

FICTION

Louis Joseph Vance

Joan Thursday

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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JOAN THURSDAY

A NOVEL

BY LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
OSCAR CESARE

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TO
GRANT RICHARDS



"Oh," she said, "I guess I'll do, all right, all right!"

CONTENTS

I
II
III
IV
V
VI
VII
VIII
IX
X
XI
XII
XIII
XIV
XV
XVI
XVII

[XVIII](#)
[XIX](#)
[XX](#)
[XXI](#)
[XXII](#)
[XXIII](#)
[XXIV](#)
[XXV](#)
[XXVI](#)
[XXVII](#)
[XXVIII](#)
[XXIX](#)
[XXX](#)
[XXXI](#)
[XXXII](#)
[XXXIII](#)
[XXXIV](#)
[XXXV](#)
[XXXVI](#)
[XXXVII](#)
[XXXVIII](#)
[XXXIX](#)

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

["Oh," she said, "I guess I'll do, all right, all right!"](#)

["What's the matter with you, anyway?" he demanded, hotly](#)

["Miss Thursday--my fiancee. Joan, this is Mrs. Marbridge"](#)

[The door slammed. He was gone](#)

JOAN THURSDAY

I

She stood on the southeast corner of Broadway at Twenty-second Street, waiting for a northbound car with a vacant seat. She had been on her feet all day and was very tired, so tired that the prospect of being obliged to stand all the way uptown seemed quite intolerable. And so, though quick with impatience to get home and "have it over with," she chose to wait.

Up out of the south, from lower Broadway and the sweatshop purlieus of Union Square, defiled an unending procession of surface cars, without exception dark with massed humanity. Pausing momentarily before the corner where the girl was waiting (as if mockingly submitting themselves to the appraisal of her alert eyes) one after another received the signal of the switchman beyond the northern crossing and ground sluggishly on. Not one but was crowded to the guards, affording the girl no excuse for leaving her position.

She waited on, her growing impatience as imperceptible as her fatigue: neither of them discernible to those many transient stares which she received with a semblance of blank indifference that was, in reality, not devoid of consciousness. Youth will not be overlooked; reinforced by an abounding vitality, such as hers, it becomes imperious. This girl was as pretty as she was poor, and as young.

Judged by her appearance, she might have been anywhere between sixteen and twenty years of age. She was, in fact,

something over eighteen, and at heart more nearly a child than this age might be taken to imply--more a child than any who knew her suspected. She herself suspected it least of all.

She looked what she liked to believe herself, a young woman of considerable experience with life. Simple, and even cheap, her garments still owned a certain distinction which she would without hesitation have termed "stylish": a quality of smartness which somehow contrived not incongruously to associate with inferior materials. Her shirtwaist was of opaque linen, pleated, and while not laundry-fresh was still presentable; her skirt fitted her hips snugly, and fell in graceful lines to a point something short of her low tan shoes, showing stockings of a texture at once coarse and sheer; to her hat, an ordinary straw simply trimmed with a band and *chou* of ribbon, she had lent some little factitious character by deftly twisting it a trifle out of the prevailing shape. Over one arm she carried a coat of the same material as her skirt, and in her hand a well-worn handbag of imitation leather, rather too large, and decorated with a monogram of two initials in German silver. The initials were J-T: her name was Joan Thursby.

Uniform with a thousand sisters of the shop-counters, she was yet mysteriously different. Men looked twice in passing; after passing some turned to look again.

Her face, tinted by the glow of the western sky, was by no means poor in native colour: a shade thin, its regular features held a promise, vague, fugitive, and provoking. Her hair was a brown which hardly escaped being ruddy, and her skin matched it, lacking alike the dusky warmth of the brune and the purity of the blonde. She was neither tall nor short, but seemed misleadingly smaller than she was in fact, thanks to the slightness of a body more stupidly nourished than under-nourished or immature. Her eyes were brown and large, and they were very beautiful indeed when divorced from the vacancy of weary thinking.

It was only in this look of the unthinking toiler that unconsciously she confessed her immense fatigue. Her features were relaxed into lines and contours of apathy. She seemed neither to think nor even to be capable of much sustained thought. Yet she was thinking, and that very intensely if unconsciously. Her mind was not only active but was one of considerable latent capacity: something which she did not in the least suspect; indeed, it had never occurred to Joan to debate her mental limitations. Her thoughts were as a rule more emotional than psychical: as now, when she was intensely preoccupied with pondering how she was to explain at home the loss of her position, and what would be said to her, and how she would feel when all had been said ... and what she would then do....

Daylight was slowly fading. Though it was only half-after six of an evening in June, the sun was already invisible, smudged out by a portentous bank of purplish cloud whose profile was edged with fire-of-gold against a sky of tarnished blue--a sky that seemed dimmed with the sweat of day-long heat and toil. The city air was close and moveless, and the cloud-bank was lifting very slowly from behind the Jersey hills; it might be several hours before the promised storm would break and bring relief to a parched and weary people.

At length despairing of her desire, the girl moved out to the middle of the street and boarded the next open car of the Lexington Avenue line.

She was able to find standing-room only between two seats toward the rear, where smoking was permitted. She stood just inside the running-board, grasping the back of the forward seat. Her hand rested between the shoulders of two men. She was the only woman in that section. Behind her were ten masculine knees in a row, before her five masculine heads: ten men crowding the two transverse benches, some smoking, all stolidly absorbed in newspapers and indifferent to the intrusion of a woman. None dreamed of offering the girl a seat; nor did she find this anything remarkable, in whom use had bred the habit of accepting without question such everyday phenomena. If she was weary, so were the men; if she desired the consideration due her sex, then must she enfranchise herself from the sexless struggle for a living wage....

The car, swerving into Twenty-third Street, plunged on to and turned north on Lexington Avenue. Thereafter its progress consisted of a series of frantic leaps from street-corner to street-corner. When it was in motion, there was a grateful rush of air; when at pause, the heat was stifling and the fumes of cigarettes, pipes, and cheap cigars blended to manufacture a mephitic reek. A slight sweat dewed the face of the girl, and her colour faded to pallor. Her feet and legs were aching, her back ached with much lifting of boxes to and from shelves, her head ached--chiefly because of the inevitable malnutrition of a shop-girl's lunch.

From time to time more passengers were taken on; a lesser number alighted: Joan found herself obliged to edge farther in between the rank of knees and the rigid back of the forward seat. By the time the car crossed Forty-second Street, she was at the inside guard-rail: ten persons, half of them standing, were occupying a space meant for five.

It was then, or only a trifle later, that she became conscious of the knee which the man behind her was purposely pressing against her. Then for a minute or two she was let alone. But she was sick with apprehension....

She stood it as long as she could. Then abruptly she twisted round and faced her persecutor.

Before her eyes, half blinded by rage and disgust, his face swam like the mask of an incubus--a blur of red flesh fixed in an insolent smirk.

She was dimly aware of curious glances lifting to the sound of her tremulous voice:

"Must I leave this car? Or will you let me alone?"

There was the pause of an instant; then she had her answer in a tone of truculent contempt:

"Ah, wha's the matter with you, anyhow?"

She choked, stammering, and looked round in despair. But the man at her elbow was grinning with open amusement, and another, seated beside her tormentor, was pretending to notice nothing, his nose buried in a newspaper.

"If y'u don't like the goin', sister, why doncha get off 'n' walk?"

This from him who had compelled that frantic protest.

With a lurch, the car stopped; and as it did so the girl turned impulsively, grasped the guard-rail, swung her lithe body between it and the floor of the car, and dropped to the cobbles between the tracks. She staggered a foot or two away, followed by an indistinguishable taunt amid derisive laughter. Fortunately there was no car bearing down on the southbound track to endanger her; while that which she had left flung away as, recovering, she ran to the sidewalk.

She began to trudge northward. The first street lamp she encountered told her she had alighted at Forty-seventh Street, and had another mile and a half to walk. But with all her weariness, she no longer thought of riding; it was impossible ... she could never escape annoyance ... men just wouldn't let her alone....

Men!...

Shuddering imperceptibly, her eyes hot with tears of shame and indignation, she walked rapidly, anxious to gain the refuge of her home, to be secure, for a time at least, from Man....

They called themselves *Men!* She despised them all--*all!* Beasts!... What had she ever done?... It wasn't as if this was the first time: they were always plaguing her: hardly a day passed.... Well, anyway, never a week.... It wasn't her fault if she was pretty: she never even so much as looked at them: but they kept on staring ... nudging.... She didn't believe there was a decent fellow living ... except, of course, That One....

He was different; at least, he had been, somehow: like a perfect gentleman. He had come between her and a gang of tormentors, had knocked one down and thrown the rest into confusion with a lively play of fists, and then, whisking Joan into a convenient taxicab, had taken her to the corner nearest her home--never so much as asking her name, or if he might call.... She had expected him to--like in a book; but he didn't, nor had he (likewise contrary to her expectations) at any time thereafter been known to haunt her neighbourhood. To her the affair was like a dream of chivalry: she remembered him as very handsome (probably far more handsome than he really was) and *different*, with grand clothes and manners (the man had helped her out of the cab and lifted his hat in parting): all in all, vastly unlike any of the fellows whose rude attentions she somewhat loftily permitted in the streets after supper or at the home of some other girl.

That One remained her dream-lord of romance. And in her heart of hearts she was sure that some day their paths would cross again. But it had all happened so long ago that she had grown a little faint with waiting.

So, smothering her indignation with roseate fancies, she plodded her weary way to Seventy-sixth Street; where, turning eastward, she presently ascended a squat brown-stone stoop, entered the dingy vestibule of a dingier tenement, pressed the button below a mail-box labelled "Thursby," waited till the latch clicked its spasmodic welcome, and then began her weary climb to the topmost floor.

II

The five flights of steps were long and steep and covered with a compound of fabric, grease, and dirt which, today resembling a thin layer of decayed rubber, had once been bright linoleum. There was no light other than a dejected dusk filtering down the wall from a grimy sky-light in the roof, a twilight lacking little of the gloom of night.

On each landing five doors opened--three toward the back, two toward the front of the building: most of them ajar, for purposes of ventilation and publicity. It was a question which was the louder, the clatter of tongues or the conflict of odours from things cooking and things that would doubtless have been the better for purification by fire.

At the top conditions were a little more endurable: and when Joan had shut behind her the door giving access to her home, the clatter and squalling came from below, a familiar and not unpleasant blend of dissonances. And within the smells were individual: chiefly of boiled cabbage and fried pork, with a feebly contending flavour of cheap tobacco-smoke.

She was in the dining-room of the Thursby flat. Behind it lay the kitchen; forward, three small cubicles successively denominated on the architect's plans as "bedchamber," "alcove," and "parlour." They were all, however, sleeping-rooms. The nearest was occupied by Joan's brother; the next, the alcove, contained a double-bed dedicated to Joan and her young sister; while the parlour held a curiosity called a folding-bed, which had long since ceased to fold, and on which slept Anthony Thursby and his wife.

Mrs. Thursby was now in the kitchen, preparing dinner with the assistance of her fifteen-year-old daughter, Edna. "Butch," the son of the house, was not at home.

Anthony Thursby sat at the dining-table, head bent over a ragged note-book and a well-thumbed collection of white and pink newspaper clippings.

It was the sight of him that checked Joan in her explicit intention. She had meant to enter dramatically to her mother, blurt out the news, with the cause, of her misfortune, and abandon herself to the luxury of self-pity soothed by sympathy. But she had also meant to have it understood that nobody was to tell "the Old Man"--at least not until she should have established herself in a new job. In short, she had not thought to find Thursby at home.

Hesitating beside the table, she removed the long pins from her hat while she stared with narrowed eyes at her father. She was wondering whether she hadn't better confess and have it out with him first as last. The only thing, indeed, that made her pause was the knowledge that there would be no living with him until she was once more "earning good money" behind a counter. And she was firmly determined not again to seek employment in a department store.

Regarding fixedly the round but unpolished bald head with its neglected fringe of grey hair, she asked herself if the bitterness in her heart for her father were in truth hatred or mere premonitory resentment of the opposition he would unquestionably set against her plans for the future....

He was a man of nearly fifty, who looked more, in spite of a tendency to genial corpulence. At thirty he had been a fair and handsome man; today his round red face was mottled, disfigured by a ragged grey moustache, discoloured by several days' growth of scrubby beard, and lined and seamed with the imprint of that consuming passion whose sign was also set in his grey, passionate, haunted eyes. Shabbily dressed in a soiled madras shirt and shoddy trousers, he wore neither tie nor collar: his unkempt chin hung in folds upon his chest. Fat and grimy forearms protruded from his rolled-up sleeves; fat and mottled hands trembled slightly but perceptibly as they rustled the pink and white clippings and with a stubby pencil scrawled mysterious hieroglyphics in the battered note-book.

Thursby was intent upon what he, and indeed all his family, knew as his "dope": checking and re-checking selections for tomorrow's races. This pursuit, with its concomitants, its attendant tides of hope and disappointment, was his infatuation, at once the solace and the terror of his declining years.

Now and again he muttered unintelligibly.

There rose a sound of voices in the kitchen. Annoyed by the interruption, he started, looked up, and discovered Joan.

She offered to his irritated gaze a face of calm, with unsmiling features.

"Hello!" he growled. "How the h--how long've you been in?"

"Only a few minutes, pa," the girl returned quietly.

"Well--what're you standing there--staring!--for, anyhow?"

"I didn't mean anything: I was just taking off my hat."

"Well"--his face was now purple with senseless anger--"cut along! Don't bother me. I'm busy."

"I see."

There was a damnable superciliousness in the tone of the girl as she turned away. Thursby meditated an explosion, but

refrained at discretion: Joan had taught him that, unlike her browbeaten mother and timid sister and her sleek, loaferish brother, she could give as good as he could send. He bent again, grumbling, over his dope. Instantly it gripped him, obliterating all else in his cosmos. He frowned, moistened the pencil at his mouth, and scrawled another note in the greasy little book.

Joan slipped quietly away to her bedroom. She found it stifling; ventilated solely from the parlour and the open door to Butch's kennel, it reeked with the smell of human flesh and cheap perfume. She noted resentfully the fact that her sister had neglected to make up the bed: its rumpled sheets and pillows, still retaining the impression of over-night, lent the cubicle the final effect of sordid poverty.

Hanging up her hat and coat, she sat for a time on the edge of the bed, thinking profoundly.

Such an existence, she felt, passed human endurance. And a gate of escape stood ajar to her, with a mundane paradise beyond, if only she had the courage to adventure....

In any event, conditions as they were now with the Thursbys could not obtain much longer. If the Old Man continued to follow the races through the poolrooms, he would soon be forced out of his small business and his family dispossessed of their mean lodgings; and there was no longer any excuse for hope that he would ever shake off the bondage of his infatuation. As it was, he gave little enough toward the support of his family, and grudged that little; almost all his meagre profits went to the poolrooms; it was only when he won (or seldom otherwise) that he would spare his wife a few dollars. Furthermore, his business was heavily involved in an intricate meshing of debt.

Thursby, at least, persisted in calling it a business; though Joan's lips shaped scornfully at mention of that mean and insignificant newspaper shop, crowded in between a saloon and a delicatessen shop, in the shadow of the Third Avenue Elevated Railway. In her understanding it was chiefly remarkable as the one place where one could be certain of not finding Thursby during the afternoon or Butch at night. They were seldom there together: it was as if father and son could not breathe the same atmosphere for long at a time.

Nominally, Butch was his father's assistant; actually, he alone kept the business alive; had it not been for his supervision of the morning and evening paper deliveries, it would long since have wasted inconspicuously away. By way of compensation, Butch, shrewdly alive to signs of a winning day, would now and again wheedle a dollar or two out of the Old Man. Wages he neither received nor expected, being well content with a nominal employment which served to cover many an hour of unlicensed liberty; and he seemed to have access to some mysterious if occasionally scanty fund, for he was never without some little money in pocket. After dinner, if Butch elected to eat the evening meal at home, he invariably disappeared; and his return was a matter of his personal convenience. He had been known not to sleep at home at all; his favourite bedtime was between one and two in the morning--after the saloons had closed. Yet no one had ever seen him drunk.

He was younger than Joan by a year. Born to the name of Edgar, he had been dubbed Butch in the public schools, and the name had stuck; even his mother and father employed it. And yet it could not be said to suit him; rather, the boy suggested a jockey. He was short, slender, and wiry; with a strong, emaciated nose flanked by small eyes sunk deep in sallow cheeks--his mouth set in a perpetually sardonic curve. He dressed neatly, whatever the straits and necessities of the family (to the mitigation of which he contributed nothing whatever) and had a failing for narrow red neckties and flashy waistcoats. His hard, thin lips were generally tight upon a cigarette; they were forever tight upon his personal affairs: if he opened them at home it was to "kid" the girls, which he did with a slangy, mordant wit, or to drop some casually affectionate word to his mother. His conversation with his father, whom he seemed always to be watching with a narrow, grim suspicion, was ordinarily confined to monosyllables of affirmation or negation.

He went his secret ways, self-sufficient, wary, reserved; a perpetual subject of covert speculation to the women of his family.

Joan had heard it whispered that he was a member of the "Car-barn Gang." But she never dared question Butch, though she trembled every time she came upon newspaper headlines advertising some fresh hooliganism on the part of the gang--a policeman "beaten up," a sober citizen "held up and frisked" in the small hours, or a member of some rival organization found stabbed and weltering on the sawdust floor of a grisly dive.

Between this girl and her brother there existed a strange harmony of understanding, quite tacit and almost unrecognized by either. Joan's nearest approach to acknowledgment of it resided in infrequent admissions to friends that she could "get on with Butch," whereas "the rest of the bunch made her weary."

Almost all the vigour and vitality of the mother seemed to have been surrendered to Butch and Joan; there had been little left for Edna. The girl was frail, anaemic, flat-chested, pretty in an appealing way: fit only for one of two things, tuberculosis or reconstruction in the country. As it was, in the busy seasons she found underpaid employment in the

workrooms of Sixth Avenue dressmaking establishments; between whiles she drudged at housework to the limits of her small strength.

As for Mrs. Thursby... It was singularly difficult for Joan to realize her mother. There was about the woman something formless and intangible. She seemed to fail to make a definite impression even upon the retina of the physical eye. She had the faculty of effacing herself, seemed more a woman that had been than a woman who was. The four boundary walls of the flat comprehended her existence; she seldom left the house; she never changed her dress save for bed. It might have been thought that she would thus dominate her world: to the contrary, she haunted it, more a wraith than a body, a creature of functions rather than of faculties. She had a way of being in a room without attracting a glance, of passing through and from it without leaving an impression of her transit.

When Joan made herself look directly at her mother, she was able to detect traces of ravaged beauty. A living shell in which its tenant lay dormant, her subjective will to live alone kept this woman going her sempiternal rounds of monotony. Capacity for affection she apparently had none; she regarded her children with as little interest as her husband. Nor had she the power to excite or sustain affection.

Joan believed she loved her mother. She did not: she accepted her as a convention in which affection inhered through tradition alone....

Seated on the edge of the bed, her face flushed with the heat of the smouldering evening, sombre eyes staring steadfastly at the threadbare carpet, the girl shook her head silently, in dreary wonder.

She stood at crossroads. She could, of course, go on as she had gone--bartering youth and strength for a few dollars a week. But every fibre of her being, every instinct of her forlorn soul, was in vital mutiny against such servitude. In fact, doubt no longer existed in Joan's mind as to which way she would turn: dread of the inevitable rupture alone deterred her from the first steps.

From the rear of the flat Edna called her fretfully: "Joan! Jo-an! Ain't you coming to eat?"

Joan rose. She answered affirmatively in a strong voice. Her mind was now made up: she would tell them after supper--after the Old Man had gone back to the shop.

She posed before a mirror, touching her hair with deft fingers while she stared curiously at the face falsified in the depths of the uneven sheet of glass.

Then placing her hands on her hips, at the belt-line, thumbs to the back, she lifted her shoulders, at one and the same time smoothing out the wrinkles in her waist and settling her belt into place.

"Oh," she said, as casually as if there had been any one to hear, "I guess I'll *do*, all right, all right!"

III

With a careless nod to her mother and sister, Joan slipped into her chair and helped herself mechanically but liberally to the remains of pork and cabbage. Her mother tilted a granite-ware pot over a cup and filled the latter with the decoction which, in the Thursby menu, masqueraded as coffee.

Joan acknowledged the service with an outspoken "Thanks."

At this Edna plucked up courage to say, with some animation: "Joan--"

The mother interrupted with a sibilant warning, "*Hush!*"

Thursby lifted his head and raked the three faces with an angry glance. "In God's name!" he cried--"can't you women hold your tongues?"

The girls made their resentment variously visible: Joan with a scowl and a toss of her head, Edna with a timid pout. The mother's face betrayed no emotion whatsoever. Thereafter, as far as they were concerned, the meal progressed in silence.

Thursby bent low over his plate, in the intervals devoted to mastication intently studying the file of dope at his elbow. Now and again he would drop knife and fork to take up his pencil and check the name of a horse or jot additional memoranda in his note-book. Infrequently he spoke or, rather, grunted, to indicate a desire for some dish beyond his reach. Curiously enough (Joan remarked for the thousandth time) he was punctilious to say "please" and "thank you."

The idiosyncrasy was all a piece (she thought) with the ease with which he employed knife, fork, and spoon: a careless grace which the girl considered "elegant" and did him the honour to imitate.

Furtively throughout the meal she studied her father. These little peculiarities of his, these refinements which sat so strangely on his gross, neglected person and were so exotic to his circumstances, exerted a compelling fascination upon the nimble curiosity of the girl. She both feared and despised him, but none the less cherished a sneaking admiration for the man. Beyond the fact that their estate had not always been so sorry, she knew nothing of the history of her parents; but she liked to think of her father, that he had once been, in some unknown way, superior: that he was a man ruined by a marriage beneath his station. To think this flattered her own secret dreams of rising out of her environment: girls, she had heard, took after their fathers--and *vice-versa*: perhaps she had inherited some of Anthony Thursby's keener intelligence, adaptability, and sensitiveness--those qualities with which she chose to endow the man who had been Thursby before he became her father. Other circumstances lent colour to this theory: Butch, for instance, had unquestionably inherited his mother's physique and her reticence, while Joan had her father's vigorous constitution and a body like his for sturdiness and good proportion....

Suddenly thrusting back his chair, Thursby rose, buttoned a soiled collar round his neck, shrugged a shabby coat upon his shoulders and, pocketing his dope, departed with neither word nor glance for his womenfolk.

His heavy footsteps were pounding the second flight of steps before a voice broke the hush in the stuffy little room, a voice faint and toneless, dim and passionless. It was Mrs. Thursby's.

"He's had a bad day, I guess...."

Edna placed a tender hand over the scalded, listless one that rested on the oilcloth. Joan, abandoning her determination to air her personal grievances at the first available instant, said suddenly:

"Never mind, ma. It ain't like he was a drinking man."

The vacant eyes in the faded face of the mother were fathoming distances remote from the four walls of the slatternly room. Her thin and colourless lips trembled slightly; little more than a whisper escaped them:

"Sometimes I wish he was--wish he had been. It'd 've been easier to stand--all this." A faltering gesture indicated vaguely the misery of their environment.

Edna continued to pet the unresponsive hand.

"Don't, mother!" she pleaded.

The woman stirred, withdrew her hand, and slowly got up.

"Come on, Edna. Le's get done with them dishes."

With eyes hard and calculating, Joan watched the two drift into the kitchen. Their wretched state touched her less than the fact that she must continue forever to share it, or else try to better it in open defiance of her father's prejudices.

"Something's got to be done for this family," she grumbled--"and I don't see anybody even thinking of doing anything but me!"

She rose and strode angrily back to the cubicle she shared with Edna. In a fit of unreasoning rage, snatching her hat from its hook, she impaled it upon her hair with hatpins that stabbed viciously. It had grown too dark to see more than a vague white shape moving on the surface of the mirror. But she did not stop to light the gas to make sure she was armoured against the public eye. In another moment, bag in hand, coat over her arm, she was letting herself out into the hallway.

Time enough tomorrow morning to fret her mother and sister with news of her misfortune: tonight she was in the humour to make a bold move toward freedom....

But on the door-stoop she checked, a trifle dashed by apprehension of the impending storm, which she had quite forgotten. She drew back into the vestibule: she could hardly afford to subject her only decent waist and skirt to danger of a drenching.

An atmosphere if anything more dense than that of the day blanketed heavily the city. Even the gutter-children seemed to feel its influence, and instead of making the evening hideous with screams and rioting, moved with an uncommon lethargy, or stood or squatted apart in little groups, their voices hushed and querulous. The roar of the trains on the nearby Elevated seemed muted, the clangour of the Third Avenue surface cars blunted, and Joan fancied that the street lamps burned with an added lustre. Wayfarers moved slowly if near home, otherwise briskly, with a spirit as unwilling

as unwonted: one and all with frequent glances skyward.

Overhead, a low-hung bosom of dusky vapour borrowed a dull blush from the fires of life that blazed beneath. In the west, beyond the silhouetted structure of the Elevated and the less distinct profile of buildings on the far side of Central Park, the clouds blazed luridly with their own dread fires--a fitful, sheeted play athwart gigantic curtains, to an accompaniment of dull and intermittent grumbles.

A soft, warm breath sighed down the breathless street, and sighing, died. Another, more cool and brusque, swept sharp upon the heels of the first, played with the littered rubbish of the pavements, caressed with a grateful touch flesh still stinging with the heat of day, and drove on, preceded by a cloud of acrid dust. A few drops of lukewarm water maculated the sidewalks with spots as big as dollars. There followed a sharper play of fire, and one more near. Children ran shrieking to shelter, and men and women dodged into convenient doorways or scudded off clumsily. The wind freshened, grew more chill... Then, so suddenly that there might as well have been no warning, on the wings of the howling blast, laced continually with empyrean fire, timed by the rolling detonations of heavy artillery now near, now far, a shining deluge sluiced the streets and made its gutters brawling rivulets.

A lonely, huddled figure, standing back in the entry, well out of the spray from the spattering drops, Joan waited the passing of the storm with neither fascination nor fear. Self-absorbed, her mood almost altogether introspective, she weighed her reckless plans. The crisis bellowed overhead in a series of tremendous, shattering explosions, bathing the empty street in wave after wave of blinding violet light, without seriously disturbing the slow, steady processes of the girl's mentality.

Then she became aware of a young man who had emerged from the darksome backwards of the tenement, so quietly that Joan had no notion how long he might have been standing there, regarding her with interest and amusement in his grey eyes and on his broad, good-humoured countenance. He had a long, strong body poised solidly on sturdy legs, short arms with large and efficient hands; and bore himself with a careless confidence that did much to dissemble the negligence of his mode of dress--the ill-fitting coat and trousers, the common striped "outing shirt," the rusty derby set aslant on his round, close-cropped head. Joan knew him as Ben Austin, one of the few admirers whose attentions she was wont to suffer: by occupation a stage-hand at the Hippodrome; a steady young man, who lived with his mother in one of the rear flats.

He greeted her with a broadening grin and a "Hello, Joan!"

She said with indifference: "Hello, Ben."

"Waitin' for the rain to let up?"

"No, foolish; I'm posing for a statue of Patience by a sculptor who's going to be born tomorrow."

This answer was brilliantly in accord with the humour of the day. Austin chuckled appreciatively.

"I thought maybe you was waitin' for Jeems to bring around your limousine, Miss Thursby."

"I was, but he won't be here till day before yesterday."

The strain of such repartee proved too much for Austin; he felt himself outclassed and, shuffling to cover his discomfiture, sought another subject.

"Whacha doing tonight, Joan? Anythin' special?"

"I've got an engagement to pass remarks on the weather with the Dook de Bonehead," the girl returned with asperity. "He ain't late, either."

"I guess that was one off the griddle, all right," said Austin pensively. "Excuse me for livin'."

There fell a pause, Joan contemptuously staring away through the glimmering rain-drops, Austin desperately casting about for a conversational opening less calculated than its predecessors to educe rebuffs.

"Say, Joan, lis'en--"

"Move on," the girl interrupted: "you're blocking the traffic."

"Nah--serious': howja like to go to a show tonight?"

She turned incredulous eyes to him. "What show?" she drawled.

"I gotta pass for Ziegfield's Follies--N'Yawk Roof. Wanta go?"

"Quit your kidding," she replied after a brief pause devoted to analysis of his sincerity. "Y' know you've got to work."

"Nothin' like that!" he insisted. "The Hip closed last Sat'dy and I got a coupla weeks lay-off while they're gettin' ready to rehearse the new show. On the level, now: will you go with me?"

"*Will I!*" The girl drew a long, ecstatic breath. Then her face darkened as she glanced again at the street: "But we'll get all wet!"

"No, we won't: I'll get an umbrella. Besides, it's lettin' up."

With this Austin vanished, to return in a few minutes with a fairly presentable umbrella. The shower was, in fact, fast passing on over Long Island, leaving in its wake a slackening drizzle amid deep-throated growls at constantly lengthening intervals.

Half-clothed children were seeping in swelling streams from the tenements as the two--Austin holding the umbrella, Joan with a hand on her escort's arm, her skirts gathered high about her trim ankles--splashed through lukewarm puddles toward Third Avenue. A faint and odorous vapour steamed up from wet and darkly lustrous asphalt.

They hurried on in silence: Austin dumbly content with his conquest of the aloof tolerance which the girl had theretofore shown him, and planning bolder and more masterful steps; Joan all ecstatic with the prospect of seeing for the first time a "Broadway show"....

A few minutes before nine they left the cross-town car at Broadway and Forty-second Street.

Though she had lived all her young years within the boundaries of New York, never before had Joan experienced the sensation of being a unit of that roaring flood of life which nightly scours Longacre Square, with scarce a perceptible change in volume, winter or summer. Yet she accepted it with apparently implacable calm. She felt as if she had been born to this, as if she were coming tardily into her birthright--something of which each least detail would in time become most intimate to her.

They were already late, and Austin hurried her. A brief, hasty walk brought them to the theatre, where Austin left her in a corner of the lobby with the promise that he would return in a very few minutes: he had to see a friend "round back," he explained in an undertone. But Joan remained a target for boldly enquiring glances for full ten minutes before he reappeared. Even then, with a nod to her to wait, Austin went to the box-office window. She was not deceived as to the general tenor of his fortunes there--saw him place a card on the ledge and confer inaudibly with the ticket-seller, and then reluctantly remove the card and substitute for it two one-dollar bills, for which he received two slips of pasteboard.

"House 'most sold out," he muttered uncomfortably in her ear as an elevator carried them to the roof. "Best I could get was table seats."

"They're just as good as any," she whispered, with a look of gratitude that temporarily turned his head.

The elevator discharged them into a vast hall with walls and a roof of glass. Artificial wistaria festooned its beams and pillars of steel, palms and potted plants lined the walls. A myriad electric bulbs glimmered dimly throughout the auditorium, brilliantly upon the small stage. Deep banks of chairs radiated back from the footlights, to each its tenant staring greedily in one common direction.

An usher waved the newcomers to the left. Ultimately they found seats at a small table in a far corner of the enclosure.

Austin was disappointed, and made his disappointment known in a public grumble: the table was too far away; they couldn't see nothin'--might's well not've come. Joan smiled his ill-humour away, insisting that the seats were fine. Mollified, he summoned a waiter and ordered beer for himself, for Joan a glass of lemonade--a weirdly decorated and insipid concoction which, nevertheless, Joan absorbed with the keenest relish.

In point of fact, the distance from their seats to the stage offered little obstacle to her complete enjoyment: her senses were all youthful and unimpaired; she saw and heard what many another missed of those in their neighbourhood. Furthermore, Joan brought to an entertainment of this character a point of view fresh, virginal, and innocent of the very meaning of ennui. She sat forward on the extreme edge of her chair, imperceptibly a-quiver with excitement, avid of every sight and sound. All that was tawdry, vulgar, and contemptible escaped her: she was sensitive only to the illusion of splendour and magnificence, and lived enraptured by dream-like music, exquisite wit, and the poetic beauty of femininity but half-clothed, or less, and viewed through a kaleidoscopic play of coloured light.

During the intermission she bent an elbow on the sloppy table-top and chattered at Austin with a vivacity new in his knowledge of her, and for which he had no match....

At one time during the second part of the performance, the auditorium was suddenly darkened, while attention was held to the stage by the antics of a pair of German comedians. But in the shadows that now surrounded them (quite unconscious that Austin had seized this opportunity to capture her warm young hand) Joan became aware of a number of figures issuing from a side-door to the stage. She saw them marshalled in ranks of two--a long double file, vaguely glimmering through the obscurity. And then the comedians darted into the wings, the lights blazed out at full strength all over the enclosure, and a roll of drums crescendo roused the audience to a tremendous and exhilarating novelty: a procession of chorus girls in hip-tights and hussar tunics who, each with a snare-drum at waist, had stolen down the aisle, into the heart of the auditorium.

For a long moment they marked time, drumming skilfully, their leader with her polished baton standing beside Joan. Then the orchestra blared out an accompaniment, and they strode away, turning left and marching up the centre aisle to the stage.... Joan marked, with pulses that seemed to beat in tune to the drumming, the wistful beauty of many of the painted faces with their aloof eyes and fixed smiles of conscious self-possession, the richness of their uniforms, their bare powdered arms, the pretty legs in their silken casings. Oblivious to the libidinous glances of the goggling men they passed, she envied them one and all--the meanest and homeliest of them even as the most proud and beautiful--this chance of theirs *to act*, to be admired, to win the homage of the herd....

She awoke as from idyllic dreams to find herself again in a Third Avenue car, homeward bound. But still her brain was drowsy with memories of the splendour and the glory; fragments of haunting melody ran through her thoughts; and visions haunted her, of herself commanding a similar meed of adoration....

Austin's arm lay along the top of the seat behind her; his fingers rested lightly against the sleeve of her shirtwaist. She did not notice them. To his clumsily playful advances she returned indefinite, monosyllabic answers, accompanied by her charming smile of a grateful child....

On the third landing of their tenement they paused to say good night, visible to one another only in a faint light reflected up from the gas-jet burning low in the hall below. The smell of humanity and its food hung in the clammy air they breathed. A hum of voices from the many cells of the hive buzzed in their ears. But Joan forgot them all.

She hesitated, embarrassed with the difficulty of finding words adequate to express her thanks.

Austin tried awkwardly to help her out: "Well, I guess it's good night, kid."

She said, exclamatory: "O Ben! I've had *such* a good time!"

"Dja? Glad to hear it. Will you go again--next week? I guess I can work som'other show, all right."

Compunction smote as memory reminded her. "But--Ben--didn't you have to pay for those tickets?"

"Oh, that's all right. I couldn't find the fella I was lookin' for, round back."

"I'm so sorry--"

"Gwan! It wasn't nothin'. Cheap at the price, if you liked it, little girl."

"I liked it *awfully*! But I won't go again, unless you show me the pass first."

"Wel-l, we'll see about that." He edged a pace nearer.

Suddenly self-conscious, Joan drew back and offered her hand. "Good night and--thank you so much, Ben."

He took the hand, but retained it. "Ah, say! is this all I get? I thought you kinda liked me...."

