. Sippy expressed a polite desire to observe the phenomenon. They danced again. Once in the maze of couples, they caught sight of Lulu and Mr. Polly, and they changed partners; but after a while they drifted together again.

"Gee!" said Mr. Sippy. "I'd rather dance with you."

"Ain't that funny?" said Lilly. "That's just what I was thinkin'."

They looked into each other's eyes.

"I ain't the kind of a fellow that takes up with every girl," explained Mr. Sippy, in self-elucidation.

"That's just what I like," said Lilly; "that's just the way with me. It ain't everybody I take a likin' to; but when I do like a person I like 'em."

"Now just look at me," went on Mr. Sippy. "If I wanted to I could bring a girl down here every night; but I don't, just because it ain't often I take a fancy to a girl."

"I like for a gentleman not to be so common-like."

"I like a person or I don't like them, that's all." He looked at her ringless hands. "You ain't keepin' no steady company, are you?"

She colored clear up into her hair.

"No," she replied, in a breathy voice.

"Can I have the pleasure of escorting you to Coney to-morrow night?"

"I'll be pleased to accept your company," she said.

They danced again, and her hair brushed his cheek.

"You're some girl, all right!" he said, holding her close.

She giggled on his shoulder.

"Gee, but I love to dance!"

"Say," he said, looking down at her suspiciously, "is it my dancing you like or me?"

"Silly!" she whispered. "I like you and your dancing."

"You're all right, little one!" he assured her.

When they finally left the hall the lights were beginning to dim. The four of them went out into the quiet streets together. The street-cars had ceased to rattle except at long intervals. They walked in twos, arms interlaced, talking in subdued tones. A cool breeze had sprung up.

At a corner drug store they partook of foamy soda-water and scooped, with long-handled spoons, refreshing mouthfuls of ice-cream from their glasses. Perched on high stools before an onyx fountain, they regarded themselves in the mirror and smiled at each other in the reflection.

At Lulu's rooming-house they lingered again, talking in subdued tones on the brownstone stoop.

"I'll call for you early to-morrow night, Miss Harkins; and, since we decided to make a party of it, me and Polly'll call for you and Miss Tracy together."

"That'll be nice," she said.

"I'm glad you have no other fellow--I don't like no partnership stuff."

"I love Coney," she said.

At last they separated, and the two girls tiptoed up to the terrific heat of their box.

"Phew!" gasped Lilly. "Ain't this just awful?"

Lulu lighted the gas and turned ecstatic eyes upon her friend.

"Lil, I always did say you brought me luck when it came to fellers--I think I got him to-night, all right."

"Oh, Loo, ain't I glad!"

"Just feel my hand, Lil--how excited I am!"

"I'm sure glad for you, dearie."

"Glad! Girl, you don't know what I'd give to own a corner of my own, where I'd never have to see a glove no more!"

She curled up on the bed, forgetful of everything but her own potential happiness.

"He sure did everything but pop to-night. Come over here and kiss me, kid."

They kissed.

"My red kimono's on the top shelf--you undress first; just help yourself." She slumped deeper in bed. "I guess you didn't make some hit yourself to-night, *Miss Harkins*--and I guess I didn't make some hit myself!"

Lulu laughed immoderately. Lilly fingered the lace at her throat.

"What's the matter? You ain't sore at the joke, are you, *Miss Harkins*?"

"No," replied Lilly; she spoke through a mental and physical nausea--a reaction which laid violent hold of and sickened her. Lulu loomed to her like a grotesque figure. The imprint of Mr. Sippy's farewell hand-shake was still moist in her own hand.

"What time is it, Loo?"

"Well, what do you know about that? It's ten after one! Gee! don't I wish to-morrow was Sunday? You gotta climb out early with me if you're goin' to that job."

"One o'clock!" Lilly's voice caught in terror. "One o'clock! I can't beat Charley home no more now."

"Whatta you mean? Ain't you goin' to stay here with me? You ain't quittin' now, are you--after all the trouble I went to to interdooce you to my gentlemen friends?"

Lilly nodded.

"You been awfully good, Loo; but I ain't got the nerve. I gotta go back to Charley."

Lulu jerked to a sitting posture, her feet dangling over the edge of the bed.