"I do, Ben, but--"

"Well, a kiss won't cost you nothin'. It's your turn now."

"But, Ben--but, Ben--"

"Oh, well, if that's the way you feel about it--"

He made as if to relinquish her hand. But to be thought lacking in generosity had stung her beyond endurance. Without stopping to think--blindly and quickly, so that she might not think--she gave herself to his arms.

"Well," she breathed in a soft voice, "just one...."

"Just one, eh?" He pressed his lips to hers. "Oh, I don't know about that!"

He tightened his embrace. Her heart was hammering madly. His mouth hurt her lips, his beard rasped her tender skin. She wanted frantically to get away, to regain possession of herself; and wanted it the more because, dimly through the tumult of thought and emotion, she was conscious of the fact that she rather liked it.

"Joan...." Austin murmured in a tone that, soft with the note of wooing, was yet vibrant with the elation of the conqueror, "Joan...."

One arm shifted up from her waist and his big hand rested heavily over her heart.

For a breath she seemed numb and helpless, suffocating with the tempest of her senses. Then like lightning there pierced her confusion the memory of the knee that had driven her from the car, only that afternoon: symbolic of the bedrock beastliness of man. With a quick twist and wrench she freed herself and reeled a pace or two away.

"Ben!" she cried, in a voice hoarse with anger. "You--you brute--!"

"Why, what's the matter?"

"What right had you to--to touch me like that?" she panted, retreating as he advanced.

He paused, realizing that he had made a false move which bade fair to lose him his prey entirely. Only by elaborate diplomacy would he ever be able to reestablish a footing of friendship; weeks must elapse now before he would gain the advantage of another kiss from her lips. He swore beneath his breath.

"I didn't mean nothin'," he said in a surly voice. "I don't see as you got any call to make such a fuss."

"Oh, don't you?... *Don't* you!" She felt as if she must choke if she continued to parley with him. "Well, I do!" she flashed; and turning, ran up the fourth flight of steps.

He swung on his heel, muttering; and she heard him slam the door to his flat.

She continued more slowly, panting and struggling to subdue the signs of her emotion. But she was poisoned to the deeps of her being with her reawakened loathing of Man. On the top landing she paused, blinking back her tears, digging her nails into her palms while she fought down a tendency to sob, then drew herself up, took a deep breath, and advancing to the dining-room, turned the knob with stealth, to avoid disturbing her family.

To her surprise and dismay, as the first crack widened between the door and jamb, she saw that the room was lighted.

Wondering, she walked boldly in.

Her father was seated at the dining-table, a cheap pipe gripped between his teeth. Contrary to his custom, when he sat up late, he was not thumbing his dope. His fat, hairy arms were folded upon the oilcloth, his face turned squarely to the door. Instinctively Joan understood that he had waited up for her, that inexplicably a crisis was about to occur in her relations with her family.

In a chair tilted back against the wall, near the window opening upon the air-shaft, Butch sat, his feet drawn up on the lower rung, purple lisle-thread socks luridly displayed, hands in his trouser-pockets, a cigarette drooping from his cynical mouth, a straw hat with brilliant ribbon tilted forward over his eyes.

Closing the door, Joan put her back to it, eyes questioning her parent. Butch did not move. Thursby sagged his chin lower on his chest.

"Where have you been?" he demanded in deep accents, with the incisive and precise enunciation which she had learned to associate only with his phases of bad temper.

"Where've I been?" she repeated, stammering. "Where.... Why--out walking--"

"Street-walking?" he suggested with an ugly snarl.

She sank, a limp, frightened figure, into a chair near the door.

"Why, pa--what do you mean?"

"I mean I'm going to find out the why and wherefore of the way you're behaving yourself. You're my daughter, and not of age yet, and I have a right to know what you do and where you go. Keep still!" he snapped, as she started to interrupt. "Speak when you're spoken to.... I'm going to have a serious talk with you, young woman.... What's all this I hear about your losing your job and going on the stage?"

IV

For a brief moment Joan sat agape, meeting incredulously the keen, contemptuous gaze of her father. Then she pulled herself together with determination to be neither browbeaten nor overborne.

"Where'd you hear that about me?" she demanded ominously.

Thursby shook his ponderous head: "It makes no difference--"

"It makes a lot of difference to me!" she cut in, sharply contentious. "You might's well tell me, because I won't talk to you if you don't."

Butch brushed the brim of his hat an inch above his eyes and threw her a glance of approbation. Thursby hesitated, his large, mottled face sullen and dark in the bluish illumination provided by the single gas-jet wheezing above the table. Then reluctantly he gave in.

"Old Inness was in the store this evening. He said--"

"Never mind what *he* said! I guess I know. Gussie's been shooting off her face about me at home. And of course old Inness hadn't nothing better to do than to run off and tell you everything he knew!"

"Then you don't deny it?" Thursby insisted.

"I don't have to. It's true. No, I don't deny it," she returned, aping his manner to exasperation.

"How'd you come to lose your job?"

"Mr. Winter insulted me--one of the floor-walkers--if you've got to know."

Thursby's head wagged heavily while he weighed this information, and he regarded his daughter with a baleful, morose glare, his fat hands trembling.

"What did you say to this man, Winter?" he asked presently.

"Told him I'd slap his face if he tried anything like that on me again. So he reported me up to the management--lied about me--and I got fired."

There was a long silence, through which Thursby pondered the matter, his thick lips moving inaudibly, while Joan sat upright, maintaining her attitude of independence and defiance, and Butch, grinning lazily, as if at some private jest, manufactured ring after ring of smoke in the still, close air.

Before her father spoke again, Joan became cognizant of Edna and her mother, like twin ghosts in their night-dresses, stealing silently, barefooted, to listen just within the door of the adjoining bedroom.

"And what do you propose to do now?" asked Thursby at length, lifting his weary, haunted gaze to his daughter's face. "What's this about your going on the stage?"

Joan set her jaw firmly. "That's what I'm going to do."

Thursby shook his head with decision. "I won't have it," he said.

"Oh, you won't? Well, I'd like to know how you're going to stop me. I'm tired slaving behind a counter for a dog's wages--and that eaten up by fines because I won't go out with the floor-walkers. I'm going to do the best I can for myself. I'm going to be an actress, so's I can make a decent living for Edna and ma and myself."

"A decent living!" Thursby mocked without mirth. "You're old enough to know better than that."

"I'm old enough to know which side my bread's buttered on," the girl flashed back angrily. "I'm through living in this dirty flat and giving up every dollar I make to keep us all from starving. God knows what we'd do if it wasn't for me with a steady job, and Edna working during the season. You don't do anything to help us out: all *you* get goes on the ponies. I don't see any reason why I got to consult you if I choose to better myself."

She rose the better to end her tirade with a stamp of her foot. Thursby likewise got up, if more sluggishly, and moved round the table to confront her.

"You don't go on the stage--no!" he said. "That's settled. Understand?"

"Oh, I get you," she replied, with a flirt of her head, "but I don't agree with you. I'm going down town first thing tomorrow to try for a job with--with," she hesitated, "Ziegfeld's Follies!"

"You will do nothing of the sort," he insisted fiercely, congested veins starting out upon his forehead. "You're my daughter, and those are my orders to you, and you'll obey 'em or I'll know the reason why. You...." He faltered as if choking. Then he flung out an arm, with a violent gesture indicating the shrinking woman in the doorway. "You--your mother was an actress when I married her and took her off the stage. She--she--"

"Don't you dare say a word against my mother!" Joan screamed passionately into his lowering face. "Don't you dare! You hear me: don't you dare!"

Her infuriated accents were echoed by a smothered gasp and a spasm of sobbing from the other room.

Momentarily abashed by the sheer force of this defiance, the father fell back a pace. An expression of almost ludicrous disconcertion shadowed his discoloured features. Then slowly, as if thoughtfully, he lifted one hand and deliberately tore his collar from its fastening and cast it from him.

At this, hastily jerking his cigarette into the air-shaft, Butch got up, removed his hat and carefully placed it on the mantel, out of harm's way.

"You," said Thursby with apparent difficulty, breathing heavily between his words--"you shan't use that tone to me, young woman, and live in this house. More than that, you'll leave it this very night--now!--unless you promise to give up this fool's notion of the stage."

"Tonight!"

Joan paled; her lips tightened; but the glint in her eyes wasn't one of fright.

"Tonight!" her father reiterated with malicious pleasure in what he thought to be evidences of consternation. "And what's more, you're going to apologize to me now."

"Apologize to you!" Joan caught her breath sharply, and her next words came without premeditation; she was barely conscious, in her rage, that she employed them: "I'll be damned if I do!"

With an inarticulate cry, maddened beyond reason, Thursby lifted a heavy hand and stepped toward her.

Simultaneously Butch sprang forward, seized the menacing fist and dragged it down and back, with a movement so swift and deft that its purpose was accomplished and the hand pinned to the small of Thursby's back actually before he appreciated what was happening.

Even Joan was slow to comprehend the fact of this amazing intervention....

Nodding emphatically, "Beat it, kid," Butch counselled in a pleasant, unstrained tone--"beat it while the going's good... Easy, now, guvner!"

Speechless, Joan slipped out into the hall and slammed the door. Stumbling blindly in the murk, she was none the less quick to find the head of the stairway.

On the ground floor, panting and sobbing, she paused to listen. There came from above no sound of pursuit to speed her on; yet on she went, out of the house, to scurry away through the midnight hush of the squalid street like a hunted thing.

There was no sort of coherence in her thoughts, nothing but shreds and tatters of rage, fear, and despair, all clouded with a faint and vain regret. She gave no heed to the way she went: impulse controlled and blind instinct guided her. But at the corner of Park Avenue she was obliged to pause for breath, and took advantage of that pause to review her plight and plan her future.

Her first concern must be to find a lodging for the night. Tomorrow could take care of itself...

Uttering a low cry of dismay, the girl clutched at the handbag swinging by its strap from her wrist: its latch was broken, its wide jaws yawned. In a breath she had grasped the empty substance of her most dire apprehensions: the slender fold of bills, handed her when she left the store for the last time that evening, was gone. Whether some sneak-thief had robbed her on a surface-car or in the Broadway rabble, or whether the lock had been broken, releasing its poor treasure, during her struggle with Austin on the stairs--or afterwards or before--she could not guess. But she was swift to recognize in its bitter fulness the heart-rending futility of retracing her steps to search for the vanished money--even though it was all that had stood between her and the world, between a common room with food for a week or two and

starvation and--the streets.

It was a fact, established and irrefutable in her understanding, that she could never go back...

Diligently exploring the bag, she brought to light a scanty store of small change: three quarters, a nickel, seven coppers--eighty-seven cents wherewith to face the world!

Further rummaging educed a handful of odds and ends, from which, by the light of a corner lamp, she presently succeeded in sorting out a folded scrap of paper bearing a pencilled memorandum, faint almost to illegibility, so that only with some difficulty could Joan decipher its legend: "*Maizie Dean (Lizzie Fogarty) 289 W. 45 St.*"

Slowly conning the address with mute, moving lips, until she had it by heart, the girl trudged on to Madison Avenue and there signalled and boarded a southbound surface-car. It carried few passengers. She had a long seat all to herself, and about fifteen minutes wherein to debate ways and means....

She reckoned it several years since Lizzie Fogarty (predecessor of faithless Gussie Inness, both at the stocking counter and in Joan's confidence) suddenly, and with no warning or explanation, had left the department store and for fully eight months thereafter had kept her where--abouts a mystery to her erstwhile associates--though rumours were not lacking in support of a shrewd suspicion that she had "gone on the stage." The truth only transpired when, one day, she drifted languidly up to the counter behind which she had once served, haughtily inspected and selected from goods offered her by a stupefied and indignant Gussie, and promptly broke down, confessing the truth amid giggles not guiltless of a suspicion of tears. Lizzie was in "vodeveal," partner in a "sister-act"--witness her card--"*The Dancing Deans, Maizie & May.*"

Beyond shadow of doubt she had prospered. Not only was she amazingly and awfully arrayed, but there was in evidence an accomplishment believed to be singular to people of great wealth, an "English accent"--or what Joan and Gussie ingenuously accepted as such. As practised by Miss Maizie Dean this embellishment consisted merely in broadening every A in the language (when she didn't forget) and speaking rapidly in a high, strained voice. Its effect upon her former associates was to render the wake she ploughed through their ranks phosphorescent with envy.

Departing in good time to spare the girls the censure of the floor-walker, she had left with Joan the pencilled address and this counsel: "If ever you *dream* of goin' into the business, my deah, don't do anythin' before you see *me*. That address will always make me, no mattah wheah 'm woikin': and I'd do *anythin'* in the woild for you. I know you'd make good *anywheres*--with that *shape* and them *eyes!*..."

Of such stuff as this had Joan fashioned her dreams. Confident in the generosity of Lizzie Fogarty, she relied implicitly upon the willingness of Miss Maizie Dean to help her into the magic circle of "the profession." She had no more doubt that Maizie would make it her business, even at cost of personal inconvenience, to secure her an engagement, than she had that tomorrow's sun would rise upon a world tenanted by one Joan Thursby. Or if such doubt entered her mind by stealth, she fought it down and cast it forth with all the power of her will. For in Miss Dean, nee Fogarty, now resided her sole immediate hope of friendly aid and advice....

Lighting at Forty-fifth Street, Joan hastened westward, past Fifth Avenue and Sixth to Longacre Square. Here on the corner, she paused to don her coat; for the low-swinging draperies of the painted skies had begun to distil upon the city a gentle drizzle, soft and warm.

Only two hours ago a vortex of vivid animation, the Square now presented a singular aspect of sleepy emptiness. With its high glittering walls of steel and glass, its polished black paving like moire silk, its blushing canopy of cloud, its air filled with an infinity of globular atoms of moisture, swirling and weltering in a shimmer of incandescence: it was like a pool of limpid light, deep and still. Few moving things were visible: now and again a taxicab, infrequently a surface-car, here and there, singly, a few prowling women, a scattering of predacious men.

Of these latter, one who had been skulking beneath the shelter of the New York Theatre fire-escapes strolled idly out toward Joan and addressed her in a whisper of loathly intimacy. Fortunately she did not hear what he said. Even as he spoke she slipped away from the curb and like a haunted shadow darted across the open space and into the kindly obscurity of the side-street.

Number 289 reared its five-storey brown-stone front on the northern side of the street, hard upon Eighth Avenue. Joan inspected it doubtfully. Its three lower tiers of windows were all dark and lightless, but on the fourth floor a single oblong shone with gas-light, while on the fifth as many as three were dully aglow. The outer doors, at the top of the high, old-style stoop, were closed, and even the most hopeful vision could detect no definite illumination through the fan-light.

Into the heart of Joan a wretched apprehension stole and there abode, cold and crawling. From something in the sedate

aspect of the house she garnered grim and terrible forebodings.

Nevertheless she dared not lose grasp on hope. Mounting the stoop, she sought the bell-pull, and found it just below a small strip of paper glued to the stone; frayed and weatherbeaten, it published in letters in faded ink scrawled by an infirm hand the information: "*Rooms to let furnished.*"

For some reason which she did not stop to analyze, this announcement spelled encouragement to Joan. She wrought lustily at the bell.

It evoked no sound that she could hear. Trembling with expectancy, she waited several minutes, then pulled again, and once more waited while the cold of dread spread from her heart to chill and benumb her hands and feet. She heard never a sound. It was no use--she knew it--yet she rang again and again, frantically, with determination, in despair. And once she vainly tried the door.

The drizzle had developed into a fine, driving rain that swept aslant upon the wings of a new-sprung breeze.

A great weight seemed to be crushing her: a vast, invisible hand relentlessly bearing her down to the earth. Only vaguely did she recognize in this the symptoms of immense physical fatigue added to those of intense emotional strain: she only knew that she was all a-weary for her bed.

Of a sudden, hope and courage both deserted her. Tears filled her eyes: she was so lonely and forlorn, so helpless and so friendless. Huddled in the shallow recess of the doorway, she fought her emotions silently for a time, then broke down altogether and sobbed without restraint into her handkerchief. Moments passed uncounted, despair possessing her utterly.

The street was all but empty. For some time none remarked the disconsolate girl. Then a man, with a handbag but without an umbrella, appeared from the direction of Longacre Square, walking with a deliberation which suggested that he was either indifferent to or unconscious of the rain. Turning up the steps of Number 289, he jingled absently a bunch of keys. Not until he had reached the platform of the stoop did he notice the woman in the doorway.

Promptly he halted, lifting his brows and pursing his lips in a noiseless whistle--his head cocked critically to one side.

Then through the waning tempest of her grief, Joan heard his voice:

"I say! What's the matter?"

Gulping down a sob and dabbing hastily at her eyes with a sodden wad of handkerchief, she caught through a veil of tears a blurred impression of her interrogator. A man.... She ceased instantly to cry and shrank hastily out of his way, into the full swing of wind and rain. She said nothing, but eyed him with furtive distrust. He made no offer to move.

"See here!" he expostulated. "You're in trouble. Anything I can do?"

Joan felt that she was regaining control of herself. She dared to linger and hope rather than to yield to her primitive instinct toward flight.

"Nothing," she said with a catch in her voice--"only I--I wanted to see Miss Dean; but nobody answered the bell."

"Oh!" he said thoughtfully--"you wanted to see Miss Dean--yes!"--as though he considered this a thoroughly satisfactory explanation. "But Madame Duprat never does answer the door after twelve o'clock, you know. She says people have no right to call on us after midnight. There's a lot in that, too, you know." He wagged his head earnestly. "Really!" he concluded with animation.

His voice was pleasant, his manner sympathetic if something original. Joan found courage to enquire:

"Do you think--perhaps--she might be in?"

"Oh, she never leaves the house. At least, I've never seen her leave it. I fancy she thinks one of us might move it away if she got out of sight for a minute or so."

Puzzled, Joan persisted: "You really think Miss Dean is in?"

"Miss Dean? Oh, beg pardon! I was thinking of Madame Duprat. Ah ... Miss Dean ... now ... I infer you have urgent business with her--what?"

"Yes, very!" the girl insisted eagerly. "If I could only see her ... I must see her!"

"I'm sure she's in, then!" the man declared in accents of profound conviction. "Possibly asleep. But at home. O

positively!" He inserted a key in the lock and pushed the door open. "If you don't mind coming in--out of the weather--I'll see."

Joan eyed him doubtfully. The light was indifferent, a mere glimmer from the corner lamp at Eighth Avenue; but it enabled her to see that he was passably tall and quite slender. He wore a Panama hat with dark clothing. His attitude was more explicitly impersonal than that of any man with whom she had as yet come into contact: she could detect in it no least trace either of condescension or of an ingratiating spirit. He seemed at once quite self-possessed and indefinitely preoccupied, disinterested, and quite agreeable to be made use of. In short, he engaged her tremendously.

But what more specifically prepossessed her in his favour, and what in the end influenced her to repose some slight confidence in the man, was a quality with which the girl herself endowed him: she chose to be reminded in some intangible, elusive fashion, of that flower of latter-day chivalry who had once whisked her out of persecution into his taxicab and to her home. In point of fact, the two were vastly different, and Joan knew it; but, at least, she argued, they were alike in this: both were *gentlemen*--rare visitants in her cosmos.

It was mostly through fatigue and helpless bewilderment, however, that she at length yielded and consented to precede him into the vestibule. Here he opened the inner doors, ushering Joan into a hallway typical of an old order of dwelling, now happily obsolescent. The floor was of tiles, alternately black and white: a hideous checker-board arrangement. A huge hat-rack, black walnut framing a morbid mirror, towered on the one hand; on the other rose a high arched doorway, closed. And there was a vast and gloomy stairway with an upper landing lost in shadows impenetrable to the feeble illumination of the single small tongue of gas flickering in an old-fashioned bronze chandelier.

Listening, Joan failed to detect in all the house any sounds other than those made by the young man and herself.

"If you'll be good enough to follow me--"

He led the way to the rear of the hall, where, in the shadow of the staircase, he unlocked a door and disappeared. The girl waited on the threshold of a cool and airy chamber, apparently occupying the entire rear half of the ground floor. At the back, long windows stood open to the night. The smell of rain was in the room.

"Half a minute: I'll make a light."

He moved through the darkness with the assurance of one on old, familiar ground. In the middle of the room a match spluttered and blazed: with a slight *plup!* a gas drop-light with a green shade leapt magically out of the obscurity, discovering the silhouette of a tall, spare figure bending low to adjust the flame; which presently grew strong and even, diffusing a warm and steady glow below the green penumbra of its shade.

The man turned back with his quaint air of deference. "Now, if you don't mind sitting down and waiting a minute, I'll ask Madame Duprat about Miss--ah--your friend--"

"Miss Dean--Maizie Dean."

"Thank you."

With this he left the girl, and presently she heard his footsteps on the staircase.

She found a deeply cushioned arm-chair, and subsided into it with a sigh. The intensity of her weariness was indeed a very serious matter with her. Her very wits shirked the labour of grappling with the problem of what she should do if Maizie Dean were not at home....

Wondering incoherently, she stared about her. The rich, subdued glow of the shaded lamp suggested more than it revealed, but she was impressed by the generous proportions of the room. The drop-light itself stood on a long, broad table littered with a few books and a great many papers, inkstands, pens, blotters, ash-trays, pipes: all in agreeable disorder. Beyond this table was one smaller, which supported a type-writing-machine. Against the nearer wall stood a luxurious, if worn, leather-covered couch. There were two immense black walnut bookcases. The windows at the back disclosed a section of iron-railed balcony.

Joan grew sensitive to an anodynous atmosphere of quiet and comfort....

Drowsily she heard a quiet knocking at some door upstairs; then a subdued murmur of voices, the closing of a door, footsteps returning down the long staircase. When these last sounded on the tiled flooring, the girl spurred her flagging senses and got up in a sudden flutter of doubt, anxiety, and embarrassment. The man entering the room found her so--poised in indecision.

"Please do sit down," he said quietly, with a smile that carried reassurance; and, taking her compliance for something

granted, passed on to another arm-chair near the long table.

With a docility and total absence of distrust that later surprised her to remember, Joan sank back, eyes eloquent with the question unuttered by her parted lips.

Her host, lounging, turned to her a face of which one half was in dense shadow: a keen, strongly modelled face with deep-set eyes at once whimsical and thoughtful, and a mouth thin-lipped but generously wide. He rested an elbow on the table and his head on a spare, sinewy hand, thrusting slender fingers up into hair straight, not long, and rather light in colour.

"I'm sorry to have to report," he said gently, "that 'The Dancing Deans, Maizie and May,' are on the road. So I'm informed by Madame Duprat, at least. They're not expected back for several weeks.... I hope you aren't greatly disappointed."

Her eyes, wide and dark with dismay, told him too plainly that she was. She made no effort to speak, but after an instant of dumb consternation, moved as if to rise.

He detained her with a gesture. "Please don't hurry: you needn't, you know. Of course, if you must, I won't detain you: the door is open, your way clear to the street. But what are you going to do about a place to sleep tonight?"

She stared in surprise and puzzled resentment. A warm wave of colour temporarily displaced her pallor.

"What makes you so sure I've got no place to sleep?" she asked ungraciously.

He lifted his shoulders slightly and dropped his hand to the table.

"Perhaps I was impertinent," he admitted. "I'm sorry.... But you haven't--have you?"

"No, I haven't," she said sharply. "But what's that--"

"As you quite reasonably imply, it's nothing to me," he interrupted suavely. "But I'd be sorry to think of you out there--alone--in the rain--when there's no reason why you need be."

"No reason!" she echoed, wondering if she had misjudged him after all.

Without warning the man tilted the green lamp-shade until a broad, strong glow flooded her face. A spark of indignation kindled in the girl while she endured his brief, impersonal, silent examination. Sheer fatigue alone prevented her from rising and walking out of the room--that, and curiosity.

He replaced the shade, and got out of the chair with a swift movement that seemed not at all one of haste.

"I see no reason," he announced coolly. "I've got to run along now--I merely dropped in to get a manuscript. I think you'll be quite comfortable here--and there's a good bolt on the door. Of course, it's very unconventional, but I hope you'll be kind enough to overlook that, considering the circumstances. And tomorrow, after a good rest, you can make up your mind whether it would be wiser to stick to your first plan or--go home."

He smiled with a vague, disinterested geniality, and added a pleading "Now don't say no!" when he saw that the girl had likewise risen.

"How do you know I've left home?" she demanded hotly.

"Well"--his smile broadened--"deductive faculty--Sherlock Holmes--Dupin--that sort of tommyrot, you know. But it wasn't such a bad guess--now was it?"

"I don't see how you knew," she muttered sulkily.

He ran his long fingers once or twice through his hair in a manner of great perplexity.

"I can't quite tell, myself."

"It wasn't my fault," she protested with a flash of passion. "I lost my job today, and because I said I wanted to go on the stage, my father put me out of the house."

"Yes," he agreed amiably; "they always do--don't they? I fancied it was something like that. But there isn't really any reason why you shouldn't go home tomorrow and patch it up--or is there?"

She gulped convulsively: "You don't understand--"

"Probably I don't," he conceded. "Still, things may look very much otherwise in the morning. They generally do, I

notice. One goes to bed with reluctance and wakes up with a headache. All that sort of thing.... But if you'll listen to me a moment--why, then if you want to go, I shan't detain you.... My name is John Matthias. My trade is writing things--plays, mostly: I know it sounds foolish, but then I hate exercise. I live--sleep, that is--ah--elsewhere--down the street. This is merely my work-room. So your stopping here won't inconvenience me in the least...."

He snatched up a mass of papers from the table, folded them hastily and thrust them into a coat pocket.

"That manuscript I was after. Good night. I do hope you'll be comfortable."

Before the amazed girl could collect herself, he had his hat and handbag and was already in the hallway.

She ran after him.

"But, Mr. Matthias--"

He glanced hastily over his shoulder while fumbling with the night-latch.

"I can't let you--"

"Oh, but you must--really, you know."

He had the door open.

"But why do you--how can you trust me with all your things?"

"Tut!" he said reprovingly from the vestibule--"nothing there but play 'scripts, and they're not worth anything. You can't get anybody to produce 'em. I know, because I've tried."

He closed the inner door and banged the outer behind him.

Joan, on the point of pursuing to the street, paused in the vestibule, and for a moment stood doubting. Then, with a bewildered look, she returned slowly to the back room, shut herself in, and shot the bolt....

On the platform of the stoop, Mr. Matthias delayed long enough to turn up his coat-collar for the better protection of his linen, and surveyed with a wry grin the slashing rush of rain through which he now must needs paddle unprotected.

"Queer thing for a fellow to do," he mused dispassionately....

"Daresay I am a bit of an ass.... I might at least have borrowed my own umbrella.... But that would hardly have been consistent with the egregious insanity of the performance....

"I wonder why I do these awful things?... If I only knew, perhaps I could reform..."

Running down the steps, he set out at a rapid pace for the Hotel Astor; which in due time received and harboured him for the night.

V

Awakening at a late hour in a small bedroom bright with sunlight, Mr. Matthias treated himself to a moment of incredulity. Such surroundings were strange to his drowsy perceptions, and his transitory emotions on finding himself so curiously embedded might be most aptly and tersely summed up in the exclamation of the old lady in the nursery rhyme: "Lack-a-mercy, can this be I?"

Being, however, susceptible to a conviction of singular strength that he was himself and none other; and by dint of sheer will-power overcoming a tremendous disinclination to do anything but lie still and feel perfectly healthy, sound, and at peace with the world: he induced himself to roll over and fish for his watch in the pocket of the coat hanging on a nearby chair.

The hour proved to be half-past ten.

He fancied that he must have been uncommonly tired to have slept so late.

Then he remembered.

"One doesn't need to get drunk to be daft," was the conclusion he enunciated to his loneliness.

"I hope to goodness she doesn't go poking through my papers!"

The perturbation to which this thought gave rise got him out of bed more promptly than would otherwise have been the case. None the less he forgot it entirely in another moment, and had bathed and dressed and was knotting his tie before a mirror when the memory of the girl again flitted darkly athwart the glass of his consciousness.

"Wonder what it was that made me turn myself out of house and home for the sake of that girl, anyway? Something about her..."

But try as he might he could recall no definite details of her personality. She remained a shadow--a hunted, tearful, desperate wraith of girlhood: more than that, nothing.

He wagged his head seriously.

"Something about her!... *Must've* been good-looking ... or something..."

With which he drifted off into an inconsequent and irrelevant reverie which entertained him exclusively throughout breakfast and his brief homeward walk: in his magnificent, pantoscopic, protean imagination he was busily engaged in writing the first act of a splendid new play--something exquisitely odd, original, witty, and dramatic.

A vague smile touched the corners of his mouth; his eyes were hazily lustrous; his nose was in the air. He had forgotten his guest entirely. He ran up the steps of Number 289, let himself in, trotted down the hall and burst unceremoniously into his room--not in the least disconcerted to find it empty, not, indeed, mindful that it might have been otherwise.

His hat went one way, his handbag into a corner with a resounding bang. He sat himself down at his typewriter, quickly and deftly inserted a sheet of paper into the carriage and ... sat back at leisure, his gaze wandering dreamily out of the long, open windows, into the world of sunshine that shimmered over the back-yards.

A subconscious impulse moved him to stretch forth a long arm and drop his hand on the centre-table; after a few seconds his groping fingers closed round the bowl of an aged and well-beloved pipe.

He filled it, lighted it, smoked serenely.

Half an hour elapsed before he was disturbed. Then someone knocked imperatively on the door. He recognized the knock; it was Madame Duprat's. Swinging round in his chair he said pleasantly: "Come in."

Madame Duprat entered, filling the doorway. She shut the door and stood in front of it, subjecting it to an almost total eclipse. She was tall and portly, a grenadier of a woman, with a countenance the austerity of whose severely classic mould was somewhat moderated by a delicate, dark little moustache on her upper lip. Her mien was regal and portentous, sitting well upon the person of the widow of a great if unrecognized French tragedian; but her eyes were kindly; and Matthias had long since decided that it needed a body as big as Madame Duprat's to contain her heart.

"Bon jour, monsieur."

"Bon jour, madame."

This form of salutation was invariable between them; but the French of Matthias rarely withstood much additional strain. He lapsed now into English, cocking an eye alight with whimsical intelligence at the face of the landlady. Madame possessed the gift (as it were an inheritance from the estate of her late husband) of creating an atmosphere at will, when and where she would. That which her demeanour now created within the four walls of the chamber of Monsieur Matthias was rather electrical.

"Something's happened to disturb madame?" he hazarded. "What's the row? Have we discharged our chef? Is it that the third-floor front is behindhand with his rent? Or has Achilles--that dachshund of Heaven!--turned suffragette--and proved it with pups?"

"The row, monsieur," madame checked him coldly, "has to do only with the conduct of monsieur himself?"

"Eh?" Matthias queried blankly.

"You ask me what?" The hands of madame were vivid with exasperation. "Is it that monsieur is not aware he entertained a young woman in this room last night?"

"Oh--that!" The cloud passed from monsieur's eyes. He smiled cheerfully. "But it was quite proper, indeed, madame. Believe me, I--"

"Proper! And what is propriety to me, if you please--at my age?" madame demanded indignantly. "Am I not aware that monsieur left my house almost immediately after entering it and spent the night elsewhere? Did I not from my window see him running up the street with his handbag through the rain? But am I to figure as the custodian of my lodgers' morals?" The thought perished, annihilated by an ample gesture. "My quarrel with monsieur is that he left the young woman here *alone!*"

Matthias found the vernacular the only adequate vehicle of expression: "I've got to hand it to you, Madame Duprat; your point of view is essentially Gallic."

"But what is the explanation of this conduct, monsieur? Am I to look forward to future escapades of the same nature? Do you intend to make of my house a refuge for all the stray unfortunates of New York? Am I, and my guests, to be left to the mercies of God-knows-who, simply because monsieur has a heart of pity?"

"Oh, here!" Matthias broke in with some impatience. "It wasn't as bad as that. It's not likely to happen again ... and besides, the girl was a perfectly good, nice, respectable girl. Madame should know that I wouldn't take any chances with people I didn't know all about."

"Monsieur knew the young woman, then?"

"Oh, yes; assuredly yes," Matthias lied nonchalantly.

By the happiest of accidents, his glance, searching the table for a box of matches wherewith to relight his pipe, encountered a sheet of typewriter paper on which a brief message had been scrawled in a formless, untrained hand:

"*Dear Sir,*" he read with relief, "*thank you--Your friend, Joan Thursby.*"

He found the matches and used one before looking up.

"Miss Thursby," he said coolly, "is the daughter of an eminently respectable family in reduced circumstances. Thinking to better her condition, she proposed to become an actress, but met with such violent opposition on the part of her father--a bigot of a man!--that she was obliged to leave her home in order to retain her self-respect. Quite naturally she thought first of her only friend in the profession, Miss Maizie Dean, and came here to find her. The rest you may imagine. Was I to turn her out to wander through the rain--at two o'clock in the morning? Madame discredits her heart by suggesting anything of the sort!"

Madame's expression of contrition seemed to endorse this reproof. She hesitated with a hand on the doorknob.

"Monsieur is prepared to vouch for the young woman?"

"Certainly," he assented, with an imperturbable countenance masking a creepy, crawly feeling that perhaps he might be letting himself in for more than he bargained.

"Very good. I go, with apologies." Madame opened the door. "Thursday, you said?"

He repeated without bothering to correct her: "Joan Thursday."

"Barbarous names of these mad Americans!"

The door, closing, totally eclipsed the grenadier.

With thoughtful deliberation Matthias (smiling guiltily) tore Joan's note into minute bits and, dropping them in a wastebasket, dismissed her message and herself entirely from his mind.

Five minutes later the typewriter was rattling cheerily.

But its staccato chattering continued without serious interruption only for the time required to cover two pages and part of a third. Then came a long interval of smoke-soothed meditation, which ended with the young man cheerfully placing fresh paper in the machine and starting all over again. This time he worked more slowly, weighing carefully the value of lines already written before recasting and committing them to paper; but the third sheet was covered without evident error, and a fourth, and then a fifth. Indeed the type-bars were drumming heartily on the last quarter of page 6, when suddenly the young man paused, scowled, thrust back his chair and groaned from his heart.

He sat for a space, teetering on the rear legs of his chair, his lips pursed, forehead deeply creased from temple to temple. Then in a sepulchral tone uttering the single word "*Snagged!*" he rose and began to pace slowly to and fro between

the door and the windows.

At the end of an hour he was still patrolling this well-worn beat--his way of torment by day and by night, if the threadbare length of carpet were to be taken as a reliable witness. And there's no telling how long he might have continued the exercise had not Madame Duprat knocked once again at his door.

Roused by that sound, he came suddenly out of profound speculations. Stopping short and bidding Madame enter, he waited with hands thrust deep in his trouser-pockets and shoulders hunched high toward his ears, a cloud of annoyance darkening his countenance.

Madame Duprat came in with a "Pardon, monsieur," and a yellow envelope. Placing this last upon the table, she announced with simple dignity, "A telegram, if you please," and retired.

Matthias strode to the table and with an air of some surprise and excitement tore open the message. He found its import unusual in more than one respect: it was not a "day-letter," and it had been written with a fine, careless extravagance of emotion that recked naught whatever of the ten-word limit.

He conned its opening aloud: "*Beast animal coward ingrate poltroon traitor beast!*--"

At this point he broke off to glance at the signature and observe thoughtfully: "If Helena's going in for this sort of thing, I really must buy her a thesaurus: she's used '*beast*' twice in two lines...."

He continued: "*How dared you run away last night? You promised. I was counting on you. I am disgusted with you and never want to see your face again. Return at once. Perhaps you won't be too late after all. Imperative. I insist that you return.*"

The signature was simply: "*Helena.*"

He said with considerable animation: "But--damn it!--I don't *want* to get married yet! I don't see what I've done...."

Throwing back his shoulders and lifting a defiant chin, he announced with invincible determination: "I won't go. That's all there is about it. I will--not--go!...

"Besides," he argued plaintively, "I couldn't travel like this--clothes all out of shape from that drenching last night--no time to change--!"

Consultation of his watch gave flat contradiction to this assertion.

"And besides, I'm just getting this thing started nicely!" This with reference to the play.

With another groan even more soulful than the first he sat down at the table, seized the telephone in a savage grasp, and in prematurely embittered accents detailed a suburban number to the inoffensive central operator. In the inevitable three minutes' wait for the connection to be put through he found ample opportunity to lash himself to a frenzy of exasperation.

"Hello!" he roared suddenly. "Hel-lo, I say!... Who is this?... Oh, you, eh, Swinton? This is Mr. Matthias.... No--I say, no! Don't call Mrs. Tankerville. Haven't time.... Just tell her I'm coming down on the six-thirty.... Yes.... And send something to meet me at the station.... Yes. Good-bye."

VI

Joan's was an awakening of another order; like the thoroughly healthy animal she was, the moment her eyes opened she was vividly and keenly alive, completely acquainted with her situation, in full command of every faculty.

With no means of determining the time save by instinct, she was none the less sure that the hour wasn't late: not late, at all events, for people who didn't have to be behind counters by half-past eight. So she lay still for many minutes, on the worn leather couch, listening intently. There was a great hush in the lodging-house: not a foot-fall, not a sound. Yet it was broad daylight--a clear and sunny morning.

Her quick eyes, reviewing the room in this new light, realized the substance of a dream come true. She liked it all: the high and dusty ceiling, the immense and gloomy bookcases, the disorderly writing-table, the three sombre and yellowing steel engravings on the walls, the bare, beaten path that crossed the carpet diagonally from door to window, the roomy and dilapidated chairs, even the faint, intangible, ineradicable smell of tobacco that haunted the air, even the

generous cushion beneath her head.

Against this last she cuddled her cheek luxuriously, a shadowy smile softening her lips, her lashes low. She was enchanted by the novel atmosphere of this roomy chamber, an atmosphere of studiousness and clear thinking. And her thoughts focussed sharply upon her memories of the early morning hours, especially those involving the man who had put himself out to shelter her. She was consumed with curiosity about him and all that concerned him. In her inexperience she found it rather more than difficult to associate his courtesy, his solicitude and generosity with his aloofness, abstraction and detachment: the type was new and difficult to classify.

Was it true, then, that Man--flesh-and-blood Man as differentiated from the romantic abstractions that swaggered through the chapters of the ten-cent weekly libraries--could be disinterested with Woman, content to serve rather than be served, to give rather than take?

On the one side stood That One of the taxicab adventure, together with John Matthias: arrayed against these, a host composed of Ben Austins and Mr. Winters and men with knees--beasts of prey who stalked or lay in ambush along all the trails that webbed her social wilderness.

Were they truly different, Matthias and that other one? Or were they merely old enemies in new masks? How was one to know?...

A noise in the basement, the rattle of a kitchen range being shaken clear of ashes, startled the girl to her feet in a twinkling. However sharp her inquisitiveness and her desire to see and to know more of this man, she entertained no idea of lingering to be found there by him...

After bolting the door and before surrendering her tired body to the invitation of the couch, she had yielded to the temptation to make a brief tour of enquiry. The result had satisfied her that Matthias had lied in one particular, at least: unquestionably this was his work-room, but no less surely the man lived as well as worked in it, much if not all of the time. In its eastern wall Joan found a door opening into a small bedroom furnished with almost soldierly simplicity. And there were two large closets in the southern wall of the chamber; in one she found his wardrobe, a staggering array of garments, neatly arranged in sharp contrast to the confusion of his desk; the other was a bathroom completely equipped, a dazzling luxury in her eyes, with its white enamel, nickel-plate, glass and porcelain fittings.

She refreshed herself there after rising--not without a guilty sensation of trespass--returning to the larger room to complete her dressing; no great matter, since she had merely laid aside skirt, coat, and shirtwaist, and loosened her corsets before lying down. In a very little time then, she was ready for the street; but with her hands on the doorknob and bolt, she hesitated, looking back, reluctant to go a thankless guest.

Slowly she moved back to the centre-table, touching with diffident fingers its jumble of manuscripts, typewriter-paper, memoranda, and correspondence. There were letters in plenty, a rack stuffed with them, others scattered like leaves hither and yon, one and all superscribed with the name of *John Matthias, Esq.*, many in the handwriting of women, a few scented, but very faintly. Joan wondered about these women and his relations with them. Was he greatly loved and by many? It would not be strange, she thought, if he were....

Her temper curiously unsettled by these reflections, she stood for a long time, staring and thinking. Then a renewed disturbance in the lower regions of the house sent her packing--but not until she had left an inadequate scrawl of thanks, whose poverty and crudity she felt keenly. Why had she never learned to write a hand of delicately angular distinction to bear comparison with the hands that had addressed those impeccably "correct" notes?...

The hallway was deserted. She let herself hastily out, believing she had escaped detection.

Sunlight swept the street from side to side, a pitiless and withering blast. Already every trace of last night's shower had vanished, blotted up by an atmosphere all a-quiver with the impetuous passion of those early, slanting rays. As if every living thing had been driven to shelter, or dared not venture forth, the street was quiet and empty. In violent contrast, the tides of life ran brawling through Longacre Square on one hand and Eighth Avenue on the other.

Joan turned toward the latter, moving listlessly enough once she had gained the grateful shadow of its easterly sidewalks. A clock in the window of a delicatessen shop told her the hour was half-past seven, while the sight of the food unattractively displayed proved a sharper reminder of breakfast-time. She had no other concern in the world just then. It would be hours before she could accomplish anything toward establishing her independence; and what steps she was to take toward that consummation remained altogether nebulous in her understanding.

She had not gone far before a dairy lunch settled the question as to where she was to breakfast.

It was a small, shabby, dingy place, its walls plastered with white tiling and mirrors. Joan's order comprised a cup of

brownish-yellow liquid, which was not coffee, and three weighty cakes known as "sinkers." These last might have been crude, childish models in putty of the popular American "hot biscuit," but were larger and slightly scorched on top and bottom, and when pried open revealed a composition resembling aerated clay. Joan anointed them generously with butter and consumed them with evident relish. Her powers of digestion were magnificent. The price of the meal was ten cents. She went away with a sense of repletion and seventy-two cents.

She turned northward again. An empty day of arid hours confronted her perturbed and questioning imagination. She was still without definite plans or notion which way to turn for shelter. She knew only that everything must be settled before nightfall: she dared not trust to find another John Matthias, she could not sleep in the streets or parks, and return to East Seventy-sixth Street she would not. She had her own exertions to rely upon--and seventy-two cents: the one as woefully inadequate as the other.

Near Columbus Circle she bought a copy of the *New York World* for the sake of its "Help Wanted" advertisements, and strolled on into Central Park.

Here she found some suggestion of nature rising refreshed from its over-night bath to bask in sunlight. The grass was nowhere scorched, and in shadowed spots still sparkled with rain-drops. The air was still, steamy, and heady with fragrance of vegetation. Upon this artificial, rectangular oasis a sky of robin's-egg blue smiled benignly. A sense of peace and friendly fortunes impregnated the girl's being. Somehow she felt serenely sure that nothing untoward could happen to her. The world was all too beautiful and kindly....

She discovered a remote bench and there unfolded her newspaper and ran hastily through its advertising columns, finding one reason or another for rejecting every opening that seemed to promise anything in the nature of such employment as she had theretofore known. There were no cards from theatrical firms in need of chorus-girls, and nothing else interested her. She was now obsessed by two fixed ideas, as they might have been the poles of her world: she was going on the stage; she was not going back behind a counter.

Yet she must find a way to live until the stage should open its jealous doors to her...

The morning hours ebbed slowly, with increasing heat. From time to time Joan, for one reason or another, would drift idly on to another bench.

Once, as she sat dreaming with vacant eyes, she was roused by the quick beating of muffled hoofs, and looked up in time to see a woman on horseback pass swiftly along a bridle-path, closely pursued by a man, likewise mounted. The face of the horsewoman burned bright with pleasure and excitement and her eyes shone like stars as she glanced over-shoulder at her distanced escort. She rode well and looked very trim and well turned out in her habit of light-coloured linen. Joan thought her charming--and unspeakably blessed.

Later they returned; but now their horses walked sedately side by side; and the woman was smiling softly, with her eyes downcast, as she listened to her companion, who bent eagerly close to her and spoke in a low and intimate voice.

For hours afterwards Joan was haunted by the memory, and rent with envious longing. A hundred times she pictured herself in the place of the horsewoman; and the man at her side wore always the manner and the aspect of John Matthias....

About two o'clock in the afternoon she lunched meagrely on crackers-and-milk at another dairy establishment on Columbus Avenue--reducing her capital to sixty-one cents. Then, recrossing the park, she made her way back through the sweltering side-streets toward her late home. She arrived in time to see her father's burly figure lumbering heavily up the street. His gaze was to the sidewalk, his mind upon the poolrooms, his thick, pendulous lower lip quivered with incessant, inaudible repetition of race-track names and records. He would not have recognized Joan had he looked directly at her. And he didn't look.

She was safe, now, to make her final visit to the flat. Thursby could be counted on not to return before six o'clock. She hastened across the street and up the narrow, dark and noisome stairway....

Seated at the dining-table, over an array of dishes discoloured with the residue of the mid-day stew, her mother, seemingly more immaterial than ever, merely lifted shadowed and apathetic eyes to Joan's face as she entered. Edna, on the contrary, jumped up with a hushed cry of surprise not untouched by alarm.

"Joan!"

The girl assumed a confident swagger. It was borne in upon her, very suddenly, that she must prove a ready liar in answer to the storm of questions that was about to break.

"Hello, people!" she cried cheerfully. "How's everything?"

"Didn't the Old Man meet you on the stairs?" demanded Edna in a frightened breath.

"Nope: I waited till he'd turned the corner," Joan returned defiantly. "Anyway I ain't afraid of him. What'd he say, last night, after I was gone?"

Edna started to speak, stammered and fell still, turning a timid gaze to her mother.

"No more'n he said before you went out," said the latter listlessly. "He won't hear of your coming back--"

"A lot I care!" Joan retorted with a fling of her head. "All I'm after's my things. I've done enough for this family.... Now I'm going to look out for Number One."

The mother made no response. She seemed no longer to see Joan, whose bosom swelled and palpitated with a suddenly-acquired sense of personal grievance.

"I've done enough!" she repeated mutinously.

Edna said in a tremulous voice: "I don't know what we'll do without you--"

"Do as I done!" Joan broke in hotly. "Go out and get a job and slave all day long so's your father won't have to support his family. Go on and try it: I'm sick and tired of it!"

She turned and strode angrily into the front rooms. Edna followed, awed but inquisitive.

Pulling their bed out from the wall, Joan disentangled from the accumulation of odds and ends beneath it a small suitcase of matting, in which she began to pack her scanty store of belongings: all in embittered silence, ignoring her sister.

"Where'd you stay last night?" Edna ventured, at length.

"With a friend of mine," Joan answered brusquely.

"Who?" the other persisted.

Joan hesitated not one instant; the lie was required to save her face.

"Maizie Dean, if you *got* to know."

"Who's Maizie Dean? I never heard you speak of her--"

"Lizzie Fogarty, then," said Joan roughly. "She used to work with me at the stocking counter. Then she went on the stage. Now she's making big money."

"Is she going to get you a job?"

"Of course--foolish!"

"Where's she live?"

"Down in Forty-fifth Street, near Eighth Avenue."

"What's the number of the house?"

"What do you want to know for?"

"Ain't you going back there?"

Joan shut down the lid of the suit-case and began to strap it. "Yes," she said with a trace of reluctance.

"I might wanta write to you," insisted Edna. "Anything might happen and you not know--"

"Oh, well, then," Joan admitted, with an air of extreme ennui, "the number's Two-eighty-nine. Catch that? Don't forget."

"I won't."

"Besides," Joan added, lifting her voice for the benefit of the listener in the dining-room, "you don't need to be so much in a rush to think I ain't ever coming back to see you. You got no right to think that of me, after the way I've turned in my pay week in and week out, right straight along. I don't know what makes you think I've turned mean. I'm going to come and see you and ma every week, and as soon's I begin to make money you'll get your share, all right, all right!"

"Joan--" the younger girl whispered, drawing nearer.

"What?"

"They had a nawful row last night--ma and pa--after you went."

"I bet he done all the rowing!"

"He"--Edna's thin, pale cheeks coloured faintly with indignation--"he said rotten things to her--said it was because you took after her made you want to go on the stage."

"That's like him, the brute!" Joan commented between her teeth. "What'd she say?"

"Nothing. Then he lit into Butch, but Butch stood up to him and told him to shut his face or he'd knock his block off."

"And he did shut his face, didn't he?"

Edna nodded vigorously. "Yeh--but he rowed with ma for hours after they'd went to bed. I could hear him fussing and swearing. She never answered one word."

Reminiscences of like experiences of her own, long white nights through which she had lain sleepless, listening to the endless, indistinguishable monologue of recrimination and abuse in the adjoining bedroom, softened Joan's mood.

She returned to the dining-room.

Her mother's head had fallen forward on arms folded amidst the odious disorder of unclean dishes. Through a long minute Joan regarded with sombre eyes that unlovely and pitiful head, with its scant covering of greyish hair stretched taut from nape to temple and brow and twisted into a ragged knot at the back, with its hollowed temples and sunken cheeks, its thin and stringy neck emerging from the collar of a cheap and soiled Mother Hubbard. With new intentness, as if seeing them for the first time, she studied the dejected curve of those toil-bent shoulders, and the lean red forearms with their gnarled and scalded hands.

Dull emotions troubled the girl, pity and apprehension entering into her mood to war with selfishness and obstinacy.

This drudge that was her mother had once been a woman like herself, straight and strong and fashioned in clean, firm contours of wholesome flesh. To what was due this dreadful metamorphosis? To the stage? Or to Man? Or to both?... Must she in the end become as her mother was, a battered derelict of womanhood, hopeless of salvage?

Slipping to her knees, she passed an arm across the thin, sharp shoulders of the woman.

"Ma ..." she said gently.

The response was a whisper barely audible, her name breathed in a sigh: "Joan...."

Beneath her warm, strong arm there was the faintest perceptible movement of the shoulders.

"Listen to me, ma: I ain't going to forget you and Edna. I am going to work hard and take care of you."

The mother moved her head slightly, turning her face away from her daughter. Otherwise she was wholly unresponsive. Joan might have been talking to the deaf.

She divined suddenly something of the tragedy and despair of this inarticulate creature whose body had borne her, who had once been as her daughter was now. Before her mental vision unfolded a vast and sordid tapestry--a patchwork-thing made up of hints, innuendoes and snatches of half-remembered conversations, heretofore meaningless, of a thousand-and-one insignificant circumstances, individually valueless, assembling into an almost intelligible whole: picturing in dim, distorted perspective the history of her mother, drab, pitiful, appalling....

Abruptly, bending forward, Joan touched her lips to the sallow cheek.

"Good-bye," she said stiffly; "I got to go."

She rose. Her mother did not move. Edna stared wonderingly, as though a bystander at a scene of whose meaning she was ignorant. Joan took up her suit-case and went to the door.

"S'long, kid," she saluted her sister lightly. "Take good care of ma while I'm away. See you before long."

She hesitated again in the open doorway, with her hand on the knob.

"And tell Butch I said thanks."

She was half-way down to the next landing before she became aware of Edna bending over the banisters.

"Joan--"

"What?"

The girl paused.

"I 'most forgot: Butch said if you was to come in to tell you to drop around to the store th'safternoon. Said he had something to tell you."

"What?" demanded Joan, incredulous.

"I dunno. He just said that this morning."

"All right. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Joan."

To eyes dazzled by ambition, the news-stand, shouldered on either side by a prosperous delicatessen shop and a more prosperous and ornate corner saloon, wore a look unusually hopeless and pitiful: it was so small, so narrow-chested, so shabby!

Its plate-glass show-window, dim with the accumulated grime of years, bore in block letters of white enamel--with several letters missing--the legend:

A THURBY
Newsd ler & Stationer
igars & Con tionery

Before the door stood a wooden newspaper stand, painted red and black, advertising the one-cent evening sheet which furnished it gratis. A few dusty stacks of papers ornamented it. The door was wide open, disclosing an interior furnished with dirt-smearred show-cases which housed a stock of cheap cigars and tobacco, boxes of villainous candy to be retailed by the cent's-worth, writing-paper in gaudy, fly-specked packages, magazines, and a handful of brittle toys, perennially unsold. The floor was seldom swept and had never been scrubbed in all the nine years that Thursby had been a tenant of the place.

The establishment was, as Joan had anticipated, in sole charge of Butch, who occupied a tilted chair, his lean nose exploring the sporting pages of *The Evening Journal*. Inevitably, a half-consumed Sweet Caporal cigarette ornamented his cynic mouth. He greeted Joan with a flicker of amusement.

"Lo, kid!" he said: and threw aside the paper. "What's doing?"

"Edna said you wanted to see me."

"Yeh: that's right." Butch yawned liberally and thrust his hat to the back of his head.

"Well?" said the girl sharply. "What do you want?"

Butch delayed his answer until he had inserted a fresh cigarette between his lips, lighted it from the old, and inhaled deeply. Interim he looked her over openly, with the eyes of one from whom humanity has no secrets.

"Dja land that job?" he enquired at length, smoke trickling from his mouth and nostrils, a grim smile lurking about his lips.

"Haven't tried yet."

"But you're goin' to?"

"Of course."

"What line? Chorus girl or supe in the legit?"

"I'm going to try to do anything that turns up," Joan affirmed courageously.

"Try anythin' once, eh?" murmured the boy with profound irony. "Well, where you goin' to hang out till you land?"

The lie ran glibly off her tongue this time: "With Maizie Dean--Two-eighty-nine West Forty-fifth."

"That where you stayed last night?"

"Yes ..." she faltered, already beginning to repent and foresee unhappy complications in event Butch should try to find her at the address she had given.

The boy got up suddenly and stood close to her, searching her face with his prematurely knowing eyes.

"Look here, kid!" he said roughly. "Hand it to me straight now: on the level, there ain't no man mixed up in this?"

She was able to meet his gaze without a tremor: "On the dead level, Butch."

"That's all right then. Only..."

"Only what?"

"There'll be regular trouble for the guy, if I ever find out you've lied to me."

"What business--"

"Ah, cut that!" snarled Butch. "You're my sister--see? And you're a damn' little fool, and somebody's got to look out for you. And that means me. You go ahead and try this stage thing all you like--but duck the men, duck 'em every time!"

He eyed her momentarily from a vast and aloof coign of vantage. She was dumb with resentment, oppressed by amazement and a little in awe of the boy, her junior though he was.

"Now, lis'en: got any money?"

"No--yes--fifty cents," she stammered.

"That ain't goin' to carry you far over the bumps. Who's goin' to put up for you while you're lookin' for this job-thing? Your frien' Maizie?"

"I don't know--I guess so--yes: I'm going to stay with her."

"Well, you won't last long if you don't come through with some coin every little while."

Without warning Butch produced a small packet of bills from his trouser-pocket.

"Djever see them before?" he enquired, with his mocking smile.

Joan gasped: "My money--!"

"Uh-huh," Butch nodded. "Fell outa your bag when you side-stepped the Old Man and beat it, last night. He didn't see it, and I sneaked the bunch while he wasn't lookin'. G'wan--take it."

He thrust the money into her fingers that closed convulsively upon it. For a moment she choked and gulped, on the verge of tears, so overpowering was the sense of relief.

"O Butch--!"

"Ah, cut that out. It's your money, all right--ain't it?"

She began with trembling fingers to count the bills. Butch tilted his head to one side and regarded her with undisguised disgust.

"Say, you must have a swell opinion of me, kid, to think I'd hold out on you!"

She stared bewildered.

"There's twenty-two dollars here, Butch!"

Her hand moved out as if offering to return the money. With an angry movement he slapped it back and turned away.

"That's right," he muttered sourly. "I slipped an extra ten in. I guess I gotta right to, ain't I? You're my sister, and you'll need it before you get through, all right."

She lingered, stunned. "But, Butch ... I oughtn't to...."

"Ah, can that guff--and beat it. The Old Man's liable to be back any minute."

Seizing her suit-case, he urged her none too gently toward the door.

"It's awful' good of you, Butch--awful' good--"

"All right--all right. But can the gush-thing till next time."

Overwhelmed, Joan permitted herself to be thrust out of the door; and then, recovering to some extent, masked her excitement as best she could and trudged away across-town, back toward Central Park.

Blind instinct urged her to that refuge where she would have quiet and peace while she thought things out: a necessity which had not existed until within the last fifteen minutes.

Before her interview with Butch she had been penniless and planless. But now she found herself in circumstances of comparative affluence and independence. Twenty-two dollars strictly economized surely ought to keep her fed and sheltered in decent lodgings for at least three weeks; within which time she would quite as surely find employment of some sort.

It remained to decide how best to conserve her resources. On the face of the situation, she had nothing to do but seek the cheapest and meanest rooming-house in the city. But in her heart of hearts she had already determined to return to the establishment of Madame Duprat, beyond her means though it might be, ostensibly to await the return of the Dancing Deans, secretly that she might be under the same roof with John Matthias.

And in the end it was to Number 289 that she turned. At half-past four she stood again on the brown-stone stoop, waiting an answer to her ring.

And at the same moment, John Matthias, handsomely garbed in the best of his wardrobe but otherwise invested in a temper both indignant and rebellious, instituted a dash from room to train, handicapped by a time-limit ridiculously brief.

As the front door slammed at his back, he pulled up smartly to escape collision with the girl on the stoop. He looked at and through her, barely conscious of her pretty, pallid face and the light of recognition in her eyes. Then, with a murmured apology, he dodged neatly round her, swung down the steps, and frantically hailed a passing taxicab.

Joan, dashed and disappointed, saw the vehicle swing in to the curb and heard Matthias, as he clambered in, direct the driver to the Pennsylvania Station with all possible haste.

She stared after the dwindling cab disconsolately. He hadn't even known her!

In another minute she would have turned her back on the house and sought lodgings elsewhere, but the door abruptly opened a second time, revealing Madame Duprat, a forbidding but imperative figure, upon the threshold.

Timidly in her confusion the girl made some semi-articulate enquiry as to the address of Miss Maizie Dean.

To her astonishment and consternation, the landlady unbent and smiled.

"Ah!" she exclaimed with unction. "Mademoiselle is the friend of Monsieur Matthias, is it not? Very good. Will you not be pleased to enter? It is but this afternoon that the Sisters Dean have returned so altogether unexpectedly."

VII

Alone in the body of a touring-car, Helena Tankerville, a slender and fair woman in white, as cool and fresh to look upon as the day was hot and weary to endure, consulted her bracelet-watch, shrugged recklessly, and lifted her parasol an inch or so to enable her to level an imperious stare at the point where the straight, shining lines of railroad track debouched from the western woodland; as if expecting the very strength of her impatience to conjure into sight the overdue train.

She was very pretty and prettily dressed and sure of herself; there were evidences of temper and determination mixed with disquietude in her manner; and there was no one in her present neighbourhood (except possibly her chauffeur) of whose existence she considered it worth her while to be aware. None the less, she was conscious that she was visible. .

..

A faint puff of vapour bellied above the distant screen of pines. Immediately a far, mellow, prolonged hoot turned all faces toward the west. A rakish, low-lying locomotive with a long tail of coaches emerged from the woodland and, breathing forth vast volumes of smoke, fled a pursuing cloud of dust, straight as an arrow to the station; where, panting with triumph and relief, as one having won a race, it drew in beside the platform.

Incontinently, upwards of two hundred people, the majority of them men in apparently comfortable circumstances, well dressed to the standards of summer negligence, swarmed out of the cars and ran hither and yon, heedlessly elbowing one another and gabbling vociferously as they sought accommodation in the long rank of station-wagons, 'buses, surreys, smartly appointed traps, and motor-cars.

Helena, bending forward, overlooked them all with imperceptible disdain. The face she sought was not among those that swam in review beneath her. And presently encountering an overbold glance, she drew back with a little frown of annoyance. Already the throng was thinning; conveyances laden to the guards were drawing out of the rank and rattling and rumbling off through stifling drifts of dust; no more passengers were issuing from the coaches; and already the parlour-car porters were picking up their stools and preparing to swing back aboard the train. The conductor waved his final signal. The bell tolled its warning. The locomotive belched black smoke and cinders and amid stentorian puffings began to move, the coaches following to their tune of clanking couplings. No sign of her refractory nephew. And still Helena hesitated to give the order to drive home; John had telephoned; it wasn't like him to be delinquent in his promises.

The end of the last car was passing her when she saw him. He appeared suddenly on the rearmost platform, with the startled expression and air of a Jack-in-the-box; dropped his suit-case over the rear rail; ran down the steps; delayed an instant to gauge distance and speed: and with nice calculation dropped lightly to the ground.

Pausing only to recover his luggage, he approached the motor-car with a sheepish smile for his handsome young aunt, who regarded him with an air of mingled bewilderment and despair.

"Wel-l!" she exclaimed, as soon as he was near enough to hear--"of *all* things--!"

"Right you are!" he affirmed gravely, tossing his handbag into the car and following it. "Kick along, Davy," he added, with a nod to the chauffeur; and gracefully sank back upon the seat beside Helena.

Purring, the car began to grope its way through the dust-fog. Matthias turned twinkling eyes to his aunt. She compressed her lips and shook her head helplessly.

"Words inadequate, aunty?"

"Quite!" she said. "*What* were you doing on that train, to come so near forgetting the station?"

"Thinking," he explained: "wrapped in profound and exhaustive meditation. I say, how stunning you look!"

She gave him up; or one inferred as much from her gesture.

"You're impossible," she said in a tragic voice. "Thinking!... While *I* had to wait there and be ogled by all those odious men!"

"You must've been ready to sink through the ground."

She eyed him stonily. "You didn't care--!"

"Even if I hadn't been preoccupied, it would never have entered my head that you seriously objected to being admired."

She received this in injured silence. Matthias chuckled to himself and settled more comfortably into his seat. The motor-car turned off the main road from the station to the village of Port Madison, down which the greater number of its predecessors had clattered, and found unclouded air on a well-metalled lane bordered with aged oaks and maples. Through a funnel-like dip between hills, Matthias, looking past his aunt, caught a fleeting glimpse of the cluttered roofs of Port Madison, its shallow, land-locked harbour set with a little fleet of pleasure boats, and the ineffable, burning blue of the distant Sound....

"I presume," Helena returned to the charge, disarmingly aggrieved, "you think I ought to be grateful for your condescending to return at all!"

"Forgive me," he pleaded, not altogether insincerely; "I know it wasn't right of me to run away like that, but I couldn't help it."

"You couldn't help it!" she murmured despairingly.

"That's just the way of it. I got to thinking about a play I wanted to write, yesterday afternoon, and--well, along about ten o'clock it got too strong for me. I just had to get back to my typewriter. You know how that is."

"I? What do I know about your silly playwriting?"

Laughing, he bent nearer and patted the gloved hand on the cushions beside him. "You know perfectly well, Helena dear, what it is to want to do something so bad you simply can't help yourself. It's the Matthias blood in both of us. That's why you ran off and married Tankerville against everybody's advice. Of course, it did turn out beautifully; but you didn't stop to wonder whether it would or not when you took it into your head to marry him. The same with me: you decide that it's high time for your delightful sister-in-law to get married, and you look round and fix on your dutiful nephew for the bridegroom-elect--wholly because you want it to be that way."

"Don't you?" she demanded sharply.

He took a moment to think this over. "I suppose I do," he admitted almost reluctantly. "But--"

"You're in love with her!" Helena declared with spirit.

"Quite true, but--"

"Then why," she begged in tones of moderate exasperation--"why do you object--hang fire--run away like a silly, frightened schoolboy as soon as I get everything arranged for you?"

"But, you see, I'm not in a position to get married yet," he argued. "I haven't--"

"How's that--'not in a position'?" she interrupted testily.

"You keep forgetting I'm the family pauper, the poor relation, whereas Venetia has all the money there is, more or less."

"There you are!" Helena turned her palms out expressively; folded them in resignation. "What more can you ask?"

"Something more nearly approaching an equal footing, at least."

"Jack!"--she turned to him with a fine air of innocence--"how much money *have* you got, anyway?"

"Thirty-six hundred per annum, as you know very well," he replied. "But, my dear, dear aunty (you're one of the most beautiful creatures alive and I'm awfully proud and fond of you) surely you must understand that no decent fellow wants to go to the girl he's in love with and make a proposition like this: 'I've got thirty-six hundred and you've got three hundred and sixty thousand; let's marry and divide.'"

"How long have you been writing plays?"

"Oh ... several years."

"And how many have you written?"

"Quite a few."

"And how much have you made at it?"

"Next to nothing, but--"

"Then why do you persist?"

"Because it's the thing I want to do."

"But you can't make any money at it--"

"I may make a lot before long. Meanwhile, I like it."

"But if you'd only listen to reason and let Tankerville--"

"With all the best intentions in the world, dear Helena, Tankerville couldn't make me a successful business man. It isn't in me. Permit me to muddle along in my own, 'special, wrong-headed way, and the chances are I'll make good in the end. But, once and for all, I refuse positively to give up my trade and try to make sense of Wall Street methods."

Helena moved her shoulders impatiently. For an instant she was silenced. Then: "But marriage needn't necessarily put an end to your playwriting. A good marriage--as with Venetia--ought even to help, I should think."

"But you persist in forgetting I'm not a fortune hunter."

"But," she countered smartly, "Marbridge is."

He said: "Oh--Marbridge!" as if dumbfounded.

She smiled quietly, a very wise and superior smile.

To this point the car had been steadily ascending; the noise of the motor, together with the frequent stutterings of the exhaust with the muffler cut-out, had been sufficient to disguise the substance of their communication from the ears of the operator. Now, however, they surmounted the highest point and began the more gradual descent to the Tankerville estate. And with less noise there was consequently very little talking on the part of the two on the rear seat. For which Matthias wasn't altogether sorry. He wanted time to think--to think about Vénetia Tankerville in the new light cast upon her by his aunt's concluding remark: as affected by her friendship with Vincent Marbridge.

In the natural swing of events, it would never have occurred to him to consider Marbridge's attentions seriously. Nobody ever took Marbridge seriously, he believed, aside from a few exceptionally foolish women....

Noiselessly the car slipped down a mile-long avenue to the brow of a promontory. On either hand Tanglewood's long parked terraces fell away to the water: on the left the harbour of Port Madison, on the right, Long Island Sound.

Matthias was barely conscious of these things; his mood was haunted by an extraordinarily clear vision of Vincent Marbridge: not tall, but by no means short; a trifle stout, but none the less a well-knit figure of a man, and tremendously alive; dark, with a broad, blunt, good-humoured face and seal-brown eyes that were exceedingly handsome and expressive; keen-witted and accomplished, knowing almost everybody and every place and thing worth knowing; hedonist and egoist, selfish, unscrupulous, magnetic, fascinating.

Impressed, Matthias frowned. His aunt eyed him covertly, with a sly, semi-affectionate, semi-malicious smile shadowing her mouth.

Slackening its pace, the car took the wide semicircle of the drive and slid sedately to a dead stop by the carriage-block. Matthias pulled himself together, jumped out, and gave his hand to his aunt. They turned toward the house.

Tankerville's pretentious marble palace crowned the brow of the headland with an effect as exquisite as a dream of an ancient French chateau realized in snow. For this its owner had his wife to thank. Helena, unable to curb her husband's desire for the most expensive and ostentatious place obtainable, had at least guided his choice of design. It was too magnificent, it was overpowering, but it was beautiful; and it was more than ever beautiful at this hour, with its walls in part bathed in a rose-pink light of sunset, in part shadowed as with a wash of violet, and with all its admirable proportions stark against the dusky sapphire of the Sound.

An unwonted stillness clung about the place. Matthias wondered.

"It might be the palace of the Sleeping Beauty," he said. "Why this deadly and benumbing silence? What--"

"Oh, simply that Tankerville decided this morning to take everybody down to Huntington for lunch. They got away quite early, in the Enchantress. Come out on the terrace; we'll look for them."

They passed through a wide, cool, panelled hallway.

"Why didn't you go?"

"You know I hate the water. Besides, I had a headache--at least, I had one until the Enchantress got under way; and furthermore I meant to stay at home and meet you and talk it out."

"Vénetia went, of course?"

"Of course--*and* Marbridge--and everybody!"

He grunted thoughtfully. They descended to a terrace which jutted airily out over the edge of a cliff, with a sheer drop of a hundred and fifty feet to the beach.

Helena, dropping languidly into a wicker chair, motioned Matthias to the broad marble balustrade.

"Any sign of the Enchantress, O perturbed nephew?"

He lingered there for an instant, marvelling with an inexhaustible wonder at the magnificent sweep of the view, then remembering, raked the waters until he discovered Tankerville's power-cruiser standing in toward the dock from the bottle-neck mouth of Port Madison harbour.

Returning, he reported, seated himself near his aunt, lighted a cigarette.

"Why did you ask him here anyway?" he demanded abruptly.

"Who?" she parried mischievously.

"Marbridge, of course," he admitted, sulking in the face of her manifest amusement.

"Jealous, Jackie?"

"Oh--if you insist."

She laughed. "The most encouraging symptom you've yet betrayed!... I didn't ask him. Tankerville did. He likes him. The man's amusing, after all."

"But you like him?"

"He amuses me."

"He's not precisely a tame cat...."

"Dear boy!" she laughed again, "I didn't fetch you out here to worry about me. I'm fire-proof. Vénétia's quite another pair of shoes. Fret about her as much as you like."

"When does he go--Marbridge, I mean?"

"Monday, I think. At least, I believe Tankerville asked him for a week only."

"And that's why you asked me, this particular week?"

"I thought you'd be a good counter-irritant; and hoped you'd come to your senses and secure Vénétia against all Marbridges for all time to come. You gave me to understand you would."

"Pardon," he corrected a trifle stiffly: "I admitted to you in strict confidence that I was in love with Vénétia. I never promised to ask her to marry me."

"Well, that's what I understood you to mean. And anyway, you'd better. Neither Tankerville nor I can control the girl; she's her own mistress and headstrong enough to be a good match for any Matthias that ever lived. If Marbridge ever convinces her that she likes him...."