"Well, ain't this a fine come-off! What'll my friends think of me? I always say you never get no thanks for tryin' to help other people; that's what I get for tryin' to do the right thing by you."

"It ain't you, Loo--I had a fine and dandy time."

"Come on, Lil--come to bed, and you'll be all right in the mornin'. Gee! Won't the girls be glad to see the beauty back? Come on to bed--it's too late for you to go back to-night, anyhow; there's time to talk 'bout things in the mornin'. I wouldn't let any man know I couldn't get along without him! Come on, Lil, and tell me what the guy to-night was like."

Lilly was pinning on her hat in an agony of haste.

"I left the note on the pincushion. If he goes in the kitchen for his milk first, like he does on hot nights, maybe I can beat him! He may be--"

Her voice trailed down the hall. She fumbled a little at the street door, hot flushes darting over her body.

In the street-car Lilly dug her nails through the silk palms of her gloves and sat on the edge of the seat, her pulse pounding in her ear. Her voiceless prayer beat against her brain. She did not see or think beyond the possibility of reaching their bedroom before her husband.

Charley was due home now--as she was lumbering across town in a lethargic street-car. Her whole destiny hung on the frail thread of possibility--the possibility that her husband would follow his wont of warm nights and browse round the kitchen larder before entering their room. She drew in a suffocating breath at the thought of Charley's wrath--she had once seen him on the verge of anger.

To reach home and the note first! That hope beat against her temples; it flooded her face with color; it turned her cold and clammy. She left the car a corner too soon and ran the block, thinking to gain time over the jogging street-car; it passed her midblock, and she sobbed in her throat.

She turned the corner sharply. From the street she could see the yellow glow of gas coming from a side-window of her apartment; the light must come from one of two rooms--her sick senses could not determine which.

"Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh!" her breath came in long, inarticulate wheezes. "Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh!" A policeman eyed her suspiciously and struck the asphalt with his stick. She turned into the embrace of the apartment house and ran up the three flights of stairs with limbs that trembled under her; her cold fingers groped about before she could muster strength to turn the key in the lock.

Lilly entered noiselessly. The bedroom was dark. Tears sprang to her eyes. For a moment she reeled; then she felt along the parlor wall to the middle room. By the shaft of light from the kitchen she could see the yellow note undisturbed, poised like a conspicuous butterfly. Her hand closed over it--she crushed it in her palm.

"Charley!" she called, and entered the kitchen.

Her husband was standing by the window--his face the white of cold ashes. He looked up at her like a man coming out of a dream.

"Charley," she cried, "I was afraid you'd get worried. I went over to Loo's, and we stayed up and talked so late--I didn't know--"



"I WENT OVER TO LOO's, AND WE STAYED UP AND TALKED SO LATE—I DIDN'T
KNOW—"

She stopped at the sight of his face; her fear returned.

"Charley, you--you--"

He regarded her, with the life coming back into his eyes and warming his face.

"It's this heat; this pesky old heat almost got me!"

"My poor, sweet boy!" she said, with a sob of relief. "My poor, sweet boy!"

He caressed her weakly, like a man whose strength has been drained from him.

"You ain't mad at me because I kicked up at supper, are you, Charley? You know I don't mean what I say when I'm out of sorts--you know there ain't nobody like my boy!"

He kissed her.

"No; I ain't sore, honey."

"Here's your milk in the ice-box. You must have just got in before me. An' let me fix you a sardine sandwich, lovey."

"I--I ain't hungry, Lil. I--I can't eat nothin'--honest."

"I want you to, Charley--you've had a hard day."

"Yes, a hard day!" he repeated, smiling.

She prepared him a sandwich. At the sink her foot struck a small, square package bearing a jeweler's stamp. It might have dropped there from nerveless fingers or been wilfully hurled.

She picked it up wonderingly. It was neatly tied with blue cord.

"What's this?"

Her husband started.

"That? Oh, that's the little surprise I was tellin' you 'bout. I started to fix it fer to-morrow; but--but--" His voice died in his throat.

She opened it with trembling fingers.

"It's the silver bracelet!" she cried. "It's the silver bracelet!"

The unshed tears sprang to her eyes.

"Oh, Charley dear, you ain't--you ain't--" The tears came like an avalanche down an incline and choked off her speech.

He folded her to him.

"No, dear; I ain't!" he soothed.

THE END