She concluded with an eloquent ellipsis.

"Probably," mused Matthias after prolonged deliberation, "I'd have lost my head before this if it hadn't been so full of that play."

Helena smiled indulgently. "It's not too late ... I hope."

Troubled, he rose, walked to the balustrade, jerked his cigarette into space, and returned.

"As between one fortune-hunter and another," he said gloomily, "I'm conceited enough to think myself the safer bet."

His aunt smiled more openly: "See what Vénétia thinks."

"I will!" said Matthias with a fine air of inalterable determination.

VIII

Since it was her whim and the winds indulged, Helena had ordered that the rite of the late dinner be celebrated by candlelight alone. Ten shaded candles graced the places. In the centre of the table an ancient candelabrum of gold added the mellow illumination of its seven alabaster arms, whose small flames yearned upward ardently, with scarce a perceptible flicker, though every window was wide to the whispering night.

One of these that faced Matthias framed a shimmering sky of stars and the still black shield of the Sound, on which the fixed and undeviating glare of a remote light-house was reflected darkly, a long unwavering way of light; he thought of a tall wax candle burning amid the sanctified shadows of some vast and dark and still cathedral....

They were ten at table: from Helena's right, Pat Atherton (Tankerville's partner), a Mrs. Majendie, Marbridge, a Mrs. Cardow, Tankerville at the head; on his right, Mrs. Pat Atherton, Matthias, Vénétia Tankerville, Majendie. The latter and his wife were almost strangers to Matthias, having arrived only the previous afternoon: but he thought them as

pleasant and handsome people as any of those with whom the Tankervilles liked to fill their house. The Athertons were old friends; he had known them well, long before Helena dreamed of marrying Tankerville. Marbridge was an indifferently familiar figure in the ways of his life; they frequented the same clubs, and of late he had begun to encounter the older man more and more frequently in his theatrical divagations. Remained Mrs. Cardrow, a widow, the acquaintance of a week's standing. Cardrow had been in some way connected with the enterprises of Messrs. Tankerville & Atherton; how, Matthias didn't remember; a man of whom rumour said little that was good until it began to say *De mortuis*.... He had killed himself for no accountable reason. His widow seemed to have survived bereavement with amazing grace.

Matthias admired her greatly. Women, he knew--Helena in their number--mistrusted her for no cause perceptible to him. He liked her, thought her little less than absolutely charming. So, evidently, did Marbridge, whose attitude toward her this evening was a little more noticeably attentive than ever before. He seemed to exert himself to interest and divert. His black eyes snapped. As he talked his heavy body swayed slightly from the hips, lending an accent to his animation. His laugh was frequent and infectious.

She was a woman who smiled more than she laughed. She smiled now, inscrutably, her beautiful, insolent eyes half veiled with demure lashes, her face turned to Marbridge, her chin a trifle high, bringing out the clear strong lines of her throat and shoulders, which had the texture, the pallor, and the firmness of fine ivory. Her eyes, when she chose to discover them, were brown, her eyebrows almost black, her hair dull gold, the gold of the candelabrum--the gold of artifice, on the word of Helena.

Perhaps it was to this odd colouring--ivory and brown, black and gold--that Mrs. Cardrow owed most of her strange and provoking quality. But there was something else, something one could not define: at once stimulating and elusive; less charm than allure; nameless; that attracted and repelled....

These were thoughts set stirring by a dozen semi-curious glances at the woman, in pauses in his conversation with Venetia. Matthias was in fact indifferent to Mrs. Cardrow. But he was tremendously interested in Venetia. It could hardly be otherwise--since his talk with Helena. He was to marry Venetia. Amazing thought!

She was adorable. Of the other women, none compared with Mrs. Cardrow: even Helena's beauty paled in contrast. But Venetia was to Mrs. Cardrow as dawn to noon. One looked at Venetia and thought of a still sea at daybreak, mobile to the young and fitful airs, radiant with sunlight, breathless with apprehension of the long, golden hours to come. One looked at Mrs. Cardrow and thought--of Woman. Venetia was dark, and the other fair; Venetia was by no means a child, Mrs. Cardrow not yet thirty. The gulf that set them apart was not so much of years as of caste: they lived and thought on different levels, mental if not social. Matthias liked to think Venetia of the higher order.

He was to marry her. Incredible!

And tonight her eyes were warm and kind for him, and all for him. He could not see that there was anything of self-interest in the infrequent glances she cast at those who sat opposite, playing their time-old game with such engaging candour. If she had thought much of Marbridge, surely she must have betrayed some little pique or chagrin. She was not blind; neither was she patient and prone to self-effacement. Matthias had known her long enough to have garnered vivid memories of her resentment of slights, whether real or fancied. She was unique and wonderful in many ways, but (he told himself in a catch-phrase of the hour) she was essentially human. He could not have cared for a woman without temper: he cared intensely for this girl-woman whose rare loveliness seemed almost exotic in its singular scheme, whose skin, fine of texture and colourless as milk-white satin, was splashed with lips of burning scarlet, whose eyes of deepest violet were luminous in the shadow of hair of the richness and lustre of burnished bronze ... luminous and kind to him: he dared to hope greatly of their sympathy.

Through dinner she had entertained him with a mirthful, inconsecutive narrative of the adventures of the day. Now, as ices were served, her interest swerved suddenly and found a new object in himself.

"Why did you run away last night?"

"You really noticed it?"

Light malice trembled on her lips: "Not till this morning."

"You were so busy"--an imperceptible nod indicated Marbridge--"I felt myself becoming ornamental. Whereas, utility's my proudest attribute. So I left you dancing, and skipped by the light of the moon."

"Not really?"

"I assure you--"

"Put out with me, I mean?"

He sought her eyes again and found them veiled and downcast. "Not the least in the world."

"Then, again, why--?"

"I wanted to get back to work. Besides, I had a little business with a manager."

And so he had; but until this moment he had forgotten it.

"Play business?"

"I'm afraid I know no other."

"Is something new to be produced?"

Matthias nodded: "Goes into rehearsal in August. A melodrama I wrote some time ago--"The Jade God."

"Who produces it?"

"Rideout."

"Who's he?"

"A foolish actor: played a sketch of mine in vaudeville for a couple of years and, because that got over, thinks this piece must."

"But it will, won't it?"

"I hope so; but I'm glad it's not my money."

"And where will you open?"

"Heaven and the Shuberts only know. Rideout books through the Shuberts, you understand."

"I'm afraid I don't."

"The Shuberts are the Independents--the opposition to the Syndicate headed by Klaw and Erlanger. You see, the theatres of this country are practically all controlled by one or the other combination. If you want booking for your show, you've got to take sides--serve God or Mammon."

"And which is which?"

"The difference is imperceptible to the innocent bystander."

"But you'll let us know--?"

"If we open within motoring distance of Town--rather!"

Tankerville, edging his plump little body forward on his chair, manoeuvred his round and sun-scorched face in vain attempts to catch his wife's eye past the intervening candelabrum. Helena, however, divined his desire.

"Coffee in the card-room, George?"

"Please!" Tankerville bleated plaintively.

There was a concerted movement from the table.

Venetia lingered with Matthias.

"It's auction, tonight. Shall you play?"

"Fraid I'll have to. So will you. Helena--you know--"

"Of course. We must. Only"--she sighed, petulant--"I'd rather not. I'd rather talk to you."

"Heroic measures!" he laughed. "But--consolation note!--we're two over two full tables. Therefore we'll have to cut in and out. That'll give us some time to ourselves."

"Yes," she agreed: "but it'll be just our luck to be disengaged at different times."

He paused in amused incredulity. "Do you really want to talk to me as badly as all that?"

She nodded, curtaining her eyes.

"Very much," she said softly.

They entered the card-room and were summoned to different tables. Matthias cut and edged Mrs. Cardrow out by a single pip. How Vénétia fared he did not learn, more than that she was to play while Marbridge was to stay out the first rubber.

He played even less intelligently than usual, with a mind distracted. Vénétia's new attitude, pleasant as had been all their association, was a development of disconcerting suddenness; or else he had been witless and blind beyond relief. And yet--how could he say? He was so frequently misled by faculties befogged with dreaming, that overlooked when they did not flatly deny the obvious: it was possible that Helena had been more wise than he.

A sense of strain handicapped his judgment; whether atmospheric or bred of his own emotion, he could not tell. And yet, plumbing the deeps of his humour, he discovered nothing there more exacting than bewilderment, more exciting than hope. On the other hand, he could fix upon nothing in the bearing of these amiable people to lead him to believe that the feeling of tensity to which he was susceptible was not the creation of his own fancy. They played with a certain abandon of enjoyment, absorbed in their diversion....

Looking past Vénétia, at the other table--Vénétia slim and tall and worshipful in a wonderful black gown that rendered dazzling the whiteness of her flesh--he could see Mrs. Cardrow and Marbridge at the piano in the drawing-room. The woman sat all but motionless, white arms alone moving graciously in the half-light as her deft hands wandered over the key-board. Marbridge, his arms folded, lounged over the piano, his back to the card-room. The eloquent movements of his round, dark head, its emphatic nods and argumentative waggings, seemed to indicate that he was bearing the burden of their talk; but the music, hushed though it was, covered his accents. The woman was looking up into his face with an expression of quick, pleased interest, her lips, half-parted, smiling.

It did not occur to Matthias to wonder about the substance of their conversation. But for a sure clue to the intrigue of Vénétia's heart--and his own--he would have given worlds.

Throwing down his cards, Tankerville announced with satisfaction: "Game--rubber. Jack, you go out--praise the Saints! You've cost Mrs. Pat close onto fifteen dollars, more shame to you!"

"Sorry!" Matthias smiled cheerfully, rising. "You would have me play."

"Hearkening and repentance!" retorted Tankerville. "Next time I marry, you can bet your sweet life I'm going to pick out a family of sure-nough bridgers.... Call Mrs. Cardrow, will you now, like a good fellow."

But Mrs. Cardrow had already left the piano. Matthias held a chair for her, and then, since the rubber at the other table was not yet decided, strolled to a window.

The night tempted him. Almost unconsciously he stepped out upon the terrace and wandered to the parapet.

Abstractedly he lighted a cigarette. When the tobacco was aglow he held the match from him at arm's-length over the abyss. Its flame burned as steadily as though protected, flickering out only when, released, it fell. No night ever more still than this: land and water alike spellbound in breathless calm; even on the brow of that high foreland where Tankerville had builded him his lordly pleasure home, no hint of movement in the air! And yet Matthias was conscious of nothing resembling oppression--exhilaration, rather. He smiled vaguely into the darkness.

From far below, echoing up from the placid waters of Port Madison as from a sounding-board, came the tinkle-tinkle of a banjo and the complaint of a harmonica. When these were silent the wailing of violins was clearly audible, bridging a distance of over a mile across the harbour, from the ball-room of the country club. Far out upon the Sound the night boat for Boston trudged along like a slow-winged firefly; and presently its wash swept inshore to rouse the beach below to sibilant and murmurous protest. In the east the vault of night was pallid, azure and silver, with the promise of the reluctant moon.

A hand fell gently upon his arm: Vénétia's. He had not been aware of her approach, yet he was not startled. He turned his head slowly, smiling. She said softly: "Don't say anything--wait till it rises."

They waited in silence. Her hand lingered upon his arm; and that last, he knew, was trembling. The nearness of her person, the intimacy of her touch, weighed heavily upon his senses.

An edge of golden light appeared where the skies came down to the sea; hesitated; increased. That wan and spectral light, waxing, lent emphasis to the rare and delicious wonder of her loveliness, to the impregnable mystery of her womanhood. He regarded her with something near awe, with keen perception of his unworthiness: as a spirit from

Heaven had stooped to commune with him. She lived; breathed; the hand upon his arm was warm and strong... Incredible!

The gibbous disk swung clear of the horizon and like some strange misshapen acrobat climbed a low-lying lattice-work of clouds. The girl turned away to a huge willow basket-chair. Matthias found its fellow and drew near to her. He struggled to speak; he fancied that she waited for him to speak; but his mind refused to frame, his tongue to utter, aught but the stalest of banalities.

"No dew tonight," he hazarded at length, shame-faced.

After an instant of silence she laughed clearly and gently. "O romantic man!" she said. "Now that you have, shattered the spell--if you please, a cigarette."

He supplied this need; held a match; delayed holding it when it had served its purpose, enraptured with the refulgent wonder of that cameo of sweet flesh and blood set against the melting shadows, silver and purple and blue.

With a second low, light laugh, she bent forward and daintily extinguished the flame with a single puff.

"I don't wish to be stared at...."

"Pardon," he said mechanically, startled. "But ... why?"

"Perhaps I'm afraid you may see too much...."

"Impossible!" he declared with conviction.

"Odd as it may sound," she said in a mocking voice, "I have my secrets."

Her back was to the moon, her face a pallid oval framed in ebony, illegible; but the moonlight was full upon his face, and she who would might read. His disadvantage was obvious. It wasn't fair...

Lounging, she crossed her knees, puffed thrice and cast the cigarette into the gulf. Abruptly she sat forward, studying him intently. He was disturbed with a singular uneasiness.

"Jack," said Vénétia very quietly, "is it true that you love me?"

"Good lord!" he cried, sitting up.

"Is it true?"

He blinked. His head was whirling. He said nothing; sank back; quite automatically puffed with such fury that in a trice he had reduced the cigarette to an inch of glowing coal; scorched his fingers and threw it from him.

Then he gasped stupidly: "Vénétia!"

"Is it true?"

She had not moved. The question had the force of stubborn purpose through its very monotony, a monotony of inflexion no less than of repetition. Her accents were both serious and sincere. She was in earnest; she meant to know.

"But, Vénétia--"

"Or have you been just making believe, all this long time?"

"It--I--why--of course it's true!" he stammered lamely.

"Then why haven't you ever told me so?"

There sounded reproach, not unkindly, but real. He shook his wits together.

"How could I guess you'd care to know?"

"Do you know me so little as to think I'd resent it, if I happened not to care?"

"I--don't know--didn't think of it that way. In fact--you've knocked me silly!"

"But why? Because I've been straightforward? Dear boy!"--she lifted a hand to him: he took it in trembling--"you're twenty-seven, I'm twenty-three. We know one another pretty well: we know ourselves--at least slightly. Why can't we face things--facts--as man and woman, not as children? What's the good of make-believe? If this thing lies between us, let's be frank about it!"

He hesitated, doubting, searching her face. Her look was very sweet and kind. Of a sudden he cried "Vénetia!" came to his knees beside her chair, snatched her hand and crushed it between his own, to his lips.

"I love you--I've always loved you!..."

He felt the velvet of her lips, her breath, upon his forehead; and made as if to clasp her to him. But she slipped back, straightening an arm to fend him off.

"No," she whispered--"not now--not here. Dear boy, get up! Think--this moonlight--anybody might see--"

"I love you!"

"I know and, dear, I'm glad--so glad! But--you made me ask you!"

"I couldn't help that, Vénetia: I was--afraid; I hardly dared to dream--of this. You were--you are--above, beyond--"

Gently her hand sealed his mouth.

"Dear, silly boy! Get up. If you won't, I must."

Releasing her hand, he rose. His emotion shook him violently. At discretion, he dropped back into his chair. He looked about him a little wildly, his glance embracing all the weird fantasy of the night: the cold, inaccessible, glittering vault of stars, the malformed and sardonic moon, the silken bosom of the Sound, the lace and purple velvet draperies of the land. Down on the harbour the banjo and harmonica were ragging to tatters a sentimental ballad of the day. From the house came a burst of laughter--Tankerville exultant in some successful stratagem at cards.

His gaze returned to Vénetia. She sat without moving, wrapped in the exquisite mystery of her enigmatic heart, bewitching, bewildering, steadfastly reading him with eyes veiled and inscrutable in liquid shadow.

Muttering--"Preposterous!"--he dropped his head between his hands. "I'm mad--mad!" he groaned.

Without stirring, she demanded: "Why?"

He shook his head free. "To have--owned up--let this come to pass. I love you: but that's all I dare say to you."

"Isn't it, maybe, enough for me?"

"I mean--I'm mad to marry you. But how can I ask you to have me? What have I to offer you? The position of wife to a poverty-stricken, half-grown playwright! It's out of reason...."

"But possibly--am I not the one to judge of that?"

"No: I won't have you marry a man unable to provide for you in the way to which you've been educated. It's a point of honour--"

"But I have--"

"You must understand: I've got to be able--able!--to humour your every whim. With things that way--what of your own you choose to spend on yourself won't count. The issue is my ability to give you everything."

"But that will come--"

"When? I can't promise--I hardly dare hope--"

"This new play isn't your only hope?"

"No--"

"Success or failure, you'll keep on?"

"Certainly...."

"Then it's only a question of time."

"But you--how can I ask you to wait?"

"There's no necessity--"

"But it must be." He rose, unable to remain still. "Give me six months: I've got another piece of work under way--and others only waiting their turn. In six months I can--"

"No!"

The monosyllable brought him up sharply. He stared. Her white arms, radiant in that clear, unearthly light, lifted toward him.

"If you want me, dear," she said in a voice tense with emotion--"it must be now--soon! To wait--six months--I--that's im--"

The beautiful modulations of Helena Tankerville's voice interrupted.

Standing in one of the windows to the card-room, she said simply: "An exquisite night."

Then, coming out upon the terrace and seeing Vénetia and Matthias, she moved toward them.

"Oh, there you are, Jack. You're wanted indoors."

Matthias, unable quickly to regain his poise, said nothing. Vénetia answered for him, calmly:

"He can't come."

"What, dear?"

"I say, he can't come, Helena. He's engaged."

"Engaged!"

Recovering, Helena bore down upon them with a little call of delight.

"Not really!... O my dears! I'm so glad!"

She gathered Vénetia into her arms.

IX

Unremarked by any of these, Marbridge stepped out upon the terrace. He was light of foot like most men of his type; his voice, unctuous with the Southern drawl which he affected together with quaint Southern twists of speech, was the first warning they had of his approach.

"This is surely one powerful' fine night. I don't wonder you-all like it better out here than--" He checked suddenly in both words and action: the women had started apart. "Why!" he added slowly, as though perplexed--"I hope I don't intrude...."

His quick dark eyes shifted rapidly from Helena to Vénetia, to Matthias, and again back to the women, during a momentary lull of embarrassment. Then Helena said quietly:

"Not in the least. But this makes you the first to learn the news, Mr. Marbridge. Vénetia and my nephew are engaged to be married."

"Engaged--!" The man's chin slacked: his eyes widened; a cigarette fell unheeded from his fingers. He smiled a trace stupidly.

"Why!"--he recollected himself almost instantaneously--"this certainly is some surprise, but I do congratulate you--both!"

With a stride he seized the hand Vénetia could not refuse him, and pressed it warmly. "You're the luckiest man I ever knew!" he declared, turning to clasp hands with Matthias.

Instinctively the latter met his powerful grasp with one as forceful. "Thank you," he said, smiling gravely into the other's eyes. Under his firm but pleasant regard they wavered and fell, then steadied with a glint of temper. Their hands fell apart. Marbridge stepped back.

"Perhaps I don't know you well enough, Mr. Matthias, to congratulate Miss Tankerville as heartily as I do you; but I'm persuaded she's not liable to make any serious mistake."

Matthias nodded thoughtfully. "I understand: your intentions are excellent. I'm sure we both thank you. Vénetia--?"

"Mr. Marbridge is very amiable," said the girl, a hint of mirth modifying her composure. "But I'm afraid, Helena," she added quickly--"if you don't mind--I think I'll go to my room."

To Marbridge she gave a quaint little bow that was half an old-fashioned courtesy, robbed of formality by her spirited smile: to Matthias her hand and a gentle "Good night!" Taking the arm of her sister-in-law, she drew her toward the house.

Watching them until they disappeared, Marbridge chuckled quietly.

"Took my breath away!" he declared. "Why, I never suspected for an instant!..." He dropped heavily but with characteristic grace into a chair. "It takes you quiet boys to get away with the girls like Venetia--all fire and dash!"

"Yes," said Matthias reflectively: "it does--doesn't it? Have another cigarette?" He offered his case. "You dropped yours...."

"Thanks.... She's a thoroughbred, all right. I reckon if I wasn't a mite too middle-aged, maybe I might've set you a pace that you'd've found lively going."

"Well, let's be thankful nothing of that sort happened, at all events."

Marbridge looked up over his match and lifted his brows; but if in reality a retort trembled on his lips, he thought better of it; and before either spoke again, Tankerville was on the terrace, brandishing pudgy arms.

"Hey, you!" he called fretfully. "Don't you know you're holding us all up? Come on in...."

But the game held less attraction for Matthias than ever, and after another and final failure to establish himself in Tankerville's good graces, he pocketed his losses, relinquished his place to Marbridge and--with even less inclination for bed than for cards--took himself again out into the open night. But now the terrace was all too small to contain his spirits. The need of action--movement, freedom, space--was strong upon him. Striding away down the drive that wound like a broad band of whitewash through its dark bordering lawns and darker coppices, he found even the grounds of Tanglewood too constricted for the extravagant energy that animated him; and took to the broad highways, with all Long Island free to his tireless spirit.

For several hours or more he trudged valiantly hither and yon, with little or no notion of whither he went--with his head in the stars and his feet in the dust and kicking up a famous smother of it--and in that time was wittingly as near to happiness as he had ever been in all his days. The faculty of coherent thought had passed from him utterly, but it passed unmourned: Venetia was his! This thought alone sufficed him. He had neither time nor inclination to entertain those doubts, those questionings and apprehensions which had beset him in saner humour theretofore. It mattered nothing now that he was poor and she wealthy, nothing that all his efforts to make something of himself had thus far proved vain and fruitless. She loved him: it was enough....

He came to his senses, eventually, long enough to recognize anew the grounds of Tanglewood. Of a sudden his impetuosity had run out; remained the pleasant languor of a healthy body thoroughly exercised, the peace of a mind vexed by no insatiable desire. And still he was not sleepy. Purposefully he retarded his footsteps, approaching the house with stealth, eager to escape observation and gain his room, unhindered. Tomorrow would be soon enough to submit to the ordeal of congratulations....

It was with a shock of amazement that he saw the house all quiet and dark. He pulled out his watch and studied its face by moonlight, finding its evidence difficult to credit: twenty minutes past one in the morning!

Gingerly, keeping to the grass in order that the gravel of the drive might not, by its crunching underfoot, betray him or alarm some wakeful member of the house-hold, he approached the front door, wondering if he were locked out, and--not without amusement at his self-contrived predicament--what to do if he were. To his relief one-half of the double door stood a foot or two ajar--thanks, he had no doubt, to the thoughtfulness of Helena or Tankerville. Blessing both on general principles, he entered, shut the door and softly shot the bolt; turned in deep obscurity to grope his way to the foot of the stairs; but paused with a hand on the newel-post and his breath catching in his throat.

In the hallway above a night-light was burning dim and low but sufficiently diffused to show him the figure of a woman silently descending the stairway. When he first became aware of her she was indeed almost within arm's length: a shape of shadow scarce three shades lighter than the encompassing gloom.... Venetia, possibly, having waited and watched for him from her windows overlooking the drive, stealing down to bid him that good night they had perforce foregone in the presence of Helena and Marbridge....

That wild and extravagant surmise had no more than entered his mind when he found the woman in his arms. She gave herself into them with a gesture of abandonment, with a little sigh that escaped in broken measure, murmurous and

fond. An arm that, lifting, flashed naked to the shoulder as the sleeve of her negligee fell back, encircled his neck and drew down his head to hers. And her mouth fastened to his with clinging lips....

Half stunned by receipt of that mad caress, one thought shot like light through the turmoil of his senses: this was never Venetia!

With an effort he straightened his neck against the pressure of the woman's arm. She strove to overcome his resistance, wooing him in accents hushed, shaking with passion:

"*Vincent ... sweetheart!...*"

He interrupted hastily: "I beg pardon!" The inadequacy of that stilted form, disgusting him, he added: "I am John Matthias."

Immediately the woman released him and, with a gasp, sank back against the newel-post. Her breath came gustily, with a sound like smothered sobbing. Pitifully he divined her shame and terror; and though he knew her very well, beyond mistake, he said evenly: "Don't worry--there isn't any light."

In a stupefied voice she iterated: "No light--?"

"It's so confounded' dark," he complained: "I couldn't tell you from Eve. So perhaps you'd better run back to your room now..."

He turned away deliberately. Behind him, after a pause of an instant, there rose a sound of soft rustling draperies, a swift and hushed patter of footsteps on the stairs. A moment or two later a latch clicked very gently in the corridor above.

Quietly Matthias switched on a single light, returned to the door, unbolted and quickly opened it.

He was not disappointed that this manoeuvre surprised a shadow skulking in the penumbra of rose bushes that bordered the steps, the shadow of a man who drew back swiftly when he recognized Matthias. This last stepped out, turned in the direction of the fugitive shadow, and pursuing at leisure, hailed in a quiet and natural tone: "I say--Marbridge!--that you?"

Immediately he came upon Marbridge at a standstill round the corner of the house, awaiting him in a curious posture of antagonism: his feet well apart, heavy body inclined a trifle forward, round dark head low between his shoulders, hands clenched, upon his face a cloud of anger.

Matthias greeted him suavely: "I was afraid I'd locked you out." Ignoring his attitude even as he seemed to ignore the fact that Marbridge had changed from evening dress to a suit of dark flannels, he added: "Coming in now? It's a bit late."

Marbridge pulled himself together. "Perhaps you're right," he assented surlily. But it was with patent effort that he mastered his resentment and accompanied Matthias back to the doors.

"A fine night, what?" Matthias filled in the awkward silence.

"Yes," agreed Marbridge brusquely. "Too fine," he amended--"too fine to waste in bed."

"Sleepless, eh?"

"Yes."

Following him in, Matthias refastened the door. "Several of us seem troubled with the same indisposition," he observed coolly, swinging to face Marbridge. "That's why I bothered to call you in, you know."

Marbridge scowled: "Perhaps I don't get you...."

"She has gone back to bed," Matthias explained pleasantly. "I didn't like to think of you waiting out there, all alone."

Marbridge choked on a retort, turned and began slowly to mount the stairs.

"Oh--going? Half a minute."

The man paused, and in silence looked down.

"I just happened to think perhaps you haven't a time-table in your room," said Matthias amiably. "There are several early trains tomorrow, you know. I fancy the eight-seven would suit you as well as any."

He got no answer other than a grunt. Marbridge resumed his deliberate ascent, gained the upper floor, and disappeared.

"Good night!" Matthias called after him, softly; and turned out the light.

X

Monday afternoon found Mr. Matthias back at his desk and in a tolerably unhappy temper, tormented not only by that conscience-stricken sensation of secret guilt inseparable from a return to neglected work, but also by a less reasonable, in fact inexplicable (to him) feeling of discomfort; as though he were a trespasser upon the premises rather than their lawful tenant.

Never before had he felt less at home, never more ill at ease in the homely solitude of his workshop and lodgings.

As for his work.... He found page 6 of that promising young first act in the typewriter carriage, precisely as it had been left on his receipt of Helena's peremptory telegram. Removing the sheet, he turned back to the first page, and read what had been written with such high and eager hope; and looked his dashed bewilderment. Knitting portentous brows, sedulously he reconsidered the manuscript at length; then with a groan put it aside, ran fingers through his hair till it rose rampant, and sat scowling darkly at the wall, groping blindly and vainly for the lost ends of that snapped thread of enthusiasm.

The first flush of confidence vanished, what he had written owned heart-rending incoherence in his understanding.

However (he assured himself) it would come back to him in time. Indeed, it was bound to. It wasn't the first time this sort of thing had happened to him, nor yet the second: he was no raw novice to cry despair over such an everyday setback.

But what the devil *was* the matter with him? All the way to Town he had been full of his theme, as keen-set for work as a schoolboy for a holiday, and hardly less for the well-worn comforts of his abode. And, lo! here sat he with his head as empty as his hands, and that misfit feeling badgering him to exasperation.

Instinctively he consulted a pipe and, through its atmosphere, the view from his windows: the never-failing, tried and true, enheartening monotony of that sun-scorched area of back-yards, grim and unlovely in the happiest weather, cat-haunted and melancholy in all its phases.... But today he essayed vainly to distil from contemplation of it any of the rare glamour of yesterday's zeal and faith. It was all gone, all! and the erratic mind of him would persist in trailing off after errant thoughts of Venetia Tankerville.

Surpassing inconsistency of the human heart! Three hours ago, in her company, he had been able to control and to behave himself, to anticipate with pleasure the prospect of returning to his desk after escorting her from the Pennsylvania to the Grand Central Station and putting her aboard the train for Greenwich, whither she was bound for a fortnight's visit. But now--he could think of nothing but Venetia: Venetia's eyes, her scarlet lips, her exquisite hands, her hair of bronze; her moods and whims, her laughter and her pensiveness, alike adorable; Venetia in evening dress on the moon-drenched terrace of Tanglewood; Venetia on the tennis-courts, all in white, glorified by sunlight, an amazingly spirited, victorious figure; Venetia with her hair blown across her eyes, at the wheel of one of Tankerville's racing motorcraft; Venetia in the gloom of the Grand Central Station, lingering to say good-bye to her betrothed....

It required several days for this stupid gentleman to awaken to the fact that the name of his trouble was merely love; that an acknowledged lover is a person vastly different from a diffident and distant worshipper; that, in short, the muse of the creative fancy is a jealous mistress, prone to sulk and deny the light of her countenance to a suitor who thinks to share his addresses with another.

But this illuminating discovery did little to allay his discontent: progress with his work alone could accomplish that; and the work dragged dolefully; he scored only dismal failures in his efforts to produce something to satisfy himself. And he had only six months to prove his worth. The date of their marriage had been fixed for February; every detail of their plans had been worked out under the masterful guidance of Helena; even the steamer upon which they were to sail for Egypt had been selected and their suite reserved.

In short he positively *had* to win out within the allotted period of grace, who seemed able only to sit there, day in and out, beside his typewriter, with idle hands, or, with a vacant mind, to pace his trail of torment from door to window: getting nowhere, stripped of every vestige of his arduously acquired craftsmanship.... It was maddening.

None the less, doggedly, savagely determined to overcome this sentimental handicap, he worked long hours: only to review the outcome of his labours with a sinking heart. For all his knowledge of the stage, for all that a long career of failures and half-hearted successes had taught him, the play that slowly took shape under his modelling lacked vitality--the living fire of drama. Technically he could find no disastrous fault with it; but in his soul he knew it to be as passionless as a proposition in Euclid.

He was a dreamer, but not even the stuff of dreams could dull the clear perceptions of his critical intelligence....

Meantime, the superficial routine of work-a-day life went on much as it had ever since he had set up shop in the establishment of Madame Duprat. His breakfasts were served him in his rooms; for his other meals he foraged in neighbouring restaurants. A definite amount of exercise was required to keep him in working trim. In short, he was in and out of the house several times each day. Inevitably, then, he encountered fellow lodgers, either on the stoop or in the hallway; among them, and perhaps more often and less adventitiously than in other instances, one wistful young woman, shabbily dressed, in whose brown eyes lurked a hesitant appeal for recognition. He grew acquainted with the sight of her, but he was generally in haste and preoccupied, looked over her head if not through her, stepped civilly out of her way and went absently his own, and never once dreamed of identifying her with that dreary and damp creature of the rain-swept night whose necessity had turned him out of his lodgings for a single night.

One day--the second Thursday following his return to Town--he found himself waiting in the lobby of the Knickerbocker, a trifle early for a luncheon engagement with Rideout and his producing manager, Wilbrow: a meeting arranged for the purpose of discussing the forthcoming production of "The Jade God." The day was seasonably insufferable with heat, but there was here a grateful drift of air through open doors and windows. Lounging in an arm-chair, he lazily consumed a cigarette and reviewed the listless ebb and flow of guests with a desultory interest which was presently, suddenly, and rudely quickened.

Marbridge, accompanied by a woman, was leaving the eastern dining-room. They passed so near to Matthias that by stretching forth his foot he could have touched the woman's skirt. But she did not see him; her face was averted as she looked up, faintly smiling, to the face of her companion. Marbridge, on his part, was attending her with that slightly exaggerated attitude of solicitude and devotion which was peculiarly his with all women. If he saw Matthias he made no sign. His dark and boyish eyes ogled his companion; his tone was pitched low to a key of intimacy; he rolled a trifle in his walk, with the insuppressible swagger of the amateur of gallantry.

They passed on and out of the hotel; and Matthias saw the carriage-porter, at a sign from Marbridge, whistle in a taxicab.

He turned away in disgust.

A moment or so later he looked up to find Marbridge standing over him and grinning impudently as he offered a hand.

"Why, *how* do you do, Matthias, my boy?"

His voice, by no means subdued, echoed through the lobby and attracted curious glances.

Matthias, ignoring the hand, lifted one of his own in a gesture deprecatory.

"Softly!" he begged. "Somebody might hear you."

Unabashed, Marbridge dropped into the chair beside him. "How's that? Why shouldn't they?"

"They might make the mistake of inferring that I liked you," returned Matthias.

Marbridge, on the point of settling back, sat up with a start. A dull colour flushed his plump, dark cheeks. For an instant his hands twitched nervously and his full lips tightened on a retort which he presumably deemed inadvisable; for mastering his impulse, he sank back again, and put a period to the display with a brief but not uneasy chuckle.

"You're all there with the acidulated repartee," he observed appreciatively. "Some class to your work, my boy!" To which, Matthias making no comment, he added with at least some effort toward an appearance of sincerity: "Sorry you feel that way about me."

"Unfortunately, I do."

"Because I wouldn't act on your suggestion about that time-table, eh?"

"Because of the circumstances which moved me to drop that hint."

A brief silence prefaced Marbridge's next remark:

"But damn it! I couldn't. It would've made talk if I'd pulled out when you wanted me to."

"There would have been no occasion for any talk whatever if you'd known how to comport yourself as the guest of decent people."

And still Marbridge husbanded his resentment.

"Oh well!" he said, aggrieved--"women!"

Matthias threw away his cigarette and prepared to rise.

"Hold on a bit," Marbridge checked him. "I want to ask a favour of you.... Of course, you're right; I am a bad actor, and all that. I'm sorry I forgot myself at Tanglewood--word of honour, I am!"

"Well?" Matthias suggested with an unmoved face.

"Look here...." Marbridge sat up eagerly. "I think you're a mighty good sort--"

"Thanks!"

"You didn't blow about that business down there--"

"I couldn't very well--could I?--with a woman involved!"

"Oh, you did the white thing; I'm not disputing that. But what I'm worried about now is whether you're as good a sport as you seem."

"Meaning--?"

Marbridge nodded significantly toward the sidewalk, where he had put his late companion into the cab. "About today: you won't find it necessary to--?"

"By God!" Matthias's indignation brimmed over. "If you're so solicitous of the woman's good name, why the devil do you allow her to be seen in your company?"

"It isn't that," Marbridge persisted, keeping himself well in hand. "After all, what's a lunch at the Knick?"

"Well--?"

"The trouble is, she's supposed to be at Newport. Majendie doesn't know--"

"You just can't help being a blackguard, can you, Marbridge?" Matthias enquired curiously. "You ought to have bitten off your tongue before you named a name in a public place like this." He rose, meeting with steady eyes the vicious glare of the other. "One word more: if I hear of your accepting another invitation to Tanglewood, I'll forget to be what you call 'a good sport!'"

Marbridge jumped up hotly. "Look here!" he said in accents that, though guarded, trembled, "I've been mighty patient with your insolence, and I'm certainly not going to forget myself here. But if you want to make a book on it, I'll lay you any odds you like that I'll be received at Tanglewood within the year, and you won't say one single damn' word. Do you make me?"

Matthias looked him up and down, smiled quietly, swung on his heel, and moved across the lobby to greet Rideout and Wilbrow.

His instinctive inclination to dismiss altogether from his mind a subject so distasteful was helped out by a conference which outlasted luncheon, involved dinner with the two men of the theatre, and was only concluded in Matthias's rooms shortly after midnight.

Wilbrow, considering the play from the point of view of him upon whom devolved all responsibility for the manner of its presentation (the scene painting alone excepted) and gifted with that intuitive sense *du theatre* singular to men of his vocation, who very nearly monopolize the intelligence concerned with the American stage today--Wilbrow had uncovered a slight, by no means damning, flaw in the construction of the third act, and had a remedy to suggest. This, adopted without opposition from the playwright, suggested further alterations which Matthias could not deny were calculated to strengthen the piece. In consequence, when at length they left him, he found himself committed to a virtual rewriting of the last two acts entire.

Groaning in resignation, he resolved to accomplish the revision in one week of solid, uninterrupted labour, and went to bed, rising the next morning to deny himself his correspondence and the newspapers and to make arrangements with

Madame Duprat to furnish all his meals until his task was finished. These matters settled, and his telephone temporarily silenced, he began work and, forgetful of the world, plodded faithfully on by day and night until late Thursday afternoon, when he drew the final page from his typewriter, thrust it with its forerunners into an envelope addressed to Rideout, entrusted this last to a messenger, and threw himself upon the couch to drop off instantly into profound slumbers of exhaustion.

At ten o'clock that night he was awakened and sat up, dazed and blinking in a sudden glare of gas-light.

Stupidly, bemused with the slowly settling dust of dreams, he stared, incredulous of the company in which he found himself.

Madame Duprat, having shown his callers in and made a light for them, was discreetly departing. George Tankerville, whose vigorous methods had roused Matthias, stood over him, with a look of deep and sympathetic anxiety clouding his round, commonplace, friendly countenance. Wearing a dinner jacket together with linen motor-cap and duster, oil-stained gauntlets on his hands, with an implacable impatience betrayed in his very pose, he cut a figure sufficiently striking instantly to engage attention--the unexpectedness of his call aside. Furthermore, he was accompanied by his wife: Helena, in a costume as unconventional as her husband's, stood at a little distance, regarding Matthias with much the same look of consternation and care.

"Great Scott!" Matthias exclaimed, pulling his wits together. "You are a sudden pair of people!" With a shrug and a sour smile he deprecated his clothing, which consisted solely of a shirt, linen trousers, and a pair of antiquated slippers. "If you'd only given me some warning, I'd've tried to dress up to your elegance," he went on.

"Damn your clothes!" Tankerville exploded. He dropped a hand on Matthias's shoulder and swung him round to the light. "Tell us you're all right--that's all we want to know!"

"All right?" Matthias looked from one to the other, deeply perplexed. "Why, of course I'm all right. Why not?"

With a little gasp of relief, Helena dropped into a chair. Tankerville removed his hand and leaned against the table, smiling foolishly.

"That's all right, then," he said. "We tried to get you on the telephone all afternoon, failed, were afraid you'd done something foolish, and took a run in to town to make sure."

"What the dickens are you driving at?" Matthias demanded. "I had my telephone cut off the other day because I was working and didn't want to be interrupted. I do that frequently. Why not? What's got into you two, anyway? Have you gone dotty?"

"No," Helena replied with a grim, pale smile; "We're sane enough--and thank Heaven you are! But V^enetia--"

"V^enetia!" Matthias cried. "What about V^enetia?"

Tankerville avoiding his eye, it devolved upon Helena to respond to Matthias's frantic and imperative look.

"V^enetia," she said reluctantly--"V^enetia eloped with Marbridge day before yesterday--Tuesday. She came in town in the morning to do some shopping, met him and was married to him at the City Hall. They sailed on the Mauretania yesterday. The papers didn't get hold of it--we knew nothing!--till this afternoon. I was afraid she might have written you and you--in despair--"

Her voice broke.

After a little, Matthias turned to a heap of unopened correspondence on a side table and ran rapidly through it, examining only the addresses.

"No," he said presently, in a level tone: "no--she didn't trouble to write me."

XI

For several days the girl had haunted the stairs, the hall, and door-step, alert to waylay Matthias, before suddenly she became aware that it was long since she had either caught a glimpse of him or heard the syncopated murmuring of the typewriter behind the closed door to his back-parlour.

It required the lapse of another day or two before she found courage to question (with laboured indifference) the

dilapidated chambermaid who sedulously neglected her room for lack of a tip. From this far from garrulous source she learned that Matthias had packed up and gone out of town very suddenly, without mentioning where he might be addressed during his absence.

Alone at the window of her tiny cell, Joan stared down at the uninspiring vista of back-yards and disconsolately recapitulated her sorry fortunes.

She was now close upon the end of the fortnight's residence in the hall bedroom; before long she would have to surrender another four dollars--a week's rent in advance. Of the twenty-two dollars she had received from Butch, eight remained in her purse. By dint of adhering to a diet largely vegetarian, she had managed without serious discomfort to keep within an expenditure of four dollars per week for food. And twice Maizie Dean had saved her the cost of an evening meal by inviting her to dine out--at the expense of friends in "the profession." But a continuance of such favours was not to be counted upon; and the problem of living a fourth week away from home was one serious and importunate--always assuming she should fail to secure work before her money ran out. She had no resources in any degree dependable: Butch, even if willing, would probably not be able to extend her another loan; she possessed nothing worth pawning; and Maizie Dean had taken prompt occasion to make it clear that, while she was willing to do anything inexpensive for a budding sister *artiste*, her tolerance would stop short of financial aid.

"Take it from me, dear," she announced soon after their first meeting: "there ain't no people in the world quicker to slip you a live tip than folks in the business; but you gotta make up your mind to pay your own keep. They work too hard for their coin to give up any without a howl you could hear from here to Hollum; and anyway, everybody's always broke in the summer. If you don't land somewhere before your cash runs low, you might just's well make up your mind to slip back into the chain-gang behind the counter."

She had developed--or changed--amazingly in the brief period of her public career. Joan experienced difficulty in recognizing in her the warm-hearted Irish girl who had initiated her into the duties of saleswoman in the stocking department. She had hardened more than superficially; she was now as artificial as her make-up, as the hue of her ashen hair. The world to her was a desert threaded by "circuits," life an arid waste of "open time" punctuated with oases of "booking"; and the fountainhead of temporal power was located in the innermost sanctum of the United Booking Offices.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she crossed her knees frankly, sucked thoughtfully at a cigarette, and waved an explanatory hand:

"Here's me and Mame, thinking we was all fixed for the nex' six weeks, and then somethin' puts a crimp into our bookin' and we're out for Gawd knows how long--till next Fall, sure. That's unless we want to take a trip over the meal-ticket circuit--fillin' in between filums, yunno. And if we do that it's goin' to crab us with the Orpheum people, sure; we'd never get back into the real money class. So we gotta hold onto what little we got until we kin see more time headed our way...."

On the other hand, she had been liberal with sage and trustworthy counsel as to the best way to go about "breaking into the game." It was thanks to her that Joan was now able to enter a theatrical employment agency without fear and trembling, and to back her application for chorus work with a glib and unblushing statement that she had had experience "in summer stock out on the Coast." And to the Sisters Dean, likewise, Joan owed her growing acquaintance with the intricate geography of the theatrical districts of New York, her ability to discriminate between players "resting" and the average run of Broadway loungers who cluttered the shady side of that thoroughfare, from Twenty-fifth Street north to Forty-seventh, those shimmering summer afternoons, and her slowly widening circle of nodding acquaintances among the lesser peoples of the vaudeville world.

As a rule she was awake before anybody else in the establishment of Madame Duprat; not yet could she slough the habit of early rising. Her breakfast she was accustomed to get at the same dairy restaurant which had supplied her first meal away from home, and at the same moderate expense--ten cents. By ten o'clock she would be on Broadway, beginning her round of the agencies: a courageous, shabby figure in the withering sun-blast, patient and indomitable through long hours of waiting in crowded anterooms, undiscouraged by the brevity and fruitlessness of the interviews with which her persistence was sometimes rewarded, ignoring disappointment with the same studied calm with which she had long since learned to ignore the advances of loafers of the streets.

Her lunches she would purchase wherever she might happen to be at the noon hour--or go without. By five o'clock at the latest--frequently much earlier--she would turn back to West Forty-fifth Street. For dinner she sought again the establishment that provided her breakfast. Her idle hours, both day and evening, she grew accustomed to waste in the double bedroom ("second floor front") occupied by the Dancing Deans.

At such times the *soi-disant* sisters were rarely without company. They were lively and agreeable creatures, by no

means unattractive, and so thoroughly theatric in every effect of manner, speech, gesture, person, and thought, that the most case-hardened member of the profession could not but feel at home in their company. Consequently, they were popular with both sexes of their associates. Seldom did a day pass but they entertained several callers, with all of whom they seemed to be on terms of the most candid intimacy.

So Joan grew accustomed to being hailed, whenever she opened the door of the sisters' room, with a formula that varied little with repetition:

"Why, if it *ain't* the kid! Hello, dearie--come right in and stop awhile. Say, lis'n: I want you to shake hands with my friend, Charlie Quard. I guess you know who Charlie is, all right; you must of seen him of'n--played leading juveniles with the Spangler Stock, I dunno how long. Charlie, this is my little friend, Miss Thursday."

"In the business, I trust?"

"Goin' to be before long. Just lookin' round."

"Well, I wish you luck, Miss Thursday. This is the rottenest season *I* ever struck. There's eighty people for every job that blooms. Why, yunno, Maizie, I was talking only yesterday to Percy Williams, and Percy said--"

At about this point Joan would ordinarily be forgotten, and the gossip would rattle on through a stifling cloud of cigarette smoke, while she sat and listened with grave, if not always comprehending, attention.

And in this manner she met and grew familiar with the personalities of an astonishing crew of minor vaudeville folk, jugglers, dancers, patter comedians, balladists, coon shouters, performers on weird musical instruments, monologists, and an unclassified host of others, including a liberal sprinkling of plain actors and actresses, the pendulums of whose life alternated between small parts in popular-price stock companies and smaller parts in so-called dramatic sketches presented in vaudeville houses.

To them all (if they remembered her at all) she was Joan Thursday. The translation from Thursby had been almost inevitable. Thursday was by far the easier word to remember; Joan soon grew tired of correcting the friends of the Dancing Deans; and accepted the change the more readily since it provided her with a real "stage name", and so, in some measure, identified her with the business to which her every aspiration was devoted.

Of all the population of this new world, perhaps the most prominent in her eyes, aside from the saltatory sisters, was Mr. Quard; or, to give him the fullest benefit of the printed cards which (detaching them dexterously from the perforated edges by which they were held in an imitation-leather cover) he distributed regardless of expense:

Mr. Chas. Harborough Quard

Spangler Stock Co.

Variety Artists Club

Brooklyn

New York

He was a long, rangy animal, robustious, romantical; with a taste in the question of personal decoration that created compelling effects. His face was large, open, boldly featured, his smile genial, his laugh constant and unctuous. Something less than thirty, he had been on the stage since childhood; with the training of an actor of the old school, he combined immense vitality, an ample, dashing air, enviable self-sufficiency, the temperament of a tom-cat.

Any competent stage-director could have made much of him; but in an age when managers cast their productions with types who "look" their parts in preference to players who can act them, he found few chances to demonstrate his ability outside the cheaper stock organizations; for the only character he was physically fitted to portray was that of an actor.

An ill-starred impulse had led him to resign his latest stock connection in order to adventure in vaudeville with a one-act sketch written to his order by a hack manufacturer of such trash. Its "try-out week" in a provincial town had elicited no offers from other managers, and in the meantime his place in the stock company had been filled. At present he had a little money saved up, no immediate prospects of an engagement, good-humour, no illusions whatever.

"It's no good," he informed Miss May Dean on the occasion of their first meeting: "I know where I get off, all right. I can play anything they slip me, but these Broadway guys can't see my kind of actor. Give me a part I can sink my teeth into, and I'll shake it until the house climbs on the seats and howls. But that ain't what they're after, these days."

"The movies'll get you, if you don't watch out," May suggested cheerfully.

"That's right; and I'd be a knock-out in a film gang, too; I'm just their kind. That's what's become of all the old boys who still think Fourteenth Street's the Rialto, yunno. But me, I'm too strong for the noise an audience makes when they like

you, or don't: I'd just as lief be hissed as get every hand in the house. Don't believe I could stand acting for a one-eyed box that didn't say anything but '*clickety-click*.' I'd rather travel with the Uncle Tommers--honest!"

He was publicly morose for a moment or two. Then he roused: "Cheer up! The worst is yet to come. Maybe I can stick out till next spring, when Grady makes his next all-star revival. Wonder what he'll exhume this time? If it's only something like 'The Silver King,' or 'East Lynne,' I may yet cop out a chance to play to a two-dollar house.... Now, lis'n: I'm going down on the stoop and smoke a cigarette while you girls colour your maps for artificial light. The eats are on me tonight."

"Does that take in my little friend?" demanded Maizie, with a nod toward Joan.

Quard threw Joan a kindly glance: "Sure. Now, get a hustle on."

"But I can't," Joan protested. "I'm sorry--I'd love to--but I've got nothing fit to wear."

"You look pretty good to me as you stand," returned Quard. "Forget it, kid, and kick in."

"That's right," Maizie insisted. "Besides, I'll lend you a hat and a fresh fichu; you don't need any coat tonight, it's too rotten warm."

"Anyway," Quard said over his shoulder as he left the room, "we ain't booked for Sherry's."

In witness whereof, he introduced the girls to an obscure Italian boarding-house in Twenty-seventh Street, the proprietress of which admitted them only after examination through a grille in the front door. Quard explained to Joan that this precaution was necessary because the house served "red ink" with the meals and without benefit of a liquor license; hence, only friends could be admitted.

They dined by gas-light in the back-yard, under an awning which served the double purpose of excluding observation from the neighbouring dwellings and compressing the heated air. Perhaps two dozen tables crowded the enclosure. The male guests by common consent removed their coats and hung them on nails in the fence. The ladies emulated by discarding hats and all conventionalities of a nature to impede free expression of their temperaments. Maizie Dean even did without her English accent.

The meal was of a sort only to be consumed with impunity by optimists and Italians: a heavy soup, and all one could eat of it, spaghetti without end, a minute section of lukewarm blotting paper with a remote flavour of chicken, a salad, cheese and coffee, a half-bottle of atrocious red wine. Joan enjoyed it immensely; it has been said that her powers of digestion were exceptional.

Everybody seemed to know everybody else. Conversation was free between tables. Personalities were bandied back and forth amid intense glee. Quard, consuming enormous quantities of wine, proved himself a general favourite, a leading spirit. After dinner he called for a virulent green cordial (which Joan tasted but could not drink) and later returned to the wine. Before the end of the evening he became semi-maudlin, and on leaving exploited a highly humorous inability to walk a straight line. On the corner of Broadway he halted suddenly, bade the three women a slurred good night, and without other ceremony swung himself aboard a Broadway car.

His rudeness excited no comment from the Dancing Deans. They walked all the way home with Joan, unescorted. Joan was surprised to see by the clock in the *Herald* building that it was almost eleven. She thought she had never known an evening to pass so quickly and so pleasantly. What little wine she had consumed seemed to have affected her not at all, beyond rendering her keenly appreciative of this novel experience.

But she suffered the next morning from a slight and, to her, inexplicable headache.

It was four or five days later before she saw Quard again. He called early in the evening--but after dinner--and sat chatting amiably with the women for upwards of an hour before the real purpose of his visit transpired.

"I was talking to Reinhardt about an idea I got for a sketch, day before yesterday," he announced suddenly. "But he wanted fifty cash before he'd touch it, and seeing as it was him slipped me that other lemon, I told him merrily where he could go and went home and wrote it myself."

"You didn't!" Maizie exclaimed admiringly.

"You bet your life I did," the actor asseverated with conscious modesty. "Why not? It's no great stunt, writing; and besides it's all old junk I've done before, only hashed up a new way. All I had to do was to cop lines out of shows I've played in--sure-fire stuff, yunno--and write in names of characters. That's nothing."

"Oh, no, nothin' at all!" commented May Dean from her perch on the window-sill. "What's an author, anyway? Eight to

five, girls, he's got the 'script on him. Get ready to duck."

"Wel-l!" Quard laughed--"you beat me to it, all right." He produced a sheaf of folded papers, smoothing them out upon his knee. "I just thought I'd see what you thought of it. If it's any good I'm going to read it to Schneider tomorrow and see what he'll offer me."

"Who's Schneider?" Maizie asked blankly.

"Agent for the film circuits," Quard replied.

"You don't mean you're thinkin' of fallin' for the four-a-day!"

"I'll try anything once; I'm not too proud to earn my bed and board in the dull season, anyhow. Besides, this thing would break into the Orpheum Circuit only over the dead body of Martin Beck. I'm no Georgie Cohan. But it oughta sandwich in between the pictures without anybody asking his ten cents back."

"You've got your nerve with you," Maizie commented darkly.

"Let him rave," May advised, exhaling cigarette smoke voluminously. "Shoot!"

Taking this for consent, Quard rattled the sheets of paper, tilted back his chair, and began to read.

His voice was flexible and sonorous; instinctively he declaimed the lines, extracting from each its full value. Now and again he lent emphasis to a phrase with an eloquent hand. But to Joan the composition was quite incoherent. She attended with wonder and a feeling of impatience because of her inability to understand what Quard seemed to relish with so much enthusiasm. It was, in fact, a worthless farrago of nonsense. None the less the two dancers laughed at encouraging intervals.

Flattered, Quard rose, removed his coat and began to act the lines, striding up and down the narrow space between the foot of the double-bed and the marble mantelpiece. The night was hot; a single gas-jet illumined the centre of the room; Quard perspired freely. For all that, his stenographic acting gave the thing some slight accent of humanity. It became a trifle, a mere trifle, more intelligible.

Seated on the window-sill, *en profile* to the room, her slight, wiry body attired sketchily in a kimono and short skirt, May Dean swung her legs and stared out into the darkness, an ironic smile hovering round her thin lips. Maizie lounged on the bed, tracing a meaningless pattern on the counterpane with a thin and rouge-stained forefinger. Joan occupied the only chair other than that at the disposal of the actor. She was very tired, and her attention wandered, even though Quard managed to draw it back now and then by some vivid trick of elocution or gesture. Vaguely sensitive to the magnetism of the man, her thoughts were occupied more with indefinite speculations about his personality than with the semi-plagiaristic and wholly commonplace concoction of cheap sentiment and tried-and-true "gags" which he professed to have written.

Physically he attracted her. Divested of his coat, his chest swelled impressively beneath a pink-striped silk shirt. When he lifted an arm, the clinging sleeve moulded itself to an admirable biceps. As he strode to and fro the stuff of his thin summer trousers shaped itself to legs that might have proved enviable to Sir Willoughby Patterne himself. His wide-lipped mouth disclosed an excellent outfit of large, white, strong teeth. His jet-black hair curled engagingly at his temples and over his generous pink ears. She liked his big, muscular, mobile hands....

She started suddenly, to discover that he had concluded and was facing her with an expectant expression, and sat up and smiled faintly, with embarrassment, trying to remember what it had all been about.

From the window, May Dean drawled languidly: "Is that the finish?"

Quard waved an arm. "Curtain!" he said; and sat down.

"My Gawd!" observed May thoughtfully.

He laughed uncomfortably: "As bad as all that?"

"It'd make a wonderful chaser," Maizie commented without lifting her eyes from the counterpane.

Quard turned desperately back to Joan. "What do you think of it, Miss Thursday?"

"I think so too," she said with all the animation she could muster. The other women laughed aloud. She flushed and added: "I mean, I think it's wonderful. I don't know what a chaser is."

"A chaser, dearie," Maizie explained in tones of acute commiseration, "is an act put on in the continuous houses to

chase out the chair-warmers and make room for more."

"Well," said Quard, shuffling the manuscript, "I don't care if it is a chaser, so long as it stakes me to the eats till something else turns up."

XII

On that day when she discovered the disappearance of John Matthias, Joan left the house later than had been her wont, and returned earlier, after a faint-hearted and abortive attempt to interview the stage-manager of a new musical production then being assembled to rehearse against an early opening in the Autumn.

The Deans were out. She had no place to go other than to her bare and lonely room, and she felt uncommonly hopeless and friendless. Subconsciously she had been holding in reserve, as a last hope, an appeal to the generosity of Matthias. He was a playwright, an intimate of managers: surely he would be able to suggest something, no matter how poorly paid or inconspicuous. Now, with the date of his return indefinite, she felt unjustly bereft of that last resource.

She spent two weary, wretched hours on her bed, harassed by a singularly fresh and clear perception of her unfitness, for the first time made conscious that she had actually possessed no reasonable excuse for her determination to go on the stage. Her qualifications, which hitherto might have been expressed, according to her own estimate, by the algebraic X, now assumed a value only to be indicated by a cipher. She had a good strong voice, it's true, but no ear whatever for music; she didn't "know steps" (Maizie's term, denoting ability for eccentric dancing) and of the art of acting she was completely ignorant. In fact, her theatrical ambitions had been founded more upon need of money than upon any real or fancied passion for the stage. Other girls had done likewise and bettered themselves: Joan knew no reason why she should fall short of their enviable achievements; but she was innocent of dramatic feeling and even of any real yearning for applause. Only her looks, of which she was confident, were to be counted upon to carry her beyond the stage doors.

She thought of her home, of her mother, her father, Edna and Butch, with a dull and temperate regret. Since that first afternoon she had never attempted to revisit them, and she felt now no inclination toward returning. Still, her thoughts yearned back to the miserable flat as to an assured shelter: there, at least, she had been safe from rude weather and positive hunger.

As things were with her, another week would find her destitute, but there was still the chance that something would turn up within that week. She felt almost sure that something would turn up. In this incurable optimism resided almost her sole endowment for the career of an actress: this, and a certain dogged temper which wouldn't permit her to acknowledge defeat until every possible expedient had been explored...

Toward evening she heard footsteps on the stairs. To her surprise they paused by her door, upon which fell a confident knock. Jumping up from her bed in a flurry, she answered to find Quard on the threshold.

No one had been farther from her thoughts. She stared, agape and speechless.

"Hello, Miss Thursday!" said the actor genially. "Can I come in?"

He entered, cast a comprehensive glance round the poor little room, deposited his hat upon the bed and himself beside it. Leaving the door open, and murmuring some inarticulate response, Joan turned back to her one chair.

"Hope I don't intrude," Quard rattled on cheerfully. "The girl told me the Deans was out and you in, so I took a chance and said I'd come right up."

"I--I'm sorry Maizie isn't home," stammered the girl.

"I ain't." Quard's eyes looked her over with open admiration. "I didn't want to see either of 'em, really. What I wanted was a little confab with you."

"With *me*!"

"Surest thing you know. I wanta talk business. I don't guess you've landed anything yet?"

Joan shook her head blankly.

"Well, I got a little proposition to make you. Yunno that sketch I wrote and you liked so much the other night?"

"Yes...."

"Well, I got hold of Schneider yesterday, and read it to him, and he says he can get me four or five weeks' booking at least, if I can put it over at the try-out. How does that strike you?"

"Why--I'm glad," Joan faltered, still mystified. "It must be fine to get something to do."

"Well, I haven't got it yet; and of course, maybe I won't get it. One of the first things you gotta learn in this business is, never spend your pay envelope till you got it in your mitt. And in this case, a lot depends on you."

"I don't get you," Joan returned frankly. "What've I got to do with it?"

Quard smiled indulgently, offered her a cigarette, which she refused, and lighted one for himself.

"If I can't get you to play the woman's part," he said, spurring twin jets of smoke through his nostrils, "it's all up--unless I can hitch up with summonelse just like you."

"You mean--you want *me* to--to act--?"

"Right, the very first time outa the box! Yunno, it's this way with these cheap houses: they can't afford to pay much for a turn, even a good one--and this one of ours is going to be about as bum as any act that ever broke through: take that from me. So it's up to me to find somebody who'll work with me for little enough money to leave something for myself, after I've squared up with the agent and stage-hands, and all that. You make me now?"

"Yes; but I haven't any experience--"

"That's just it: if you had, I couldn't afford you. But you gotta start sometime, and it won't do you no harm to get wise to what little I can teach you. Now the most I can count on dragging down for this act is sixty a week. I want twenty-five of that for myself. Fifteen, more will fix the agent and the rest. That leaves twenty for you. It ain't much, but it's a long sight better than nothing."

"But--how do you know I can do it?"

"That'll be all right. I know all about acting--anyway, I know enough to show you how to put across anything you'll have to do in this piece. Now how about it?"

"Why, I'll be glad--"

"Good enough. Now here: I've had this dope type-written, and here's your copy. Let's run through it now, and tonight you can start in learning. Tomorrow we'll have a rehearsal, and just as soon's we got our lines pat, we'll let Schneider have a pipe at it. Don't worry. It ain't going to be hard."

Thus reassured, but still a trifle dubious, Joan accepted a duplicate of the manuscript, and composed herself to follow to the best of her ability Quard's second reading.

This time he took less pains with his enunciation, scanned the lines more rapidly, and frequently interrupted himself in order to explain a trick of stage-craft or to detail with genuine gusto some bit of business which he counted upon to prove especially telling.

In consequence of this exposition, Joan acquired a much clearer understanding of the nature of the sketch. It concerned two persons only: a remarkably successful stage dancer, to be played by Joan; her convict husband, fresh from the penitentiary, by Quard. *Scene*: the dressing-room of the dancer. *Time*: just after the dancer's "turn." Joan, discovered "on", informs the audience of her fortunate circumstances through the medium of a brief soliloquy. *Enter* Quard (shambling gait, convict pallor, etc.) to inform her that she has been living in the lap of luxury during the eight years that he has been serving time: "I'm goin' to have my share now!" Comedy business: humorously brutal attitude toward wife; slangy description of prison life. ("They'll simply eat that up!"--*Quard*.) More comedy business involving a gratuitous box of property cigars and a cuspidor. Suddenly and without shadow of excuse, husband accuses wife of infidelity. Indignant denials; wife exhibits portrait of child born after commitment of husband, and of whose existence he has heretofore been ignorant: "It was for him I fought my way to the top of the ladder: he has *your* eyes!" Incontinently husband experiences change of heart; kisses photograph; snuffles into cap crushed between hands; slavers over wife's hand; refuses her offer of assistance; announces he will go West to "make a *man* of myself!" before returning to claim his wife and child. And the *Curtain* falls upon him in the act of going out, all broken up.

"Of course," Quard admitted, "it's bunk stuff, but we can put it across all right. I'm going to call it *The Convict's Return* and bill it as by *Charles D'Arcy and Company*. You'll be the company. I don't want to use my name, because it ain't going to do me any good to have it known I've taken to this graft, and if I'm lucky no one's going to spot me through

my make-up."

Suddenly apprised by the failing light that the hour was growing late, he pocketed the manuscript and rose.

"Come on out and eat--business dinner. We'll talk things over, and I'll fetch you home early, so's you can start getting up on your lines."

They dined again at the Italian boarding-house. Quard drank but sparingly, considerably to the relief of Joan....

She was home by half-past eight, her head buzzing with her efforts to remember all he had told her, and sat up till three in the morning, conning the inhuman speeches of her part until she had them by rote; no very wonderful accomplishment, considering that the sketch was to play less than fifteen minutes, and that two-thirds of its lines were to be delivered by Quard.

But once with head on pillow, it was not her role that she remembered, but the man: his coarsely musical tones, his eloquent white hands, the overt admiration that shone in his eyes whenever he forgot his sketch and remembered momentarily Joan the woman. She felt sure he liked her. And she liked him well. Of the merits of his enterprise she knew nothing, but he had succeeded in inspiring her with confidence that he knew what he was about.

She drifted off into sleep, comforted by the conviction that she had found a friend.

By the time of her return from breakfast, the next morning, Quard was waiting for her at the lodging-house. He had already arranged with Madame Duprat for the use of the front parlour for rehearsals, pending its lease to some fortuitous tenant; and here he proceeded to work out the physical action of the sketch. His gratitude to Joan for knowing her part was almost affecting; he himself was by no means familiar with his own and her prompt response to cues he read from manuscript facilitated his task considerably. When they adjourned for luncheon he announced himself persuaded that they would be ready to "open" within a week.

Within that period Joan learned many things. She was a tractable and docile student, keen-set to profit by the scraps of dramatic chicanery which formed the major part of Quard's stage intelligence. He himself had a very fair memory and had been drilled by more than one competent stage-director whose instructions had stuck in his mind, forming a valuable addition to his professional equipment. Joan soon learned to speak out clearly; to infuse some little semblance of human feeling into several of her turgid lines; to suffer herself to be dragged by one wrist round the room on her knees, by the romantical convict; to time her actions by mental counting; to "feed lines" to her partner in a rapid patter through the passages of putative comedy. She learned also to answer to "dearie" as to her given name, and to submit to being handled in a way she did not like but which, from all that she could observe, was considered neither familiar nor objectionable as between people of the stage. And she learned, furthermore, that May Dean's opinion of the venture was never to be drawn beyond a mildly derisive "My Gawd!" while Maizie's ran to the sense that it was all a chance and Joan a little fool if she didn't grab it--and anyway Joan was old enough to take care of herself with Charlie Quard or any man living!

And it was Maizie who was responsible for insisting that Joan wheedle an advance of ten dollars from Quard, ostensibly toward the purchase of costume and make-up. But when this had been successfully negotiated, the dancers advised Joan to save it against an emergency, and between them provided her with an outfit composed of cast-offs: a black satin decollete bodice, an accordion-pleated short skirt of the period of 1890, wear-proof silk stockings, a pair of broken-down satin slippers with red heels, a japanned tin make-up box with a broken lock, and a generous supply of cheap grease-paint and cold cream.

Joan's debut occurred within the time-limit set by Quard and before an audience of two, not counting a few grinning stage-hands. The two were the agent Schneider, and the manager of a small moving-picture house in the Twenty-third Street shopping district; on the half-lighted stage of which their "try-out" took place at half-past ten of a rainy and disheartening morning. The judges sat in the darkened auditorium, staring apathetically and chewing large cigars. Joan, though a little self-conscious, was not at all nervous, and remembered her lines perfectly; better than this, she looked very fetching indeed in her makeshift costume. Quard forgot several of his speeches, floundered all over the stage, and in a frantic effort to redeem himself clowned his part outrageously. Nevertheless they were engaged.

Convinced of their failure, Joan had only succeeded in removing her make-up and struggling into her shabby street clothing, when Quard knocked at the door of her dressing-room. He had played without make-up, and consequently had been able to catch the manager and agent before they could escape. Lounging in the doorway, he breathed a spirit of congratulation strongly tainted with fumes of whiskey.

"We're on!" he declared exultantly. "What'd I *tell* you? You needn't have changed, because we're going to stick here, and open today. One of the turns on this week's bill fell down at the last minute, and so we cop this chance to fill in. We

go on after the first films--about a quarter of one; and then at four-thirty, seven-thirty, ten-forty-five. Now whadda yunno about that?"

Joan gulped and shook her head, her eyes a little misty. For the first time she began to perceive that she had counted desperately on success.

"I think--we're awful' lucky!" she said faintly.

"Lucky nothing! I knew I could get away with it--always providing I had you to play up to."

"Me!"

"That's right. After we'd fixed things up I took Schneider down to the corner and bought him a drink. He said--I dunno as I ought to tell you this, but anyway--he said the sketch was punk (God knows it is) and never would've gone if it hadn't been for you. He said all the women would go crazy about you--you'd got the prettiest shape he'd seen in a month of Sundays. Yunno they get most of their afternoon houses from the women shoppers down here."

He paused and after a moment added meditatively: "Of course, you can't *act* for shucks."

Joan, looking down, said nothing. Quard dropped a hand intimately across her shoulder and infused a caressing note into his voice.

"I guess I'm a bad little guesser--eh, dearie?"

Joan stood motionless for an instant. His hand seemed as if afire, as if burning through her shirtwaist the flesh of her shoulder. And she resented passionately the intimacy of his tone. Of a sudden she shook his hand off and moved a pace or two away.

"Let me alone," she said sullenly.

Quard started and jerked out a "What?"

"I said, let me alone," she repeated in the same manner, looking him steadily in the face.

He coloured darkly, mumbled something indistinguishable, and flashed into a short-lived fit of temper.

"What's the matter with you, anyway?" he demanded hotly.



"What's the matter with you, anyway?" he demanded, hotly.

"Nothing," she replied quietly; "only I don't want to be pawed."

"No?" he exclaimed with sarcasm. "Is that straight?"

"Yes, that's straight--and so'm I!"

Recollecting himself, Quard attempted to carry off his discomfiture with a shrug and a laugh: "Oh, all right. Don't get huffy. I didn't mean anything."

"I know you didn't, but don't do it again."

He turned out into the corridor; hesitated. "Well--let it go at that, can't you?"

"All right," she said sulkily: "*you* let it go at that."

Quard tramped off without saying anything more, and, whatever his resentment and disappointment, schooled himself to control them, and met her half-way to a reconciliation when the approaching hour of their first public appearance brought them together in the wings.

And by this time Joan had been sufficiently diverted by other experiences to have regained her normal poise. The dingy, stuffy, and evil-smelling dressing-room to which she had been assigned had suffered an invasion of three other women: two worn and haggard clog-dancers and a matronly ballad-singer who, having donned an excessively soiled but showy evening gown, had settled down calmly to her knitting: an occupation which had interfered not in the least with her flow of animated and not unkindly gossip. Joan gathered that her voice was the main support of a small family,

consisting of a shiftless husband and three children, for the younger of whom the mother was knitting a pair of small, pink booties. These last had immediately enlisted the sympathetic interest of the clog-dancers, one of whom boasted of the precocity of her only child, a boy of eight living with his grandmother in Omaha, while the other told simply of the death of two children, due to neglect on the part of those to whom she had been obliged to entrust them while on the road....

Joan was the first to reach the entrance to the dingy "kitchen-set" which was to figure as a star dressing-room for the purposes of their sketch (and, for the purposes of subsequent offerings, as the drawing-room of a mansion on Fifth Avenue and the palm room of a fashionable hotel). About ten times the size of any dressing-room ever constructed, it was still atmospherically cheerless and depressing. She looked it over momentarily to make sure that the various simple properties were in place, and turned to find Quard approaching. Beneath the jaunty assurance which even his hang-dog make-up couldn't wholly disguise, she was able to detect traces of some uneasiness and anxiety.

It was a fact that he had grown a trifle afraid of her.

The discovery impressed her as so absurd that she smiled; and instantly the man was himself again. He thrust out a hand, to which with covert reluctance she entrusted her own.

"All right now?" he asked cheerfully.

She nodded: "All right."

"Good enough. Let's see what kind of a house we've got."

He found a peep-hole near the proscenium arch and peered intently through it for a moment or two; then beckoned Joan to take his place. But she could make but little of what seemed a dark well filled with flickering shadows. She turned away.

"Only a handful out there," Quard assured her. "It's too early for much of a crowd. No good getting nervous about this bunch."

"I'm not," she asserted quietly.

And she wasn't; no less to her own surprise than to Quard's, she was conscious of no trace of the stage-fright she had heard so much about. Indeed a singular feeling of indifference and disappointment oppressed her; it was all so unlike what she had looked forward to as the setting for her first appearance in public. The dreary and tawdry atmosphere behind the scenes of the dilapidated little theatre; the weary and subdued accents in which her dressing-room associates had discussed their offspring; the *tinkle-tinkle-tinkle-whang* of a painfully automatic piano in the orchestra-pit; her own shabby second-hand costume; the brutal grotesqueness of Quard's painted countenance at close range--these owned little in common with those anticipations roused by the glitter and glamour of that fleshy show on the New York Theatre roof garden. She felt cheated; in perspective, even the stocking-counter seemed less uninviting....

A muffled outbreak of laughter and brief murmur of applause filtered through the curtain. The piano stopped with a crash. Quard nodded and, touching her elbow, urged her toward the entrance.

"Film's finished. Ready and steady, old girl."

"I'm all right," she said sullenly. "Don't you worry about me."

She heard the curtain rise with a rustling as of mighty wings penetrated by the shrill squeal of an ungreased block; held back a moment; and walked on, into a dazzling glare of footlights, conscious of no emotion whatever beyond desire to get finished with her part and return to the dressing-room. At the designated spot, near the centre of the stage, she paused, faced the audience with her trained smile and mouthed the opening lines with precisely the proper intonation....

The curtain fell at length amid a few, scattering hand-claps that sounded much like faint-hearted firecrackers exploding at a distance. Joan rose from the chair in which she had been seated in a posture simulating abandonment to tears of joy, and walked soberly off the stage--barely anticipating a few stage-hands, who rushed on to make the changes necessary for the next act.

Quard was waiting for her.

"Well," he said, "it didn't go so bad, did it?"

"No," she agreed listlessly.

"Anyhow, they didn't throw things at us."

"No." She endeavoured to smile, with indifferent success.

"I got a lot more laughs with that spittoon business than I thought I would," he continued thoughtfully as they turned back toward the dressing-rooms.

Joan made no reply, but when she stopped at the door of her dressing-room, Quard added tentatively:

"Anyway, it beats clerking in a department store, doesn't it?"

With some hesitation she replied: "I don't know..."

XIII

Immediately after her second public appearance in "The Convict's Return," Joan removed her make-up, changed to street dress and scurried through the rain to a Child's restaurant, not far from the theatre. In her excitement she had forgotten lunch and she was now thoroughly hungry. But she lingered purposely over the meal and even for some time after she had finished, preoccupied with self-dissection.

She was--at last!--an actress; but she was none the less singularly discontented. In a very brief time she had travelled a great way from the Joan Thursby of East Seventy-sixth Street; a world of emotion and experience already dissociated them; but she seemed to have profited little by the journey. She felt sure that she had started the wrong way to prove her ability to act. And foreseeing nothing better than her present circumstances, she questioned gravely an inscrutable future.

Instinctively she felt uneasy about this intimate, daily relationship with Quard. She wasn't afraid of him, but she was a little afraid of herself--because she liked him. Though still she dwelt in secret longing upon the image, half real, half fanciful, of a lover gentle and strong and fine--such an one as John Matthias might prove--for all that, Charlie Quard had the power to stir her pulses with a casual look of admiration, or with some careless note of tenderness in his accents.

The shower slashed viciously at the restaurant windows. At that hour there were few other patrons in the establishment, no lights to relieve the dismal greyness of the afternoon, and no sounds other than an infrequent clash of crockery, the muffled shuffling of waitresses' feet, and their subdued voices, the melancholy and incessant crepitation of the downpour.

Joan was sensible to the approach of an exquisite despondency; and in alarm, fearing to think too deeply, she arose, ran back to the theatre and on impulse paid her way in through the front, to watch the flickering phantasmagoria of the flying films and to sit in judgment on the antics of her fellows on the variety bill. She was in no hurry to return to the dressing-room, with its smells of grease-paint, scented powder, ordinary perfumes, sweat, stale cigarette-smoke, gin, and broken food. One of the clog-dancers claimed a tubercular tendency, for which she asserted gin to be a sovereign specific; but as the day ran on was even forgetting, at times, to cough by way of an overture to recourse to the bottle. The other, viewing this proceeding with public disfavour, had opened up an apparently inexhaustible and hopelessly monotonous store of reminiscence of the privations she had endured in consequence of "Fanny's weakness." Joan gathered that the two were forever being dropped from one bill after another because of Fanny's weakness.

And of this she had five more days to anticipate and to endure....

She crawled back to Forty-fifth Street at half-past eleven, that night, so dog-tired that she had neither the heart nor the strength to call on the Deans with her good news; this though there were sounds of discreet revelry audible through the door of the second-floor front....

Somehow the week wore out without misadventure. Joan walked through her part with increasing confidence. Quard left her very much to herself when they were off the stage; indeed, he spent no more time in the theatre than was absolutely necessary. What he did out of it she did not know, but from the frequency with which he played his part with an alcoholic breath, she surmised that he was solacing himself in conventional manner for his degradation to "the four-a-day."

On the third day the clog-dancers were dispensed with for the reason forecast, their place being taken by two female acrobats of a family troupe, who lolled about for eleven hours at a stretch in their grimy pink tights and had little to say

either to Joan or to the matronly lady with the robust voice and the knitting. But the change was a wholesome one for the dressing-room.

The following week *Charles D'Arcy & Company* played at another house of equal unpretentiousness, on the East Side, and the week after that was divided between two other theatres. And on Wednesday of the fourth week--they were then in Harlem--what Joan had vaguely foreseen and hoped against, happened.

Quard turned up in the morning with red-rimmed eyes, a flushed face and a thick tongue blatantly advertising a night of sleepless drunkenness. By sheer force of an admirable physique and the instinct of a trained actor, he contrived to play the first turn without mishap, snatched a little sleep in his dressing-room, and seemed almost his everyday self at the next repetition. But after that he left the theatre to drug his jangling nerves with more whiskey; and appeared at the final repetition so stupefied that he would not have been permitted to go on the stage but for remissness on the part of the stage-manager. Before he had been five minutes on view he was hooted off and the curtain was rung down amid an uproar.

Once back in her dressing-room (where she was alone, since their act was the last on the bill and the rest of the performers had already left the theatre) Joan gave way to a semi-hysterical tempest of tears. It was her first experience at close quarters with a man in hopeless intoxication, and while Quard's surrender was too abject to terrify, she was faint with disgust of him and incensed beyond measure with him for having subjected her to those terrible five minutes before a howling audience. With this, she was poignantly aware that henceforth their offering was "cold": by morning Quard's name would be upon the black-list and further booking impossible to secure. She might as well count herself once more out of work, and now in even less hopeful circumstances than when first she had struck out for herself; for then she had been buoyed up by the fatuous confidence of complete inexperience, and then she had been comparatively affluent in the possession of twenty-two dollars. Now she knew how desperately hard was the way she must climb, and she had less than five dollars. What little she had been able to set aside out of her weekly wage had gone to purchase some sorely needed supplements to her meagre wardrobe.

It was some time before she could collect herself enough to dabble her swollen eyes with cold water, scrub off her make-up, and change for the street.

She stole away presently across an empty and desolate stage and through the blind, black alley leading from the stage-door to One-hundred-and-twenty-fifth Street. She felt somewhat relieved and comforted by the clean night air and the multitude of lights--the sense of normal life fluent in its accustomed, orderly channels. It seemed, in her excited fancy, like escaping from the foul, choking atmosphere of a madhouse...

The theatre was near Third Avenue, toward which Joan hurried, meaning to board a southbound car and transfer to Forty-second Street. But as she neared the corner she checked sharply, and (simple curiosity proving stronger than her impulse to fly across the street) went more slowly--only a few yards behind a figure that she knew too well--a swaying figure with weaving feet.

Vastly different from the carefully overdressed, dandified person he had been at their first meeting, Quard stumbled on, his hands deep in pockets, head low between his shoulders, a straw hat jammed down over his eyes. Obviously he was without definite notion of either his where-abouts or his destination. Passers-by gave him a wide berth.

He seemed so broken and helpless that pity replaced horror and indignation in the heart of the girl. After all, he hadn't been unkind to her; but for him she would long since have gone to the wall; and ever since their clash on the day of the try-out, he had treated her with a studied respect which had pleased her, apprehensive though she had remained of a renewal of his advances.

Suddenly, and quite without premeditation, she darted forward and plucked Quard by the sleeve just as he was on the point of staggering through the swinging doors of a corner saloon. If her impulse had been at all articulate, she would have said that this was, in such extremity, the least she could do--to try to save him from himself.

"Charlie!" she cried. "No, Charlie--don't be a fool!"

The man halted and, turning, reeled against the door-post. "Wasmasr?" he asked thickly. Then recognition stirred in his bemused brain. "Why, it's lil Joan Thursh'y...."

"Come away," she insisted nervously. "Don't be a fool. Don't go in there. Go home."

He moved his head waggishly. "Thash where 'm goin'--home--soon's I brace up a bit."

"Come away!" Joan repeated sharply, dragging at his cuff. "Do you hear? Come away. A walk'll straighten you out better'n anything else."

"Walk, eh?" Quard lifted his chin and lurched away from the door-post. "Y' wanna take walk with me? All right"--indulgently--"I'll walk with you, lil one, 's far's y' like."

"Come, then!" she persisted. "Hurry--it's late."

He yielded peaceably, with a sodden chuckle; but as he turned the lights of the saloon illumined his face vividly for an instant, and provided Joan with a fresh and appalling problem. The man had forgotten to remove his make-up; his mouth and jaws were plastered with a coat of bluish-grey paint, to suggest a week's growth of beard when viewed across footlights; there were wide blue rings round his eyes, and splashes of some silvery mixture on his dark hair. His face was a burlesque mask, so extravagant that it could not well escape observation in any steady light. It was impossible for Joan to be seen publicly with him--in a street-car, for instance. But now that she had taken charge of him, she couldn't gain her own consent to abandon the man to the potentially fatal whims of his condition. For a moment aghast and hesitant, in another she recognized how unavoidable was the necessity of adopting the suggestion his stupefied wits had twisted out of her pleadings: she would have to walk with him a little way, at least until he could recover to some slight extent.

Indeed, even had she desired to, she would probably have found it difficult to get rid of him just then; for in an attempt to steady himself, Quard grasped her arm just above the elbow; and this grip he maintained firmly without Joan's daring to resent it openly. She was to that extent afraid of his drunkenness, afraid of his uncertain temper.

Submissively, then, she piloted him to the south side of the street, where with fewer lighted shop-windows there was consequently less publicity, and to Lexington Avenue, turning south and then west through the comparative obscurity of One-hundred-and-twenty-fourth Street. Neither spoke until they had traversed a considerable distance and turned south again on Lenox Avenue. The streets were quiet, peopled with few wayfarers; and these few hurried past them with brief, incurious glances if not with that blind indifference which is largely characteristic of the people of New York. Quard suffered himself to be led with a docility as grateful as it had been unexpected. It was apparent to the girl that he was making, subconsciously at least, a strong effort to control his erratic feet. He retained her arm, however, until they were near One-hundred-and-sixteenth Street: when, noticing the lights of a corner drug-store, the girl held back.

A swift glance roundabout discovered nobody near.

"Where's your handkerchief, Charlie?" she demanded.

"Where's whash? Whashmasser?"

"I say," she repeated impatiently, "where's your handkerchief? Get it out and scrub some of that paint off your face. Do you hear? You look like a fool."

"M a fool," Quard admitted gravely, fumbling through his pockets.

"Well, I won't be seen with you looking like that. Hurry up!"

Her peremptory accents roused him a little. He found his handkerchief and began laboriously and ineffectually to smear his face with it, with the sole result of spreading the colour instead of removing it. In this occupation, he released her arm. With a testy exclamation, Joan snatched the handkerchief from him and began to scour his cheeks and jaws, heedless whether he liked it or not. To this treatment he resigned himself without protest--with, in fact, almost ludicrous complaisance, lowering his head and thrusting it forward as if eager for the scrubbing.

For all her willingness she could accomplish little without cold cream. When at length she gave it up, his jowls were only a few shades lighter. She shrugged with despair, and threw away the greasy handkerchief.

"It's no use," she said. "It just *won't* come off! You'll have to go as you are."

"Whash that? Go where?"

"Now listen, Charlie," she said imperatively: "see that drug-store on the corner? You go in there and ask the man to give you something to straighten you out."

Quard nodded solemnly, fixed the lighted show-window with a steadfast glare, and repeated: "So'thin' to straighten m' out."

"That's it. Go on, now. I'll wait here."

He wagged a playful forefinger at her. "Min' y' do," he mumbled, and wandered off.

"And--Charlie!--get him to let you wash your face," she called after the man.

Waiting in the friendly shadow of a tree, she watched him anxiously through the window; saw him turn to the soda-fountain and make his wants known to the clerk, who with a nod of comprehension and a smile of contempt began at once to juggle bottles and a glass.

Singularly enough, it never occurred to the girl to seize this chance to escape. She was now accepting the situation without question or resentment. Quard seemed to her little better than an overgrown, irresponsible child, requiring no less care. Somebody had to serve him instead of his aberrant wits. To leave him to himself would be sheer inhumanity... But she reasoned about his case far less than she felt, and for the most part acted in obedience to simple instinct.

She saw him drain a long draught of some whitish, foaming mixture, pay and reel out of the store. He had, of course, forgotten (if he had heard) her plea to remove the remainder of his make-up. She was angry with him on that account, as angry as she might have been with a heedless youngster. But she did not let this appear. She moved quickly to his side.

"Come on," she said quietly, turning southward; "you've got to walk a lot more."

He checked, mumbled inarticulately, staring at her with glazed eyes, but in the end yielded passively. In silence they continued to One-hundred-and-tenth Street, Joan watching him furtively but narrowly. The drug worked more slowly than she had hoped. Primarily, in fact, it seemed only to thicken the cloud that befogged his wits. But by the time they had gained the last-named street, she noticed that he was beginning to walk with some little more confidence.

He now seemed quite ignorant of her company--strode on without a word or glance aside. They crossed to Central Park and, entering, began to thread a winding path up the wooded rises of its northwestern face. Momentarily, now, there was an increasing assurance apparent in the movements of the man. He trudged along steadily, but with evident effort, like one embarrassed by a heavy weariness. His breathing was quick and stertorous.

The park seemed very quiet. Joan wondered at this, until she remembered that it must have been nearly midnight when they stopped at the drug-store. She had noticed idly that the clerk had interrupted preparations to close in order to wait on Quard.

They met nobody afoot, not even a policeman; but here and there, upon benches protected by umbrageous foliage, figures were vaguely discernible; men and women, a pair to a bench, sitting very near to one another when not locked in bold embraces. Joan heard their voices, gentle, murmurous, fond. These sights and sounds, the intimations they distilled, would at a previous time have moved the girl either to derision or to envy; now she felt only a profoundly sympathetic compassion, new and strange to her, quite inexplicable.

Near the top of the hill they found a bench set in the stark glare of an arc-light, and therefore unoccupied. Upon this Quard threw himself as if exhausted. He said nothing, seemed wholly oblivious of his companion. Immediately he was seated his chin dropped forward on his chest, his hat fell off, his arms and legs dangled inertly. He appeared to sink at once into impregnable slumber; yet Joan was somehow intuitively aware that he wasn't asleep.

She herself was very weary, but she couldn't leave him now, at the mercy of any prowling vagabond of the park. Picking up his hat, she sat down beside him with it in her lap, glad of the chance to rest. She was at once and incongruously not sleepy and thoughtless. Convinced that Quard was coming to himself, she was no longer troubled by solicitude; her wits wandered in a vast vacuity, sensitive only to dull impressions. She felt the immense hush that brooded over the park, a hush that was rendered emphatic by the muffled but audible and fast drumming of the man's over-stimulated heart, straining its utmost to pump and cleanse away the toxic stuff in his blood; the infrequent rumble and grinding of a surface-car on Central Park West seemed a little noise in comparison. Now and again a long thin line of glimmering car-windows would wind snakily round the lofty curve of the Elevated structure at One-hundred-and-tenth Street. Beyond, the great bulk of the unfinished cathedral on Morningside Heights loomed black against a broken sky of clouds.

At one time a policeman passed them, strolling lazily, helmet in hand while he mopped his brow. His stare was curious for the two silent and ill-assorted figures on the bench. Joan returned it with insolent and aggressive interest, as if to demand what business it was of his. He grinned indulgently, and passed on.

She had lost track of time entirely when Quard stirred, sighed, lifted his head and sat up with a gesture of deep despondency. The movement roused her from a dull, lethargic, waking dream.

"Feeling better, Charlie?" she asked with assumed lightness.

He nodded and groaned, without looking at her.

"Able to go home yet?"

"In a minute," he said drearily.

"Where do you live?" she persisted.

He waved a hand indifferently westward. "Over there--Ninety-sixth Street."

"Think you'll be able to walk it?"

"Oh, I'm all right now." He groaned again, and leaned forward, elbow on knee, forehead in his hand. "I feel like hell," he muttered.

"The best thing for you is to get to bed and get some sleep," said the girl, stirring restlessly.

He snapped crossly: "Wait a minute, can't you?"

She subsided.

"I guess you know I've gummed this thing all up, don't you?" he asked at length.

"Yes, I guess you have," she replied, listless.

"And, of course"--bitterly--"it's all *my* fault...."

To this she answered nothing.

"Well, I'm sorry," he pursued in a sullen voice. "I guess I can't say any more'n that."

She sighed: "I guess it can't be helped."

He leaned back again, explored a pocket, brought to light a roll of money, with shaking hands stripped off four bills. "Well, anyway, there's your bit."

Taking the bills, she examined them carefully. "That's a whole week," she said, surprised.

"All right; it's coming to you."

With neither thanks nor further protest, she put the money away in her pocket-book.

"You've acted like a brick to me," he continued.

"Don't let's talk about that now--"

"I don't want you should think I don't appreciate it. If it hadn't been for you, I don't know when I'd've got home--chances are, not till tomorrow night, anyway. The old woman'd've been half crazy."

Joan kept silence.

"My mother," he amended, with a sidelong glance. "There's only the two of us."

"Well," said the girl rising, "if that's so, you'd better get home to her; she won't be any too happy until she sees you--and not then."

Reluctantly he got to his feet. "She thinks I'm a great actor," he observed bitterly; "and I'm nothing but a damn' drunken--"

Joan interrupted roughly: "Ah, can that bunk: it'll keep till tomorrow--and maybe you'll mean it then."

He subsided into silence, whether offended or penitent she neither knew nor cared. She gave him his hat, avoiding his look, and without further speech they found their way out to the gate at One-hundred-and-third Street. Here Joan paused to await an Eighth Avenue car.

"You'd better walk all the way home, even if you don't feel like it," she advised Quard brusquely. "It won't do you any harm, and that mop of yours is a sight."

"All right," he assented. He moved tentatively a foot or so away, checked, turned back. "I suppose this is good-bye--?" he said, offering his hand.

"I guess it is," she agreed without emotion. Barely touching his clammy and tremulous fingers, she hastily withdrew her own.

A southbound car was swinging down to them, not a block distant. Quard eyed it with morose disfavour.

"At that," he said suddenly, "maybe this wouldn't've happened if you hadn't been so stand-offish. I only wanted to be friends--"

In her exasperation Joan gave an excellent imitation of Miss May Dean's favourite ejaculation. "My Gawd!" she said scomfully--"if you can't think of any better excuse for being a souse than to blame it on me.... Good *night!*"

The car pulled up for her. She climbed aboard--left him staring.

XIV

Though it was after three in the morning when Joan got home, she wasn't, as she had thought to be, the only waking person in the house. She had no sooner entered than, fagged though she was, she grasped this knowledge with a thrilling heart.

Beneath the door of the back-parlour a thin yellow line of light shone, as brilliant in the obscurity as the rim of a newly minted coin. She paused; and there came to her ears the swift staccato chattering of a typewriter.

Of a sudden she remembered how long it was since John Matthias had been anything but an abstraction in the background of her consciousness. He might have been at home for days: she had neither known nor thought of him, so wrapped up had she been with the routine of her work and the formless intrigue of emotions stimulated by the personality of Charlie Guard.

But now Charlie had eliminated himself from her life (she was quite sure that she would never see him again) while to the man labouring late, behind that closed door, she must be even more a dim reminiscence than ever before.

It stung her pride to think that Matthias had been able to forget her so easily. And she regretted bitterly that she herself had been so ready to let the image of her absent-minded benefactor fade upon the tablets of her memory.

By way of mute apology and recompense she hastened to enshrine anew in her heart her ideal of a gentleman; and it was fashioned in the likeness of John Matthias. And she resolved not to let another day pass without approaching him. She was sure he would help her if he could; and she was very anxious to make him realize her again.

But morning found her in quite another humour, one as diffident as different. And promptly she made a discovery so infinitely dismaying that it put the man altogether out of her mind for the time being. The Deans, she learned, had on the previous day received an offer for an engagement at a summer park in the Middle West, and had accepted, packed up and departed, all in an afternoon.

So she was more lonely than ever she had been since leaving home. The bedroom of the Dancing Deans, that salon where those stars of remote and lowly constellations had assembled to afford Joan her only glimpses of social life, was empty, swept and gamished. Those whom she had met there, and who had been nice to her, those scatter-brained, kind-hearted, shiftless denizens of the vaudeville half-world, were once again removed from her reach.

She spent that day and the next on the streets, trudging purposefully through the withering heat of August, once more a figure of the pageant which marches that most dolorous way, theatrical Broadway in the dog-days; one with the groups of idling actors with their bluish jowls and shabby jauntiness, one with and yet aloof from that drift of inexplicable creatures of stunted bodies and shoddy finery, less women than children, wistful of mien, with their strange, foreign faces and predatory eyes, bold and appealing to men, defiant to women....

Nothing came of it: the agencies took no more interest in her fortunes than they had before she could truthfully lay claim to stage experience. Each night she crawled home, faint with fatigue and the burden of the broiling day, to relish the bitter flavour of the truth that she would never go far without influence.

The third day she spent at home, resting and furbishing up her wardrobe to make a good appearance in the evening. Toward nightfall she bathed, did up her hair in a new and attractive way, shrewdly refrained from dressing her face with rouge and powder after the fashion the Deans had taught her, and clothed herself simply and sweetly in her best skirt and a fresh shirtwaist--both recent purchases.

In the deepening gloom of evening she mounted guard alone upon the stoop.

Circumstances could not have proved more favourable; and since her eyes were quick to distinguish the tall and slender figure of Matthias the moment he turned out of Longacre Square, the length of the block away, she had ample time to prepare herself. And yet it was with growing consternation that she watched his approach, and when at last he

ran lightly up the steps, she was so hampered by embarrassment that the words she had framed to address him went unuttered, and her tentative movement to rise was barely perceptible--a start, a sinking back. So that Matthias, in his preoccupation, received only a faint impression that he had somehow disturbed the girl (whoever *she* might be) and lifting his hat, murmured an inarticulate word of apology and brushed past her into the vestibule. As the door of the back-parlour was noisily closed, tears of anger and mortification started to Joan's eyes. Then promptly temper overcame that which had daunted her calmer mood. Before she knew it she was knocking at Matthias's door.

He answered immediately and in person, with his coat off and his collar unfastened by way of preparation for a long night's work. Staring blankly, he said "Oh?" in a mechanical and not at all encouraging manner.

"Mr. Matthias--" Joan began with a slight, determined nod.

"Oh--good evening," he stammered.

Seeing him more at loss than herself, her self-confidence returned in some measure. "You don't remember me, Mr. Matthias," she asserted with a cool smile.

He shook his head slowly: "So sorry--I've got a shocking memory. It'll come back to me in a minute. Won't you--ah--come in?"

Joan said "Thanks," in a low voice, and entered. "I am Joan Thursday," she added with a hint of challenge in voice and glance.

"Oh, yes, Miss Thursday--of course! Won't you sit down?"

Matthias offered her an easy chair, but the girl was quite aware, as she accepted it, that he was still vainly racking his memory for some clue to the identity of Joan Thursday.

"You were very kind to me one night about six weeks ago," she said, choosing her words carefully in order not to offend his fastidious taste. "Don't you remember? It was a rainy night, and I had nowhere to go, and you let me stay here--"

"Oh!" he exclaimed, his face lighting up. "Of course, I remember now. Joan Thursday--to be sure! You left me a little note of thanks. I've often wondered what became of you."

"I've been living here, right in this house, ever since."

"You don't mean it. How very odd! I should think we'd have met before this, if that's the case."

"You've had plenty of chances," she laughed, feeling a little more at ease. She rested her head against the back of the chair and regarded him through half-lowered lashes, conscious that the lamplight was doing full justice to her prettiness. "I've seen you dozens of times."

"That's funny!" he observed, genuinely perplexed. "I don't see how that could have happened--!"

"You were always too busy thinking about something else to look at poor me," she returned; and then, intuitively sensitive to the affectation of the adjective "poor" (a trick picked up from one of Maizie's women friends) she amended it hastily: "at me, I mean."

"Well, I don't understand it, but I apologize for my rudeness, just the same," he laughed; and sat down, understanding that the girl wanted something and meant to stay until she got it, wondering what it could be, and a little annoyed to have his working time thus gratuitously interrupted. "So," he ventured, "you fixed things up to stop here, did you? At least, I seem to remember you--ah--weren't in very good form, financially, that night we met."

"Yes," she said, "I fixed it up all right. I'd lost my money, but the next day I found it again, and I came back here because I didn't know where else to go, and besides there was my friends upstairs--the Deans, you know."

"Oh, yes, to be sure. And did they help you find work on the stage? You did want to go on the stage, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yes; that's why I left home, you know. But they didn't help me any--the Deans didn't--at least, not exactly; though it was through them I met a fellow who took me on for a vaudeville turn."

"Why, that's splendid!" said Matthias, affecting an enthusiasm which he hardly felt. "And--you made good--eh?"

"Well"--she laughed a little consciously--"I guess I did make good. But he didn't. He was a boozier, and they threw us out of the bill last Wednesday."

"That's too bad," said Matthias sympathetically. "I see."

And truly he did begin to see: she was out of a job and wanted assistance to another. It wasn't the first time--nor yet merely the hundredth--that he had been approached on a similar errand. People seemed to think that--simply because he wrote plays which, if produced at all, scored nothing more than indifferent successes at best!--he could wheedle managers into providing berths for every sorry incompetent who caught the footlight fever. It was very annoying. Not that he wouldn't be glad to place them all, given time and influence; but he had neither.

Joan, watching him closely, saw his face darken, guessed cunningly the cause. And suddenly the buoyant assurance which had been hers up to this stage in their interview deserted her utterly. No longer enheartened by faith in the potency of her good looks and the appeal of her necessity, she became again the constrained and timid girl of unreasonable and inarticulate demands.

After a brief silence, Matthias looked up with a smile.

"I don't suppose you have anything else in sight?"

Joan shook her head.

"And you need a job pretty hard--eh?"

"Oh, I do!" she cried. "I haven't hardly any money, and the Deans have gone away, and the agencies won't pay any attention to me--"

"I understand," he interrupted. "Half a minute: I'll try to think of something."

Unconsciously he began to pace the way his feet had worn from door to window.

"How old are you?" he asked abruptly.

She started and instinctively lied: "Twenty...."

His surprise was unconcealed: "Really?"

She faltered unconvincing amendment: "Nearly."

"No matter," he said briskly. "It comes to the same thing: you're under twenty. The stage is no place for girls of your age. Don't you think you'd better chuck it--go home?"

Not trusting herself to speak, she shook her head, her eyes misty with disappointment.

"Besides, you're too good looking...."

Struck by her unresponsiveness, he paused to glance at her, and noted with consternation the glimmer of tears in her lashes.

"Oh, I say! Don't cry--we'll find something for you, never fear!"

"I'm sorry," she gulped. "I--I didn't mean to.... Only, I can't go home, and I must find something to do, and you'd been so kind to me, once, I thought--"

"And I will!" he asserted heartily. "I'm only trying to advise you.... I don't want to preach about the immorality of the theatre. A sensible girl is as safe on the legitimate stage as she would be in a business office--safer! But theatrical work has other effects on one's moral fibre, just as disastrous, in a way. It's lazy work; barring rehearsals, you won't find yourself driven very hard--unless ambition drives you, and you've got uncommon ability and mean to get to the top. Otherwise, you won't have much to do, even if constantly engaged. You'll get average small parts; you may be on in one act out of three or four. But even if you appear in every act, you'll only be in the theatre three hours or so a day. The rest of it you'll waste, nine chances out of ten. You'll lie abed late, and once up it won't seem worth while starting anything before it's time to show up at the theatre. That's the real evil of stage life: to every hard-working actor it turns out a hundred--five hundred--too lazy even to act their best, of no real use either to themselves or to the world."

He checked and laughed in a deprecatory manner. "I didn't mean to speechify like this, but I do know what I'm talking about."

Joan had listened, admiring Matthias intensely, but thoroughly sceptical of his counsel, to the tenor of which she paid just sufficient heed to perceive that doubts admitted would condemn her cause.

"I mean to succeed," she said in an earnest voice: "I mean to work hard, and I do believe I'll make good, if I ever get a

chance."

"Then that's settled!" assented Matthias promptly. "The thing to do now is to find out what you can do with a chance."

He pawed the litter of papers on the table, and presently brought to light a typed manuscript in blue paper covers.

"This," he said, rustling the leaves, "is the first act of a play we're going to put on early in September. It goes into rehearsal in a week or ten days. There's a small part in the first act--a stenographer in a law office--a slangy, self-sufficient girl--you might be able to play. As I say, it's small; but it's quite important. It's the fashion nowadays, you know, to write pieces with small casts and no parts that aren't vital to the action. If you should bungle, it would ruin the first act and might kill the play. But I'm willing to try you out at rehearsals--with the distinct understanding that if you don't fit precisely you'll be released and somebody else engaged who we're sure can play it."

"That's all I ask," said the girl. "You--you're awful kind--"

"Nonsense: I'd rather have you than anyone else I can think of just now, because you're pretty, and pretty women help a play a lot; and the man who's putting this piece on would rather have you because he'll get you for less money than he'd have to pay an actress of experience. So, if you make good, all hands will be pleased."

"Shall I begin to study now?" Joan asked, offering to take the manuscript.

"Not necessary. Your part will be given you when the first rehearsal is called. I merely want to refresh my memory, to see how much you'll have to do."

He ran hastily through the pages.

"As I thought: you are on at the opening for about ten minutes, and near the end of the act for a two-minute scene. Twelve minutes' work a day for, say, twenty-five dollars a week: that isn't bad. You'll be out of the theatre by half-past nine every night.... You see the point I've been trying to make?"

"Yes," Joan assented. "It seems very easy. I hope I can do it."

"I'm sure you can," said Matthias. "But--how are you going to live between now and the opening?"

Joan's eyes were blank.

"Have you any money?" he insisted.

"A very little," she faltered--"eighteen dollars--"

"You won't get pay for rehearsals; and they'll last three weeks; after we open it will be another week before the ghost walks. That's--say--six weeks you've got to scrape through somehow. Eighteen dollars won't cover that. Perhaps you'd better go back to your old job until we start."

"I was fired from the last, and it would take more than two weeks for me to find anything like it, I know."

"And there you are!"

Matthias tossed the manuscript back to the table, waved his hands eloquently and threw himself into a chair, regarding her with his whimsical, semi-apologetic smile.

"I'm afraid," he added after a minute, "I've reached the end of my string. Further suggestions will have to come from you."

"I don't know," said the girl doubtfully. "Maybe I can think of something--maybe something will turn up."

"I hope so. Perhaps even I may invent something. If I do, I'll let you know, Miss Thursday."

He arose, his manner an invitation to go, to which she couldn't be blind.

She got up, moved slowly toward the door.

"I hope I haven't bothered you much--put you out of your writing--"

"Oh, that's all right," he interrupted insincerely.

"And you have been awful good to me."

"Please don't think of it that way."

He was holding the door for her, but on the threshold she hesitated.

"Unless," she ventured half-heartedly--"unless I could help you some way with your work."

"Help me?" he exclaimed, at once amazed and amused.

"I mean, copying--if you ever have any."

"Type-writing?"

She nodded, with a flush of hope. "When I was a kid--I mean, before I left school--I studied a while at a business college--nights, you know. They taught me type-writing by the touch system, but I couldn't seem to get the hang of shorthand, and so had to give it up and go to work in a store."

"Now that *is* a helpful thought!" he cried, turning back into the room. "Wait a minute. There may be something in this. Let me think."

But his deliberation was very brief.

"It can be done!" he announced in another moment. "I have got a lot of stuff to be copied. You see, about a month ago I..."

He checked, his eyes clouding without cause apparent to the girl.

"Well!" he went on with a nervous laugh--"I didn't feel much like work. Guess I must've done too much of it, for a while. Anyway, I found I had to quit, and went out of town for a while. Of course I couldn't stop work really--a man can't, if he likes his job--and so I took some manuscripts along and revised them in long-hand. Now they ought to be copied--I'd been thinking of sending them out to some public stenographer--but if you want the work, it's yours."

XV

Never had any of her difficulties been adjusted in a manner more satisfactory to Joan. She rose at once from an abyss of discouragement to sunlit peaks of happiness. Installing a rented type-writing machine in the room adjoining her own (temporarily without a tenant and willingly loaned by Madame Duprat) she tapped away industriously from early morning till late at night, sedulously transcribing into clean type-script the mangled manuscripts given her by Matthias. By no means a rapid worker, after renewing acquaintance with the machine she made up for slowness by diligence and long hours. And the work interested her: she thought the plays magnificent; and a novel which Matthias gave her when his stock of old plays ran low she considered superb. It was his first and only book, and had not as yet been submitted to the mercies of a publisher. But to Joan it was something more than a book; it was a revelation, her primal introduction to the world of the intellect. From poring over its pages, she grew hungry for more, thrilled by the discovery that she could find interest and pleasure in reading.

She began to borrow extensively from the circulation branch of the Public Library in Forty-second Street, and to read late into the night, defying the prejudices of Madame Duprat on the question of gas consumption....

Refusing an offer of public stenographer rates, she had asked for ten dollars a week. This Matthias paid her, under protest that the work was worth more to him. The arrangement was, however, a fortunate one; for though at first Joan earned more than she received, after rehearsals of "The Jade God" had started she was seldom able to give more than two or three hours a day to the copying.

These rehearsals furnished her with impressions vastly different from those garnered through her experience with "The Convict's Return."

The company assembled for the first time on a mid-August morning, in the author's study. There were present eight men, aside from Matthias and the manager, his producing director and his press agent, and four women, including Joan. After brief introductions, the gathering disposed itself to attention, and Matthias, rocking nervously in his revolving desk-chair, read the play aloud. To most of those present the work was new and unfamiliar; they listened with intense interest, keenly alive to the possibilities of the various parts for which they had been cast.

But Joan was not of these; she had typed all the parts and knew not only the story but her own slight though significant role (as she would have said) "backwards." Sitting in a shadowed corner, she devoted herself to studying

those with whom her lines were to be cast.

The leading lady was an actress who, after several attempts to star at the head of her own company, was reduced to playing second to the young and handsome matinee hero of several seasons ago, planning to return in triumph to the stage after an unsuccessful effort to retire from it into the contented estate of well-financed matrimony. Through their widely published photographs Joan was familiar with the features of both.

She thought the star charming; good-humoured, good-looking, well-mannered, slight and graceful, he had all the assurance of a Charlie Quard and none of his vain swagger.

But Joan decided on sight to detest the leading woman. She was a pale, ashen blonde, with a skin as colourless as snow, level dark brows, sharp blue eyes set close to the bridge of her pointed nose, and a thin-lipped, violent mouth. The first impression she conveyed was one of dangerous temper; the second, that she had been happy in her choice of photographers. Throughout the reading, she sat negligently on the arm of a chair, swinging a foot and staring out of the window with an air of immitigable disdain.

Of the other women, one was a grey-haired, sweet-faced lady of perhaps fifty years, whose eyes softened winningly whenever they encountered Joan's, the other an unlovely creature of middle-age and long stage experience, who seemed to have no interest in life aside from her unfolding part. The remainder of the company, of a caste hall-marked by the theatre, offered nothing novel to Joan's eyes--aside from a fat, red-faced lump of a youth who was to act a thick-witted, sentimental office-boy, in love with the stenographer (Joan). This one she decided to tolerate on suspicion; he resembled a type which she had found difficult, apt to impertinence and annoying attentions.

Rideout, the man financially responsible for the production, was an English actor of reputation and considerable ability. Carrying his stoutish body with an ease that almost suggested slenderness: with his plump, blowsy face, twinkling eyes and fat nose of a comedian: the insuppressible staginess of his gesture would have betrayed his calling anywhere. Now and again Joan surprised an anxious expression lurking beneath his humorous smile; she had inferred from some casual remark made by Matthias that Rideout was staking all he possessed on the success of this play.

The producing manager, Wilbrow, was a short, lean-bodied American, with lantern jaws, large intent eyes, and a nervous frown. Joan was impressed with the aloof pleasantness of his manner: she was to know him better.

The reading over, the company was dismissed with instructions to report at ten the next morning at an obscure dance-hall masquerading under the name of an opera house, situate in the immediate neighbourhood, between Eighth and Ninth Avenues. Several lingered to affix signatures to contracts--Joan of their number; and when these were gone, there remained in conference the star, the leading woman, Matthias, Rideout, and Wilbrow.

Going out to dinner that night, Joan passed Matthias bidding good-bye to the leading woman in the hallway. He seemed tired and wore a harassed look; and later, when the girl delivered the outcome of her day's copying, he had a manner new to her, of weary brusqueness.

The first rehearsal proper was held in a stuffy and ill-ventilated room, so dark that it was necessary to use the electric lights even at high noon. The day was fortunately cool, otherwise the place had been insufferable. There was little attempt at acting; the company devoted itself, under Wilbrow's patient direction, to blocking in the action. They had no stage--simply that bare, four-square room. Half a dozen chairs and a few long benches were dragged about to indicate entrances and properties. Nobody pretended to know his part--not even Joan, who knew hers perfectly. The example of the others, who merely mumbled from the manuscripts in their hands, made the girl fear to betray amateurishness by discovering too great an initial familiarity with her lines. So she, too, carried her "script," and read from it. When not thus engaged, she sat watching and noting down what was going on with eager attention.

But she took away with her a depressing sense of having engaged in something formless and incoherent.

But succeeding rehearsals--beginning with the second--corrected this misapprehension. That afternoon developed Wilbrow suddenly into a mild-mannered, semi-apologetic, and humorous tyrant. He discovered an individual comprehension of what was required for the right development of the play, and an invincible determination to get it. He never lost either temper or patience, neither swore nor lifted his voice; but having indicated his desire, wrought patiently with its subject, sometimes for as long as an hour, until he had succeeded in satisfying it. He worked coatless, with his long black hair straggling down over his forehead and across his glasses: an incredibly thin, energetic, and efficient figure, dominated by a penetrating and masterful intelligence. Not infrequently, taking the typed part from the hands of one of his puppets, he would himself give a vivid sketch of its requirements through the medium of intonation, gesture, and action. And to Joan, at least, the effects he created by these means were as striking in the feminine roles as in the masculine. Utterly devoid of self-consciousness, he had the faculty of seeming for the moment actually to be what he sought to suggest: one forgot the man, saw only what he had in mind.

Another thing that surprised the girl more than a little was the docility with which her associates submitted to his dictation and even invited it. She had heard of actors "creating" roles; but in this company no one but the producer seemed to be creating anything. The others came to rehearsals with minds so open that they seemed vacuous; not one, whether the star, his leading woman, or any of their supporting players, indicated the least comprehension of what they were required to portray or the slightest symptom of original conception. What Wilbrow told them and then showed them how to do, they performed with varying degrees of success. So that Joan at last came to believe the best actors those most susceptible to domination, least capable of independent thought. As he gradually became acquainted with his lines and the business Wilbrow mapped out for him, the star began to give more compelling impersonations at each rehearsal; but to the girl he never seemed more than a carbon filament of a man, burning bright with incandescence only when impregnated with the fluid genius of a superior mentality. So, likewise, with the leading woman....

As for herself, Joan was hardly happy in her endeavour to please. Having unwisely formed her own premature conception of her part, and lacking totally the technical ability to express it, she ran constantly afoul of Wilbrow's notions. She was called upon first to erase her own personality, next to forget the personality which she had meant to delineate, and finally to substitute for both these one which Wilbrow alone seemed able to see and understand. She strove patiently and without complaint, but in a stupefying welter of confusion. While on the pretended stage she was constantly terrified by Wilbrow's mild but predominant regard, which rendered her only awkward, witless, and ill-at-ease. Then, too, her attempts to imitate his brilliant and colourful acting were received with amusement, not always wholly silent, by the rest of the company. She seemed quite unable to follow his lead; and toward the end of the first week, throughout the whole of which (she was aware from the calm resignation of Wilbrow's attitude) she had improved not one whit, she began to despair.

Inasmuch as she appeared only in the first act, she was customarily excused from attendance at the rest of each rehearsal, and spent this extra time at home, over her typewriter; thus maintaining the fiction of earning her weekly stipend.

On Saturday afternoon, however, as soon as her "bit" had been rehearsed, there occurred one of those quiet, aloof conferences between Wilbrow, Rideout, and Matthias, which she had learned to recognize as presaging a change in the cast. Twice before, such consultations had resulted in the release of subordinate actors who had proved unequal to their parts. Now from the author's uneasy and distressed eye, which alternately sought and avoided her, Joan divined that her own fate was being weighed in the balance. And her heart grew heavy with misgivings. None the less, she was permitted to leave with no other advice than that the rehearsals would resume on the following Monday, at nine in the morning, on the stage of a Broadway theatre.

She hurried home in a mood of wretched anxiety and creeping despair. Wilbrow had indisputable excuse for dissatisfaction with her; Rideout was quite humanly bent on getting the best material his money could purchase--and she was far from that; while Matthias couldn't reasonably protest against her dismissal for manifest incompetency. And dismissal now meant more to Joan than the loss of her coveted chance to appear in a first-class production; it meant not only the loss of the living she earned as typist--and she had been engaged with the understanding, implicit if not explicit, that Matthias had only enough extra work to occupy her until the opening of his play; dismissal from the cast of "The Jade God," in short, meant the loss to her of Matthias.

There was no longer in her heart any doubt that she loved him. The admiration conceived in her that first night, when he had turned himself out to afford her shelter, had needed only this brief period of propinquity to ripen into something infinitely more deep and strong. And from the first she had been ready and willing to adore his very shadow upon an excuse far less encouraging than his kindly though detached interest in her welfare. In her cosmos Matthias was a being as exotic as a Martian, his intelligence of an order that passed understanding. His thoughts and ways of speech, his interests and amusements (as far as she could divine them) the delicacy of his perceptions, and the very refinements of his mode of life, all new and strange to her, invested him with a mystery as compelling to her imagination as the reticences of a strange and beautiful woman have for the mind of a young man. She worshipped him with a hopeless and inarticulate longing, and was content with this for the present; but hourly she dreamed of a day when through his aid she should have lifted herself to a position in which she would seem something more to him than a mere, forlorn shop-girl out of work and scratching for a living. If only she might hope to become an actress of recognized ability!...

It was a truism in her conception of life that the estate of actress was a loadstone for the hearts of men.

If success were to be denied her!...

In her bedroom, behind a locked door, she hurried to her pillow and to tears. She had known many an hour darkened by the fugitive despairs of youth; but never until this day had she been so despondently sorry for herself.

Later, the banal ticking of her tin alarm-clock penetrated her consciousness, and she remembered that she had work to do--to be finished before evening, if her promise to Matthias were to be kept. She rose, splashed face and eyes with cold water, and went to her typewriter in the adjoining room.

She had really very little to do in order to complete her task--only a few pages of scored and interlined manuscript to reduce to clean copy; but her mind was not with her work. Time and again she found herself sitting with idle hands, thoughts far errant; and now and then she had to dry her eyes before she could proceed: so stubbornly did she cling to the sorry indulgence of self-pity! Once, even, she was so overcome by contemplation of her sufferings that she bowed her head upon the table where the manuscript lay, and wept without restraint for several minutes--without restraint and, toward the last, with kindling interest in the discovery that her tears were bedewing a freshly typed page.

If Matthias were to notice, would he understand? And, understanding, what would he think?...

With shame-faced reluctance she destroyed the blotched page and typed it anew.

It was dark before she finished; and she was glad of this when she gathered up the manuscript to take to her employer. With no light in his room other than that of the reading-lamp with the green shade, her stained and flushed cheeks and swollen eyes would escape detection. It was not that she wouldn't have welcomed sympathetic interest, but a glance in the mirror showed her she had wept too unrestrainedly not to have depreciated the chiefest asset of her charm--her prettiness.

However, she could not well avoid the meeting: the work must be delivered; but if she were lucky she would find him in one of his frequent moods of abstraction, and their interview need only be of the briefest. Nevertheless, she would have sent the work to him by the chambermaid if her week's wage had not been due that night.

She waited a moment, listening at the door to the back-parlour; but there was no sound of voices within; and reassured, she knocked.

His response--"Come in!"--followed with unexpected promptness. She obeyed, though with misgivings amply justified as soon as she found herself in the room, which was for once well-lighted, two gas-jets on the chandelier supplementing the green-shaded lamp.

Matthias was bending over a kit-bag on the couch, hastily packing enough clothing to tide him over Sunday. He threw her an indifferent glance and greeting over his shoulder.

"Hello, Miss Thursday! I was beginning to wonder whether you'd forgotten me. I'm going to run down to Port Madison until Monday morning--last chance I'll have for a day in the country for some time, probably. Chances are, Wilbrow will keep us at work next Sunday. Got that 'script all ready?"

Joan, depositing it on the table, murmured an affirmative in a voice uncontrollably unsteady. Before entering she had been quite sure of her ability to carry off the short interview without betraying her harrowed emotions. But to find the man about whom they centred packing to leave town--to leave her!--added the final touch of misery to her mood. And the inflection of her response could not have failed to strike oddly on his hearing.

Uttering a wondering "*Hello!*" he straightened up and swung round to look at her. And a glance sufficed: his smile faded, was replaced by a pucker of sympathy between his brows.

"Why, what's the trouble?"

Joan averted her face. "N-nothing," she faltered. Her lip trembled, her eyes filled anew. She dabbed at them with a wadded handkerchief.

Matthias hesitated. He drew down the corners of his mouth, elevated his brows, and scratched a temple slowly with a meditative forefinger. Then he nodded sharply and, crossing to the door, closed it.

"Tell me about it," he said, coming back to the girl. "Things not going to suit you, eh?"

She shook her head, looking away. "I--I--!" she stammered--"I can't act!"

"O nonsense!" he interrupted with kindly impatience. "You mustn't get discouraged so easily. Naturally it comes hard at first, but you'll catch on. Everything of this sort takes time. I was saying the same thing to Wilbrow today."

"Yes," she mumbled, gulping--"I--I know. I was watching you. H-he and Mr. Rideout wanted to fire me, didn't they?"

"What? Oh, no, no!" Matthias lied unconvincingly. "They--they were just wondering.... I assured them--"

"But you hadn't any right to!" the girl broke in passionately. "I can't act and--and I know it, and you know it, as well as

they do. I can't--I just can't! It's no use.... I'm no good...."

Of a sudden she flopped into a chair, rested her head on arms folded on the table, and sobbed aloud.

Matthias shook his head and (since she could not see him) permitted himself a gesture of impotent exasperation. This was really the devil of a note! Women were incomprehensible: you couldn't bank on 'em, ever. Here was he preparing to catch a train, and not too much time at that....

But a glance at the clock reassured him slightly; he had still a little leeway. All the same, he didn't much relish the prospect of being compelled to invest his spare minutes in attempting to comfort a silly, emotional girl. And, besides, somebody in the hallway might hear her sobbing....

This last consideration took him somewhat reluctantly to her side. "There, there!" he pleaded, intensely irritated by that feeling of helplessness which always afflicts man in the presence of a weeping woman, whether or not he has the right to comfort her. "There--don't cry, please, Miss--ah--Thursday. You're all right--really, you are. You--you're--ah--doing all this quite needlessly, I give you my word."

He might as well have attempted to stem a mountain torrent.

"I wish I could make you understand this is all quite unnecessary," he groaned.

"I--I'm so mis'able!" came a wail from the huddled figure.

"I'm sorry," he said uncomfortably--"awfully sorry, truly. But you--I'm not afraid you won't make good, and I don't intend to let you go until you've had every chance in the world. That's a promise."

He ventured to give her quaking shoulder a light, encouraging pat or two, and rested his hand upon the corner of the table.

"Come, now--brace up--please. I--"

With a strangled sob Joan sat up, caught his hand and carried it to her lips. Before he could recover from his astonishment it was damp with her tears and kisses.

Instantly he snatched it away.

"You--you're so good to me!" she cried.

Matthias, horrified, stepped back a pace or two, as if to insure himself against a repetition of her offence, and quite mechanically dried his hand with a handkerchief. And then, in a flash, he lost his temper.

"What the devil do you mean by doing that to me?" he demanded harshly. "Look here--you stop this nonsense. I won't have it. I--why--it's outrageous! What right have you got to--to do anything like that?"

The shock of his anger brought the girl to her senses. Her tears ceased in an instant, as if automatically. She rose, mopping her face with her handkerchief, swallowed one last sob, and moved sullenly toward the door.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled. "I--you've been very kind to me--I forgot myself. I'm sorry."

"Well ..." he said grudgingly, in his irritation. "But don't let it happen again."

"There's no chance of that," the girl retorted with a brief-lived flash of spirit. "Good night."

"Good night," he returned.

She was gone before he recovered; and then compunction smote him, and he followed her as far as the hallway.

In the half-light of the flickering gas-jet, he saw her only as a shadow slowly mounting the staircase. And a glance toward the front door discovered indistinct shapes of lodgers on the stoop.

"Miss Thursday!" he called in a guarded voice.

She heard, hesitated a single instant, then with quickened steps resumed the ascent.

He called once again, but she refused to listen, and he returned to his study in a state of insensate rage; which, however, had this time himself for its sole object--Joan's transgression quite lost sight of in remorse for his brutality. He could not remember ever having spoken to any woman in such wise: no man had any right to speak to any woman in such a manner, for any cause, however exasperating.

Tremendously disgusted with himself, and ashamed, he tramped the floor so long, trying to quiet his conscience, and made so many futile attempts to apologize to the girl by word of hand--one and all either too abject or too constrained--that he had lost his train before he produced the lame and halting effort with which he was at length fain to be content.

A later train was bearing him under the East River to Long Island when Joan read his message.

A servant had taken it to the girl's room and, knocking without receiving an answer, concluded that Joan was out and slipped it under the door.

When the descending footsteps were no longer audible, Joan rose from the bed, lighted the gas, and with blurred vision deciphered the lines:

"DEAR MISS THURSDAY:--Please forgive me for my unmannerly exhibition of temper. I regret exceedingly my inability to make you understand how sorry I am to have hurt your feelings.

"And do please understand that there is no grave dissatisfaction with your work at rehearsals. Remember that you have two weeks more in which to show what you can do.

"I shall hope that you are not too deeply offended to overlook my loss of temper and to continue typing my book; if possible I'd like to have another chapter by Monday night.

"Sincerely yours,

"JOHN MATTHIAS."

"P. S.--I enclose--what I'd completely forgotten--the regular weekly amount--\$10."

She fell asleep, at length, with this note crushed between her pillow and her cheek.

XVI

Her work proved invaluable distraction for the greater part of that long and lonely Sunday. When not at her typewriter she was tormented by alternate fits of burning chagrin and of equally ardent gratitude toward Matthias. Had this last been in town and chanced to meet her, she must either have quitted him definitely or have betrayed her passion unmistakably even to the purblind eyes of a dreaming dramatist. As it was, the girl had time to calm down, to recognize at once his disinterestedness and her own folly. If her infatuation did but deepen in contemplation of his generosity, she none the less regained poise before bedtime and with it her determination to succeed in spite of her stupidity, if only to justify his kindness.

But the morning that took her back to rehearsals found her in a mood of dire misgivings. She would have forfeited much--anything other than their further association--to have been spared the impending encounter with Matthias. And although the author was not present when she reached the theatre, her embarrassment hampered her to a degree that rendered her attempts to act more than ever farcical.

Wilbrow, seated in a chair on the "apron" of the stage, his back to the lifeless footlights, did not interrupt her once; but despair was patent in his attitude, and despair informed his eyes, and not long after her scene was finished the producer for the first time betrayed indications of temper.

"Blaine!" he said abruptly in a chilling voice to one of the minor actors--"don't you *know* there's a window over there--up left centre?"

The player thus addressed, who had been idling purposelessly near the centre of the stage, looked up with a face of blank surprise.

"Sure," he said--"sure I know it."

"That's something, at least!" Wilbrow commented acidly. "I'm glad you remember it. If I'm not mistaken, I've reminded you of that window twice every day since Monday."

"Yes," agreed the other with a look of painful concentration; "I guess that's right, too."

"And yet you can't remember what I've told you just as often--that I want you to be up there, looking out of the window, when *Sylvia* enters!"

The actor turned out expostulatory palms. "But, Mr. Wilbrow, what for? I don't see--"

"Because," the producer interrupted incisively, "the stage directions indicate it; because the significance of this scene requires you to be there, looking out, unaware of *Sylvia's* entrance; because you look better there; because it dresses the stage; because you're in the way anywhere else; because I--God help me!--because *I--want--you--to--be--there!*"

A smothered giggle broke from a group of players technically off-stage. Wilbrow glared icily toward that quarter.

"Yes, I know," Blaine agreed intelligently. "But how do I *get* there?"

The front legs of Wilbrow's chair rapped the boards smartly as he jumped up. In silence, he grasped Blaine's arm and with a slightly exaggerated melodramatic stride propelled him to the indicated spot, released him, and stood back.

"Walk!" he announced with an inimitable gesture of tolerant contempt; and went back to his chair. Not a line of his face had changed. He sat down, nodded to the leading woman.

"All right, Mary," he said; and to another actor: "Now, the cue for *Sylvia*, please!"

Joan shivered a little.

Matthias did not come in until after the girl had finished her part in the afternoon rehearsal. She caught sight of him in the darkened auditorium just as she went off; and hurried from the house in tremulous dread.

But a meeting was inevitable; and that evening, just before the dinner hour, found her reluctantly knocking the door of the back-parlour. The voice of Matthias bade her enter, and she drew upon all her scant store of courage as she turned the knob. To her immense relief he was not alone. Rideout and Moran, the scene painter, were in consultation with Matthias over two small model stages set with painted pasteboard scenery.

Matthias greeted her with a preoccupied smile and nod.

"Oh, good evening, Miss Thursday. More 'script, eh? Thank you."

Silently Joan gave him the manuscript and left the room. But the door had no sooner closed than it was re-opened and again closed. She turned to face this dreaded crisis.

His smile was friendly and pleasant if a trace uncertain. He made as if to offer his hand, and thought better of it.

"Oh, Miss Thursday.... I sent you a note...."

She nodded, timid eyes avoiding his.

"Am I forgiven?"

"I--I--if you'll forgive me--" she faltered.

"Then that's all right!" he cried heartily. "I'm glad," he added with unquestionable sincerity--"and sorry I was such a brute. I ought to have understood what a strain you'd been under. Shall we say no more about it?"

She nodded again: "Please...."

"Good!" He offered his hand frankly, subjected hers to a firm, cool pressure, and moved back to his study door. "Good night."

She whispered her response, and ran upstairs to her room, almost beside herself with delight.

It was all right!

Best of all, the advances had come from him; he it was who had sued for pardon where the fault was hers--clear proof that he thought enough of her to wish to retain her friendship!

With a glad and comforted heart she settled down to attack anew the vexatious problem of her role in "The Jade God."

But for all her worry and good will, the next morning's rehearsal of her scenes passed off in the same terrible silence as had marked Monday's. And in the same afternoon the storm broke.

After plodding through her first scene, Joan was about to go off when Wilbrow called her.

"Miss Thursday," he said quietly, "one of three things has got to happen--*now*: either you'll follow my instructions, or you'll quit, or I will. I've told you what I want so many times that I'm tired repeating myself. Now we're going to go over

that scene again and again, if it takes all afternoon to get what I'm after. *But*, before we start, I will ask you to bear one thing in mind: this isn't an ingenue part; there's no excuse for acting it like a petulant school-girl. Even pretty stenographers are business-like in real life--sometimes--and we're trying to secure some semblance of real life in this production. In other words, I want you to forget Billie Burke and try to act like a human being who's a little sore on her job and her employer, but not sore enough to chuck it just yet. Now, if you please--begin right at the beginning."

For an instant Joan stood hesitant, on the verge of refusing. There seemed to be no satisfying this man: he either didn't or wouldn't understand; she tried desperately to please him--and her sole reward was to be held up to the derision of the entire company! It was intolerable! And of a sudden she hated Wilbrow with every atom of her being. But ... if she were to talk back or refuse to go on, Matthias would be forfeited from her life.

She choked down her chagrin, resisted the temptation to wither Wilbrow with a glare, and sulkily resumed her place in the chair beside another chair that was politely presumed to be her typewriter desk.

At once the fat boy whom she detested crossed the indefinite line dividing the scene from "off-stage," and leering insolently, spoke the opening line of the play. Seething with indignation, the girl looked up and in cutting accents shot her reply at him. She was pleased to surprise a look of dumb amazement in his eyes. At all events, she had succeeded in letting *him* know just how she felt toward him! And this success inspired her to further efforts. She rattled through the remainder of the scene with the manner of a youthful termagant.

When she had finished, Wilbrow said nothing beyond: "Again, please."

The demand served only to deepen her resentment, and the second repetition differed not materially from the first.

Ceasing to speak, she flounced away, but Wilbrow's voice brought her back.

"Very good, Miss Thursday," he said mildly--"very good indeed. But why--in the name of Mike!--if you *could* do it--why wouldn't you until now?"

"Because," Joan stammered--"because--!"

But she didn't dare say what she wished to, and checked her tongue in a fit of sulks more eloquent than any words she could have found.

Wilbrow waited an instant, then laughed quite cheerfully.

"The usual reason, eh? I might have guessed you had a sure-'nough one concealed about you.... That's all for today. Tomorrow morning at nine."

Privately pondering this experience, Joan surprised its secret, and drew from it a conclusion that was to have an important influence upon her professional future: in order to act convincingly, she must herself feel the emotions accredited to her part. As applied to her individual temperament, at that stage of its development, this rule had all the inflexibility of an axiom. Others might--as others do--act in obedience to the admonitions of their intelligence: Joan could at that stage act only according to the promptings of her emotional self.

So she encouraged herself to hate Wilbrow with all her heart, to despise him without ceasing night or day; no charitable thought of the manager was suffered to gain access to her humour at any hour. And so admirably did she succeed in impregnating her mind with virulent dislike of the man, that she afforded him no end of amusement. She made a point of coming to the rehearsals early enough to infuriate herself with contemplation of him in the flesh; and of walking up and down, before and between her scenes, thinking evil of him. The twinkle with which his eyes followed her, in place of their erstwhile calm indifference or resignation, worked only to intensify her rancour. Curiously enough, a clear comprehension of the illogical absurdity of it all made her temper even more bitter.

One day just before the final rehearsals, Wilbrow, meeting her at the stage-door, planted his slender body squarely in her way.

"Good morning!" he said cheerfully, with a semi-malicious smile. "My congratulations, Miss Thursday! You're doing nobly."

"Thanks," Joan said curtly, pausing perforce.

"You ought to be very grateful to me. Are you?"

"No."

"I wonder what you'd do under the direction of a man you happened to like?"

"I don't know." Joan gave him a sullen look. "Will you please let me pass."

"Delighted." He moved aside with mocking courtesy. "I ask only one thing of you: don't fall in love with me before our first night. I haven't got time to sour another sweet young thing's amiable disposition.... Keep on hating me as hard as you like--and we'll make at least a half-portion actress of you yet...."

Toward the end of the second week, Joan began to notice that Rideout was growing less assiduous in attendance. At first inclined to lay this to his satisfaction with the progress--to her the production seemed to be taking on form and colour in a way to wonder at--she later overheard a chance remark of one of her associates, to the effect that Rideout was himself rehearsing with another company.

"Well," someone commented, "if it was my coin back of this show, I'd stick by it if I had to play the office-boy."

"I guess," was the reply, "Rideout ain't got any too much outside what he's sunk in this production. Shouldn't wonder if he needs what he's to get with Minnie Aspen."

"Mebbe. He's a good trouper. What does he drag down, anyway?"

"Four hundred a week."

"Nix with those Lambs' Club figures. I mean regular money."

"Oh, two hundred and fifty, sure."

"Now you've said something...."

During the third week it was announced that "The Jade God" would open in Altoona on the following Monday. And at the same time Joan discovered that she was expected to provide her own costume, a simple affair but unhappily beyond the resources of either her wardrobe or her pocket-book. In despair she took the advice of Mrs. Arnold (the sweet-faced lady of fifty, whom Joan counted her only friend on the company) and approached Rideout's personal representative, Druggett, with a demand for an advance. With considerable reluctance Druggett surrendered fifteen dollars, and promised her as much more on Monday, toward expenses on the road. And again on the advice and introduction of Mrs. Arnold, the girl succeeded in satisfying her needs at an instalment-plan clothing-house: paying eight dollars down on a bill of about forty and agreeing to remit the balance at the rate of four dollars each week.

The final dress-rehearsal was called for Saturday morning. They were to leave New York Sunday night. But on Friday afternoon a sense of uneasiness and uncertainty invaded the temper of the organization. Wilbrow neglected the players to engage in protracted conferences with Matthias, Rideout, Moran, and Druggett, out of earshot, at the back of the auditorium. One or two weather-wise "trouper" hazarded gloomy surmises as to the nature of the "snag": that most favoured involved a "shake-up with the Shuberts" over some change in their route. With a singular unanimity the prophets of disaster either avoided or overlooked the actual cause of the trouble.

At ten o'clock the next morning--a little late--Joan, with her costume in the dilapidated wicker suit-case, hurried into the theatre to find the company scattered about the stage in poses variously suggestive of restless dejection. Neither the star nor the leading woman was present, and there was no scenery in sight, other than that belonging to the production which occupied the same stage nightly. Rideout was nowhere to be seen, but the author, the producer, and Druggett were engaged in earnest but inaudible argument "out front." From their manner Joan inferred that Druggett was advocating some course actively opposed by Wilbrow and passively by Matthias. The group broke up before she found opportunity to question her associates. Druggett, in manifest dudgeon, turned sharply and marched out of the house, while Wilbrow strode purposefully back to the stage by way of the passage behind the boxes, Matthias following with an air of profound disgust and despondency.

From the centre of the stage the producer addressed the little gathering.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he said sharply; and waited until he had all their attention. "There'll be no rehearsal today, and--and unless something quite unexpected happens, we won't open Monday. The truth is, there isn't money enough behind this show to finance it beyond Altoona. Moran can't collect on his scenery, and won't deliver. Mr. Matthias has offered to fix Moran up if we agree to go out, but I can't see it that way. Mr. Rideout's proposition is that we go on the road and run our chances of making expenses--but I don't have to tell you people what a swell show we'd have of breaking even on a tank route at this season of the year--hot weather still with us, and all that. We *might*--but that's about all you can say. And I don't think any of us want to count ties from Altoona...."

"Mr. Druggett thinks that Mr. Rideout will be able to make a deal with the Shuberts, but I doubt it. Just now they're all tied up with their own productions and have no time to waste on a gambling risk like this. Of course, if I'm wrong, you'll all be notified. But I wouldn't, if I were you, pass up another engagement on the off-chance of this thing panning out"

after all.

"I'm sorry about this--we're all sorry, naturally. We all lose. Mr. Matthias here loses as much as any of us--the rights in a valuable property for several months, at the inside. I'm out fifteen hundred dollars I was to get for putting the show on. And Rideout's out the two thousand real coin he's invested in expectation of backing which failed to materialize. Personally I refused to shoulder the responsibility of letting you go out in ignorance of the real state of affairs. That's all."

He hesitated an instant, as if not satisfied that he had dealt fully with the situation, and glanced a little ruefully from face to face of the company. But for the moment none made any comment. And with an uncertain nod to the author, Wilbrow turned and disappeared through the stage-door.

Matthias waited a trifle longer, as though anticipating trouble with the disappointed players; but there was no feeling manifest in their attitude toward him other than sympathy for a fellow-sufferer. And presently he consulted his watch and followed the stage-director.

Those left in the theatre discussed the contretemps in subdued and regretful accents, betraying surprisingly little rancour toward anyone connected with it. Even Rideout escaped with slight censure. He was, in the final analysis, one of them--an incurable optimist who had erred only in banking too heavily on hope and promises.

By twos and threes they gathered up their belongings and straggled off upon their various ways, a sorry, philosophic crew. Within ten minutes their dissociation was final and absolute.

XVII

Late in the evening, Matthias gave it up, and shaking off Rideout (whose only hope had resided in the author's anxiety to save his play) betook himself to an out-of-the-way restaurant to idle with a tasteless meal.

He was at once dog-weary and heart-sick.

The net outcome of some ten hours of runnings to and from, of meetings and schemings, of conferences by telephone and of communications by telegraph with those who had promised financial support to Rideout's project, was an empty assurance, indifferently given by the Shuberts, to the effect that, if nothing happened to make them think otherwise, they might possibly be prepared to consider the advisability of producing "The Jade God" about the first of January.

The truth of the situation was that neither the Shuberts nor any other managerial concern was likely (as Wilbrow put it) "to look cross-eyed at the piece" until they could get full control of it; which would be in some three months, when Rideout's contract to produce would expire by limitation. And since Rideout might be counted upon to hold on to his contract rights till the last minute and leave nothing else undone in the effort to recoup his already substantial losses, it was useless to consider the play as anything but a property of potential value relegated indefinitely to abeyance.

Matthias believed in the play with all his heart. During the last three weeks he had watched it come to life and assume the form he had dreamed for it, coloured with the rich hues of his imagination and quick with the breath of living drama. And because he possessed in some measure that rare faculty of being able to weigh justly the work of his own hand, and had looked upon this and seen that it was good, he had counted on it to win him that recognition which, more than money, his pride craved--partly by way of some compensation for what it had suffered at the hands of Vénétia Tankerville.

He was still sore with the hurt of that experience. Privately he doubted whether he would ever wholly recover from it; but the doubt was a very private one, never discovered even to his most sympathetic friends, not even to Helena, whose scorn of her sister-in-law remained immeasurable. Fortunate in having been able to afford those several weeks in the wooded hills of Maine, in their fragrant and passionless silences Matthias had found peace and regained confidence in his old, well-tryed, wholesome code of philosophy; which held that though here and there a man ill-used by chance or woman might be found, the world was none the less sound and kind at heart, and good to live in.

For all that, he could not easily endure the thought of Vénétia's lowering herself to use him to further her love affair with Marbridge; of Vénétia going from his arms and lips to the lips and arms of that insolent animal, Marbridge: the one amused by her successful cunning, the other contemptuous in his conquest. And he often wondered with what justice he judged the woman. It comforted him a little, at times, to believe that she had not acted so cruelly altogether as a free agent, to think her meeting with Marbridge in New York a freak of chance and fate, her elopement an unpremeditated and spontaneous surrender to the indisputable magnetism of the man. Marbridge commanded the reluctant admiration

of men who did not like him--who knew him too well to like him. How much more easily, then, might he not have overcome the scruples of a girl untutored in the knowledge of her own heart....

Or had it all been due merely to the fact that John Matthias was not a man to hold the love of women? Such men exist, antipathetic to the Marbridges of the world. Was he of their unhappy order, incapable of inspiring enduring love?

He could review a modest cycle of flirtations with women variously charming and willing to be amused, light-hearted attachments and short-lived, one and all, those that might have proved more lasting broken off without ill-will on either side--though always by the woman. Venetia alone had named Love to him as if it stood to her for something higher and more significant than the diversion of an empty hour--Venetia who was now in Italy, the bride of Marbridge!

And yet, oddly enough, it wasn't his memories of Venetia and his regrets and wounded self-esteem that rendered insipid his belated dinner and made him presently abandon it in favour of the distracting throngs of Broadway. They were thoughts of another woman altogether that urged him forth and homeward--a poignant sympathy for Joan Thursday, the friendless and forlorn, whose high anticipations had with his own that day gone crashing to disaster. He couldn't remember what had made him think of her, but now that he did, it was with disturbing interest.

He found himself suddenly very sorry for the girl--much more sorry for her than for himself. What to him was at worst a staggering reverse, to her must seem calamitous beyond repair.

It wasn't hard to conjure up a picture of the child, pitifully huddled upon her bed, in tears, heart-broken, desolate, perhaps (since he had not been home to pay her) supperless and hungry!

Matthias quickened his stride. His suddenly awakened and deep solicitude tormented him. He had received evidence that Joan's was a nature tempestuous and prone to extremes: he didn't like to contemplate the lengths to which despair might drive her.

Through the texture of this new-found care ran a thread of irritation that it should have proved a care to him. He realized that he must of late have been giving a deal of thought to the girl. Formerly he had been aware of her much as he was of Madame Duprat; such kindness as he had shown her had been no greater than, and of much the same order as, he would have shown a stray puppy. Tonight he found himself unable to contemplate her as other than a vital figure in his life--a creature of fire and blood, of spirit and flesh, at once enigmatic and absolute, owning claims upon his consideration no less actual because passive. He who had pledged his ability and willingness to find her a foothold on the stage, was responsible for her present distress and disappointment. And if his good offices had been sought rather than voluntary, still was he responsible; for she wouldn't have dreamed of seeking them if he hadn't in the first place insisted on putting her under obligation to him. He had in a measure bidden her to look to him; now it was his part to look out for her.

Hardly a pleasant predicament: Matthias resented it bitterly, with impatience conceding the weight of that doctrine which teaches the fatal responsibility of man for his hand's each and every idle turn. He had paused to pity a stray child of the town; and because of that, he now found himself saddled with her welfare. A situation exasperating to a degree! And, he argued, it was merely this subconscious sense of duty which had of late held the girl so prominently in his mind--ever since, in fact, that night when she had broken down and impulsively kissed his hand. Just that one hot-headed, frantic, foolish act had primarily brought home to Matthias his obligations as the object of her unsought, unwelcome gratitude....

He found Joan waiting on the stoop: a silent and vigilant figure, aloof from the other lodgers--a woman and two or three men lounging on the steps. And as these moved aside to give Matthias way, Joan rose and slipped quietly indoors, where in the hall she turned back with a gesture that too clearly betrayed the strain and tenseness of her emotions; but, to his gratification, she was dry of eye and outwardly composed.

"You were waiting for me?" he asked; and taking assent for granted rattled on with a show of cheerful contrition: "Sorry I'm late. There were ten dozen stones we had to turn, you know."

Her eyes questioned.

He smiled, apologetic: "No use; Rideout simply can't swing it."

"I've finished type-writing that book," she announced obliquely.

"Have you? That's splendid! Will you bring it to me? And then we can have a little talk."

She nodded--"I'll go fetch it right away"--and scurried hastily up the stairs as he went on to his room.

Leaving the door ajar and lighting his reading-lamp, Matthias closed the shutters at the long windows, adjusting their

slats for ventilation. Then for some minutes he was left to himself. Resting against the edge of his work-table, he studied ruefully a cigarette which he was too indifferent or too distracted to continue smoking. Smouldering between his fingers, its slender stalk of pearly vapour ascended with hardly a waver in the still air, to mushroom widely above his head. It held his eyes and his thoughts in dreaming.

He was thinking, simply and unconsciously, of the Joan he had just realized in the half-light of the hallway: a straight, slim creature with eyes like troubled stars, her round little chin held high as if in mute defiance of outrageous circumstance; vividly alive; giving a strange impression, as of some half-wild thing, at once timid and spirited, odd and -beautiful.

To the sound of a light tap on the open door, the girl herself entered, a mute incarnation of that disturbing memory. She put down the manuscript before acknowledging his silent and intent regard. But becoming aware of this, her eyes wavered and fell, then again steadied to his. He was vastly concerned with the surprising length of her dark silken lashes and the delicate shadows on her warm, rich flesh. And he was sensitive to the virginal sweetness and fluent grace of her round and slender body. Vaguely he divined that the calm courage of her bearing was merely a naive mask for a nature racked by intense feeling....

"That's the last," she said quietly, indicating the manuscript. "I finished up this evening," she added, superfluously yet without any evidence of consciousness.

"Thank you. I'm glad to get it." Ransacking his pockets, Matthias found money, and paid her for the week.

"I suppose that'll be all?" she asked steadily. "I mean, you won't want any more type-writing done for a while?"

"I don't know," he said slowly. "We'll have to ... talk things over. Today has changed everything.... If you don't mind, I'll shut the door: people all the time passing through the hall..."

She shook her head slightly to indicate a mild degree of impatience with his punctiliousness about that blessed door. Unconscious of this, having closed it, he returned to her, frowning a little as he reviewed her circumstances with a mind that seemed suddenly to have lost its customary efficiency of grasp.

He found her eyes and lost them again, glancing aside in inexplicable embarrassment.

"I'm sorry," he said slowly, looking down at the manuscript she had just delivered, and abstractedly disarranging it with thin, long fingers--"awfully sorry about the way things have turned out. I--"

She interrupted him sharply: "O no, you're not!"

He looked up quickly, amazed and disconcerted by the hint of anger in her tone. A little tremor ran through her body and she lifted her chin a trace higher while she met his stare with eyes hot and shining. Red spots like signals blazed in her either cheek.

Confused, he stammered: "I beg your pardon--!"

"I say you're not sorry. You're glad. You're glad, just like anybody else might be. *I don't blame you.*"

She shot these words at him like bullets, with a disturbing display of passionate resentment. He opened his lips to speak, and thinking better of it, or else not thinking at all in his astonishment, gaped witlessly, wholly incapable of conceiving what had got into the girl.

With a flush of scornful satisfaction her eyes remarked these evidences, so easily to be misinterpreted; then quickly she lowered her head and turned away, leaning against the table, her back to the light and face in shadow.

"*I don't blame you,*" she repeated in a sullen murmur.

He demanded blankly: "My dear girl, what *do* you mean?"

"I mean.... Why, just that you're glad to get rid of me!" she returned, looking away. He noticed the nervous strength with which her hands closed over the edge of the table, the whitening of their small knuckles.... "It's perfectly natural, I guess. I've been a nuisance so long, you've got every right to be tired of having me hang around--"

"But, my dear young woman--!"

She interrupted impatiently: "Oh, don't call me that. It don't mean anything. I guess I know when I'm not wanted. I'll go now and never bother you any more."

Moving a pace or two away, she resumed before Matthias could muster faculties to cope with this emergency:

"All the same, I don't want you to think I don't appreciate how good you've been to me--and patient, and all that. I am grateful--honest!--but I'm not as dumb as you think: I know when I'm in the way, all right!"

"But you entirely misunderstand me--"

"O no, I don't! You've made yourself plain enough, if you didn't think I had sense enough to see. It don't take *brains* to see through a man who's only trying to be polite and kind--all the time bored--"

"But, Miss Thursday--"

She turned toward the door.

He made a gesture of open exasperation. This was all so unfair! He had only meant to be kind and considerate and--and everything like that! And now she had drawn against him one of those unique and damnable indictments which seem to be peculiarly the product of a certain type of feminine mentality, and against which man is constitutionally incapable of setting up any effective defence, reason and logic alike being arbitrarily ruled out of court by the essential injustice of the charge. She chose to accuse him of having adopted toward her a mental attitude of which he was wholly guiltless; and there was no way by which he might persuade her of his innocence!

And it was so confoundedly clear that she considered herself, temporarily at least, abused and altogether justified of her complaint!

"Please," he begged, "don't go yet. Give *me* a chance!"

Her hand was on the knob. She hesitated, with an air of expectant and generous concession.

"You're really quite unfair," he began; but paused to regain control of himself and to wonder a little, blindly, why it was that he tolerated her impudence--for it couldn't be called anything less. It would be much more sensible and quite just to bow to her construction of their indefinite relations and let her go her ways without more argument.

In spite of everything, he could not refrain from one last attempt to set himself right.

"I don't quite know what to say to you," he resumed patiently, "when you insist on putting thoughts into my head that never were there. I've really wanted to help you--"

"Why?"

The monosyllable brought him up startled and staring. "Why? I hardly know...."

"Didn't you know better?"

"I don't understand you--"

Her eyes were wide and dark to his; all trace of petulance had faded from her manner. "You ought to. You ought to know," she insisted quietly, "that a man like you can't be just *kind* to a girl like me without.... Oh!" she cried, "I suppose it would've been different if the show had gone out--and everything--but now, with that hope gone--and nothing more to do for you--with no prospects but to lose you--the only friend I've got in the world--!"

Her voice broke at a high pitch, and she fell silent, turning away to stare with swimming eyes down at the table. He saw her trembling violently, her lips quivering. His amazement was extraordinary and bewildering. He heard his voice, as it might have been another's, saying: "Does it really mean so much to you?"

"Oh, can't you see!"

With a little, helpless motion of her hands, she lifted quickly to him a face of flushed and tear-dimmed loveliness. Another man might have been numb to its appeal: to Matthias it proved irresistible, coming sharp upon the shock of comprehending that she offered him her love, herself.

In a stride, hardly knowing what he did, he folded the girl in his arms. She lay therein for an instant as though bewitched by the exquisite wonder of this consummation of her fondest, maddest dreams; then in a breath became a woman reanimate and wild with love, clinging to him with all her strength, in an ecstasy of impassioned tenderness.

Bending his head, Matthias found her lips.

"My dear, dear girl!" he murmured.

"Oh," she breathed, "I have loved you always--always!"

"If I had only known, if I had only guessed--!"

"How could you? *I* didn't know ... not till a little while ago.... And even then, I couldn't have told you ... only the thought of losing you ... my dear, my dear!"

"I never guessed...."

"You're not sorry? You're not angry with me--?"

"Angry? I adore you!"

"You will love me always?"

"Always and forever."

"And never send me away from you?"

"You shall never leave me but of your own will."

"I think I was going mad with the thought of losing you!"

"My beloved girl!..."

The dusky stillness of the room was murmurous with whispers, sighs, terms of endearment half smothered and all but inaudible.

To these a foreign and alarming sound: a rapping at the door.

Matthias lifted his head, wincing from the interruption. The girl in his arms moved feebly, as if to disengage. He held her for a moment still more close. Her heart sounded sonorously against his bosom. "Hush!" he said in a low and warning voice. And then the rapping was repeated. At once he released her. She moved away, blushing and dishevelled, the fragrant freshness of her starched linen waist a crumpled disorder, her hair in disarray; her crimson face one of many evidences of the tumult of her senses.

In the hallway a man's voice said: "He must be in. There's a light--"

A woman answered impatiently: "Of course he's in; but the chances are he's asleep." She called in a louder tone: "Jack-- Jack Matthias!"

Recognizing the voice of his aunt, that person groaned aloud--"O Lord!"--stole a glance at Joan, hesitated, shrugged, as if to say: There's no help for it! Then he answered the door.

Helena swept in with a swirl of impatient skirts. "Good heavens!" she cried. "What ails you, Jackie? We knocked half a dozen times. Were you--?"

Her glance encountering Joan, the words dried on her lips.

Tankerville, at her heels, jerked a motor gauntlet from his fat hand in order to grasp that of Matthias. "Surprised you--eh?" he chuckled--"getting in so late. Well, it's all accidental. We were bound home--been visiting the Hastings for a week, you know--but the car broke down just this side of Poughkeepsie and delayed us and...."

He became distressfully aware of his wife's silence, simultaneously ascertained the cause of it, and cut his speech short in full stride.

Matthias laughed a little, quietly: no good trying to carry off this situation; by many a clue aside from Joan's confusion, they were betrayed.

"You've caught us," he said cheerfully. "We may as well own up. Helena, this is Joan--Miss Thursday--my fiancee. And Joan, this is my aunt, Mrs. Tankerville--and her husband."

And immediately he was conscious of the necessity of bridging the pause that would inevitably hold these three confounded, pending adjustment to his amazing announcement.

"We had intended to keep it quiet for a while," he pursued evenly, shutting the door.... "Helena, let me help you with that cloak.... But since you've declared yourselves in, we can only ask you to hold your peace until we're ready. I'm sure we can count on you both."

Tankerville puffed an explosive: "Oh--certainly!"

Helena glanced shrewdly from Joan to Matthias. He smiled his confidence in her, knowing that he might count upon her doing the right thing to put the girl at ease--just shoulders of the girl as positively as he might count upon her violent opposition to the match as soon as she discovered that he had engaged himself to her pet abomination, a woman of the stage.

With a bright nod to him, she turned back to Joan; drew slowly near to her; dropped kindly hands upon the shoulders of the girl.

"But, my dear!" she exclaimed in a tone of expostulation--"you are beautiful!"

XVIII

Escorting his aunt to the car, Matthias helped her in, closed the door, and then, with a grin of amused resignation masking that trepidation to which he was actually a prey, folded his arms on the top of the door and invited the storm with one word of whimsical accent: "Well?"

"Is it true?" she demanded, as if downright incredulous.

"Most true," he insisted with convincing simplicity.

The tip of one gloved finger to her chin, Helena considered remotely.

"She's very beautiful," she conceded, "and sweet and fetching and hopelessly plebeian. She'd be wonderful to have around, to look at; but to listen to.... Oh my dear! what *are* you thinking of?"

"Cut it," Tankerville advised from his corner. "None of your funeral, old lady."

"That consideration never yet hindered a Matthias," his wife retorted--"or a Tankerville, either, as far as I've been gifted to observe. However"--she turned again to her nephew--"you are presumably in love, and I hope you'll be happy, if ever you marry her. I shan't interfere--don't be afraid--but ... I could murder Venetia for this!"

"Good night," said Matthias, offering his hand.

But instead of taking it, his aunt leaned forward, caught his cheeks between both hands, and kissed him publicly.

"Good night," she murmured in a tragical voice. "And Heaven help you!... When is it going to be?"

"We haven't settled that yet," he laughed; "but you may be sure I shan't marry until I'm able to support my wife in a manner to which she's unaccustomed."

He returned to Joan with--until he recrossed the threshold of his study--a thought ironic concerning the inconsistency of Helena's veneration of caste with her union to fat, good-natured, pretentiously commonplace George Tankerville. For that matter, the Matthias dynasty itself was descended from a needy, out-at-elbows English adventurer who had one day founded the family fortunes by taking title to Manhattan real estate in settlement of a gambling debt and on the next had died in a duel--the only act of thoughtful provision against improvidence registered in his biography. So Matthias wasn't much disposed to reverence his pedigree: social position, at least as a claim upon his consideration, meant little to him: the only class distinctions he was inclined to acknowledge were those created by the intellect and of the heart. In his private world people were either intelligent or stupid, either kindly or (stupidly) egoistic. To the first order, with humility of soul he aspired; for the other he was, without condescension, heartily sorry....

But there was nothing half so analytical as this in his temper when he rejoined Joan: only wonder and rejoicing and delight in her.

He found her near the door, tense and hesitant, as though poised on the point of imminent flight. There was in her wide eyes a look almost of consternation; they seemed to glow, shot with the fire of her lambent thoughts. A doubting thumb and forefinger clipped her chin; a thin line of exquisite whiteness shone between her scarlet lips.

Closing the door, he opened his arms. She came to them swiftly and confidently. Doubts and fears vanished in the joy of his embrace; she was no longer lonely in a world unfriendly.

From the eloquent deeps of their submerged and blended senses, words now and again floated up like bubbles to the surface of consciousness:

"You still love me?"

"I love you."

"It wasn't pity--impulse--Jack--?"

"It was--love. It is love. It shall be love, dear heart, forever and always...."

"You *told* her--your aunt--we were engaged!"

"Aren't we?"

A convulsive tightening of her arms....

A whisper barely articulate: "You really ... want me ... enough to marry me?"

"I love you."

"But...."

"Isn't that enough?"

"But I am--only me: nothing: a girl who dares to love you."

"Could any man ask more?"

"You.... What will your friends say?... You'll be ashamed of me."

"Hush! That's treason."

"But you will--you won't be able to help it--"

A faint, half-hearted cry of protest: words indistinguishable, silenced by lips on lips; a space of quiet....

"How shall I make myself worthy of you?"

"Love me always."

"How shall I dare to meet your family, your friends--?"

"You will be my wife."

"But that won't be for a long time...."

"Yes, we must wait--be patient, Joan." She lifted her head, wondering. "But don't fear; love will sustain us."

"I will be patient. You'll have to give me time to learn how not to disgrace you--"

"What nonsense!"

"I mean it. I must be somebody. I'm nobody now."

"You are my dearest love."

"I must be more, to be your wife. Give me time to learn to act. When I am a success--"

"No more of that!" There was definite resolution in the interruption. "You must give up all thought of the stage."

"But I want to--"

"It's not the place for you--for my wife that is to be."

"But we're not to be married for a long time, you say."

"I'm a poor man, dear--I have enough for one, not enough for two. It may be only weeks, it may be months or years before my work begins to pay."

"But meantime I must live--support myself, somehow."

"You will leave that to me?"

"I must do something--be independent--"

"Won't you leave it all to me? I will arrange everything--"

"I'll do whatever you wish me to."

"And forget the stage--?"

"I don't know--I'll try, Jack."

"You must, dear one."

It was not a time for disagreements. Joan clung more closely to him. The issue languished in default, was forgotten for the time....

Transports ebbed: the faintest premonitory symptoms of a return to something resembling sanity made their appearance; of a sudden Matthias remembered the hour.

"Do you know," he said with tender gravity, having consulted his watch, "it's after eleven?"

"It doesn't seem possible," she laughed happily.

"And I'm hungry," he announced. "Aren't you?"

She dared to be as frank as he: "Famished!"

"Come along, then! Run, get your hat. It gives us an excuse for at least two hours more...."

By the time she had repaired the damage this miracle had wrought with her appearance, Matthias had walked to the Astor and brought back a taxicab. The attention affected Joan with a poignant and exquisite sense of happiness.

It was only her second ride in a motor vehicle. The top being down, they sat very circumspectly apart; but Matthias captured her hand and eye spoke to eye with secret laughter of delight, each reading the other's longing thought. The speed of the cab and its sudden slackening as it picked its path down Broadway, the flow of cool air against her face, the swimming maze of lights through which they sped, the sense of luxury and protection, added the last touch of delirious pleasure to Joan's mood.

Matthias had chosen the cafe of "Old Martin's," at Twenty-sixth Street, the first place that suggested itself as one where they could sup without the girl being made to feel out of place in her modest work-a-day attire; but his thoughtfulness was misapplied: Joan was exalted beyond such annoyances; and those feminine glances which she detected, of pity, disdain, and jealousy, she took complacently as envious tributes to her prettiness and her conquest.

From a seat against the wall, in a corner, she reviewed the other patrons of the smoke-wreathed room with a hauteur of spirit that would have seemed laughable had it been suspected. She thought of herself as the handsomest woman there, and the youngest, of Matthias as the most distinguished man and--the luckiest. The circumstances of the place and her partner enchanted her to distraction.

The food Matthias ordered she devoured heedlessly; but there was a delicious novelty in the experience of sipping her first glass of champagne. It was, for that matter, the first time she had ever tasted good wine, or any kind of alcoholic drink other than an occasional glass of lukewarm beer, cheap and nasty to begin with and half-stale at best, and that poisonous red wine of the Italian boarding-house to which Charlie Quard had introduced her. She had never dreamed of anything so delicious as this dry and exhilarating draught with its exotic bouquet and aromatic bubbles.

With a glowing face and dancing eyes she nodded to Matthias over the rim of her goblet.

"When we are rich," she laughed softly, "I'm never going to drink anything else!"

He smiled quietly, enjoying her enjoyment; but, when emptied, the half-bottle he had ordered was not renewed.

There was without that enough intoxication in his fondness, in the simulacrum of gaiety manufactured by the lights, the life, the laughter, and in the muted, interweaving strains of music. Joan felt that she was living wonderfully and intensely, a creature of an existence transcendent and radiant.

It was after one when another taxicab whisked them homeward through the quieting streets. She sat as close as could be to her lover and would not have objected on the grounds of "people looking" had he put an arm round her. Though he didn't, she was not disappointed, sharing something of his mood of sublimely sufficient contentment. But when he bade her good night at the foot of the stairs in the deserted and poorly lighted hallway, she gave herself to his caresses with a passion and abandon that startled and sobered Matthias, and sent him off to his room and bed in a thoughtful frame of mind.

Lying awake in darkness until darkness was dimly tempered by the formless dusk that long foreruns the dawn, he communed gravely with his troubled heart.

"Things can't go on this way--as they've started. There's *got* to be sanity.... It's myself I've got to watch, of course," he said with stubborn loyalty to his ideal. "I mustn't forget I'm a man--nine years older--nearly ten.... Why, she's hardly more than a kiddie.... She doesn't *know*.... I've got to watch myself...."

And in her room, four floors above, Joan sat as long before her bureau, chin cradled on her slim, laced fingers, eyeing intently the face shown her by gas-light in the one true patch of the common, tarnished mirror.

When at length she rose, suddenly conscious of a heavy weariness, she lingered yet another long moment for one last fond look.

"It's true," she told herself with a little nod of conviction; "I am beautiful. *She* said I was ... he thinks I am ... I must be...."

XIX

For a long time Joan lay snug between the sheets, staring wide-eyed into the patch of lustrous blue morning sky framed by the window, reviewing this new and wonderful adventure of her heart from a point of view remote, detached, and critical. Thoughts recurred that in the excitement and ardour of the night had been passed over and neglected; and from them she derived a new, strange, and intoxicating sense of power.

Her first waking thought was as her last before sleeping: *I am beautiful.*

Her second, not *I love him*, but *He loves me.*

And her third grew out of the second: *I can make him do what pleases me.*

Yesterday a lowly supplicant at the shrine of love: today Love's very self, adored and desired by an erstwhile divinity now humbled to the level of humanity!

A fit of petulance, beauty in tears, a whispered word of passion: strange and strangely simple incantation to have turned a world upside down! How easily was man supplanted to the spell!

The sense of power ran like wine through her being: she felt herself invincible, an adept of love's alchemy; she had surprised its secret, and now the world of man's heart lay open to the practices of her disastrous art. For a moment she experienced an almost terrifying intimation of empires ripe for conquest that lay beyond Matthias; but from this she withdrew her troubled gaze; nor would she look again; not yet....

She considered his mad extravagance of last night--taxicabs, champagne, tips! Was he, then, able to afford such expenditures? In her understanding they went oddly with his pretensions to decent poverty. Or had he merely lost his head under the influence of her charms? This last theory pleased her; she adopted it with reservations: the question remained one to be cleared up.

He disapproved of a career upon the stage for her?... Joan smiled indulgently: that matter would be arranged in good time. She meant to have her way....

At a tap on her door she changed suddenly from the aloof egoist to a woman athrill before the veil of portentous mysteries. She sat up in bed, called out to know who was knocking, gave permission to the chambermaid to enter, and received a note in the hand of Matthias.

"*Past twelve o'clock,*" she read, "*and still no sign of you, sweetheart. I give you thirty minutes to dress and come to me. If you don't, I'll come for you. After breakfast, we'll run out of town for the day--our first day together!*" MATTHIAS."

Half wild with delight, she hurried through her toilet and ran down-stairs to find her lover waiting in the hallway, watch in hand.

He closed it with a snap, and made her a quaintly ceremonious bow. "In two minutes more--!" he observed in a tone of grave menace. "But before we go out, have the kindness to step into my humble study. I have somewhat to say to you."

She appeared to hesitate, to be reluctant and preoccupied occupied.

"What about?" she demanded distantly.

But her dancing eyes betrayed her.

"Business," he said, sententious. His gesture indicated a vigilant universe of eavesdroppers. "Nobody's but our own!"

Nevertheless, there was none to spy upon them as he drew her gently by the waist, down the hall and into the back-parlour. She yielded with a charming diffidence.

In his embrace the sense of power slipped unheeded from her ken; returned the deep, obliterating rapture of over-night. Lips that first submitted, soon gave in return, then demanded....

She clung heavily to him, a little faint and breathless with a vague and sweet and nameless longing....

At breakfast in a neighbouring restaurant, Matthias disclosed his plans for the day, involving a motor trip down along the north shore of Long Island, dinner at Huntington, a return by moonlight. Joan, enchanted by the prospect--the sum of whose experience outside Manhattan Island was comprised in a few trips to Coney Island--consented with a strange mingling of eagerness and misgivings; the thought of the cost troubled a conscience still haunted by memories of last night's prodigality.

"I didn't know you had an automobile."

"I haven't; I'm chartering one for the day."

"But ... but ... won't it be awfully expensive?"

"Don't worry, dear."

"But, you know, you aren't--rich."

"I'm a magnate of happiness, at all events: and today is *our* day, the first of our love, sweetheart. For twelve long hours we're going to forget everything but our two selfish selves. Why fret about tomorrow? It always does manage to take care of itself, somehow. And frankly, I don't care to be reminded of its existence today; for tomorrow I work...."

A day of quicksilver hours slipping ever from their jealous grasp; of hours volatile and glamorous: in Joan's half-dazed consciousness, a delectable pageant of scenes, sensations and emotions no sooner comprehended than displaced by others no less wonderful....

Abed long after midnight, visions besieged her bewilderingly: a length of dusty golden highway walled by green forest, with a white bridge glaring in sunlight at the bottom of a hill; the affrighting onrush of great motor-cars meeting their own, and the din and dust of their passage; the bright harbour of Huntington, blue and gold in a frame of gold and green, viewed from the marble balustrade of the Chateau des Beaux Arts; the wrinkled, kindly, comprehending face of a waiter who served them at dinner; the look in her lover's eyes as she repeated, on demand, guarded avowals under cover of the motor's rumble; the ardent face of a boy who had seemed unable to cease staring at her in the restaurant; silver and purple of the road by night; wheeling ranks of lights dotting the desolation of suburban Brooklyn; the high-flung span of Queensboro' Bridge, a web of steel and concrete strung with opalescent globes; the glare of the city's painted sky; the endless pulsing of the motor; their last caress on parting at the foot of the stairs....

On the morrow she went back to her typewriter like Cinderella to her kitchen. But what work Matthias was able to invent for her was neither arduous nor urgent; she was able to take her time on it, and wasted many an hour in dreaming. Her mind was, indeed, more engaged with thoughts of new frocks than with the circumstances of her love or her services to her lover.

She was to receive thenceforward twenty-five instead of ten dollars a week. Matthias had experienced little difficulty in over-ruling her faint protestations: they were to be together a great deal, he argued, and she must be able to dress at least neatly; moreover, by requiring her promise to marry him at some future time when his fortunes would permit, he had in a measure made her dependent upon him; she couldn't reasonably be asked to wait for long on a bare pittance.

His arguments were reinforced by one he knew nothing of, a maxim culled from the wisdom of Miss Maizie Dean: *It was up to a girl to look out for herself first, last, and all the time.* The platitude had made an ineffaceable impression upon Joan's sense of self-preservation. And if Matthias were able to afford nightly dinners for two at good restaurants, in addition to theater tickets several times a week, he ought to be able to afford a decent compensation to his stenographer; especially when it was his wish that she refrain from attempting to earn more money on the stage.

It was, however, true that no offer had come to Joan of other theatrical work, and that the issue of her ambition remained in abeyance, a subject which she didn't care to raise and which Matthias, since that first night, had

considered settled.

Customarily they met each evening about half-past six at some distance from their lodgings: a precaution against gossip on the part of the other inmates of the Maison Duprat. Thence they would go to dine at some favourite restaurant, where food was good and evening dress not obligatory--the cafe of their first supper by preference, or else the Lafayette, in University Place, the Brevoort House, or one of a few minor French establishments upon which Matthias had conferred the approval of a discriminating taste. Thereafter, if he meant to work, they would take a taxicab for a brief whirl through Central Park or up Riverside Drive to Grant's Tomb and back. Or if he considered attendance upon some first representation important enough to interfere with his work, as forming part of the education of a student of contemporaneous drama, they would go to a theatre, where he always contrived to have good but inconspicuous seats.

In all, Joan must have attended with him eight or nine first-nights; and since Matthias refused to waste his time on musical comedy, they witnessed for the most part plays dealing with one phase or another of social life in either London or New York. From these Joan derived an amount of benefit which would have surprised anyone ignorant of the quickness of perception and intelligent adaptability characteristic of the American girl, however humble her origin. The poorest plays furnished her with material for self-criticism and improvement. As plays, indeed, she was but vaguely interested in them, but as schools of deportment, they held her breathlessly attentive. She never took her gaze from the stage so long as there remained upon it an actress portraying, however indifferently, a woman of any degree of cultivation whatever. Gestures, postures, vocal inflections, the character of their gowns and the manner in which they contrived to impart to them something of their wearer's personality, the management of a tea-cup or a fashion of shaking hands: all these were registered and stored away in the girl's memory, to be recalled when alone, reviewed, dissected, modified to fit her individually, practised, and eventually to be adopted with varying discretion and success.

She who was to be the wife of a man of position, was determined that his friends and associates should find little to censure in her manners. For long Helena Tankerville figured to Joan as an impeccable model of tact, distinction, taste, and gentlewomanliness. To become as Helena was, summed up the dearest aspirations of the girl. She began to be very guarded in her use of English, eschewed as far as her means permitted the uniform style of costume to which New York women are largely prone, dressed her hair differently and upon no superstructure other than its own, and spent long hours manicuring and observing the minor niceties of the feminine toilet.

Paradoxically, with the obtuseness characteristic of a certain type of imaginative man, Matthias appreciated and was grateful for the improvement in his fiancee without realizing it objectively; what pleased his sensitive tastes, he accepted as normal expressions of innate good-breeding; what jarred, he glossed with charity. It was inconceivable that he should love any woman but one instinctively fine: he endowed Joan with many a grace and many a virtue that she did not possess; and this implicit assertion of his, that she was all that the mistress of his heart ought to be, incited her to more determined efforts to resemble all that by birth and training she was not.

It was some time before the novelty palled and she grew restive under the strain of it all...

"I had a talk with Rideout today," he observed during dinner, on an evening about a fortnight subsequent to the disbanding of "The Jade God" company. "He's dickering with Algerson--thinks the thing may possibly come to a deal before long."

"How do you mean?" Joan enquired with quick interest.

"Algerson wants to buy Rideout's interest in the play--at a bargain to himself, of course. Rideout is holding out for a better offer, but he's hard pressed, and I rather think he'll close with Algerson within a few days."

"Who's Algerson?" Joan asked, after an interval devoted to ransacking her memory for some echo of that name; resulting in the conviction that she had never heard it before.

"He runs a chain of stock companies out on the Pacific Coast, and now he's anxious to branch out into the producing business."

"And if he gets 'The Jade God'--when will he put it on?"

"Can't say--haven't seen him. I'm not supposed to know he's interested as yet; though of course they'll have to come to me before the deal can be ratified."

"But you'll consent?"

"Rather! Especially if Algerson will take over Rideout's contract as it stands. It provides for pretty good royalties, and as a prospective bridegroom I'm very much interested in such sordid matters."

Joan traced a meaningless pattern on the cloth with a tine of her fork; glanced surreptitiously at Matthias; remembered that toying with the tableware wasn't good form, and quietly abandoned the occupation.

"I wonder ..." she murmured abstractedly.

"You wonder what--?" Matthias prompted when she failed to round out her thought.

She laughed uneasily. "I was just wondering if--if he gets the piece--Algerson would give me a chance at my old part?"

"Not with my consent," said Matthias promptly. "You know I don't want you to stick at that game."

"But I'm tired doing nothing," she pouted prettily.

Matthias shook his stubborn head. "Besides," he added quickly, "Algerson will probably try the show out in one of his stock houses before he goes to the expense of organizing a new and separate production. I mean, he'll use people already on his pay roll, and not engage outsiders until he knows pretty well whether he's got a success or a failure on his hands."

"You think he will produce out West?"

"Probably."

"And will you have to go?"

"I don't know. I shan't unless I get some guarantee of expenses. Although ... I don't know ... perhaps I ought to. Wilbrow and I are the only people who know how the thing ought to be done, and Algerson most certainly won't pay what Wilbrow asks for making a production--and his expenses to the Coast and back, besides.... It would be a shame to let a valuable property go smash for want of intelligent supervision."

"Then you may go, after all?"

"I can't say until something definite is arranged. I'll have to think it over."

Joan sighed.

A week elapsed before the subject came up again.

Matthias had been out all day; Joan, with no typing to engage her, had sought surcease of ennui with a book and an easy chair in the back-parlour. But the story was badly chosen for her purpose. Its heroine, like herself, had in the beginning been merely a girl of the people, little if any better equipped for the struggle to the top: Joan could see no reason why she should not rise with a rapidity as wonderful, given but the chance denied her through the unreasonable prejudice of her lover.

And presently the book lay open and neglected in her lap, while her thoughts engaged mutinously with this obstruction to her desires, seeking a way to circumvent it without imperilling her conquest.

Joan was proud and sure of her power over Matthias, but she realized that in spite of it she didn't as yet fill his life; there existed in his nature reticences her imagination might not plumb; and until chance, or the confidence only to be engendered through long, slow processes of intimate association, should make these known to her, she hesitated to join issue with his will.

And yet ... she was continually restless and discontented. Sometimes she felt that the old order of uncertainty and stifled longings had been better for her soul; that she couldn't much longer endure the tension of living up to the rigorous standards of Matthias and his kind; that she might even be happier as the object of a passion less honourable and honest than that which he offered her.

But never before this day had she admitted so much to herself, even in her most secret hours of egoistic self-communion....

Matthias came in briskly, in a glow of high spirits, shortly before sunset; and immediately, as always, her every doubt and misgiving vanished like mists in the morning-glow of his love.

Throwing hat and stick upon the couch, he went directly to her chair, knelt beside it, gathered her to him. She yielded with a sedate yet warm tenderness perhaps the more sincere today because of a conscience stricken by the memory of her late disloyalty of thought. And something of her fond gravity and gentleness penetrated and sobered his own mood. He held her very close for many minutes. But when he drew back at arm's-length to worship her with his eyes, she turned her head aside quickly, if not quickly enough to deceive him. He was instant to detect the glimmer of tears in

her long lashes, the childish tremor of her sweet lips, and again drew her to him.

"My dearest one!" he whispered with infinite gentleness and solicitude. "What is it? Tell me."

"Nothing," she breathed brokenly in return. "Nothing--only--I guess--I'm a little blue--lonely without you, dear. I'm afraid I need either to be at work or--with you always."

"Then be comforted, sweetest girl; the time won't be long, now--I believe in my very soul."

"Till when--?" She leaned back in her chair, examining his face with eyes that shone with infectious fire of his confident excitement. "Till when? What do you mean? Something has happened!"

"You're right," he laughed exultantly: "two big things have happened to me today. Wylie has accepted 'Tomorrow's People': we signed the contract this afternoon; he's to put it on about the first of the year."

"Oh, I'm so glad!"

"But that isn't all: Algerson has bought Rideout's contract and is to produce 'The Jade God' in Los Angeles as soon as it can be got ready."

"Dearest!"

There was an interval...

"Only," he said presently, "it's going to mean a little real loneliness for you, dear--not more than a few weeks--"

"Why?" she demanded sharply.

"Because I've promised Algerson to superintend the rehearsals. I couldn't well refuse. You know how much it means to us, dear heart."

"When do you leave?"

"Monday--the Twentieth Century Limited for Chicago then on to Los Angeles."

"And you'll be gone, altogether, how long?" Joan persisted tensely.

"With good luck, about a month. If we strike a snag, of course, I may have to stop over a week or so longer. It's hard to say."

"Then I'm to be left--here--alone--with nothing to do but wait--perhaps more than a month!"

"I'm afraid so, dear. It's for both of our sakes. So much depends--"

"Jack!" Placing her hands on his shoulders, Joan held him off. "Take me with you," she pleaded earnestly.

"Think a moment, sweetheart. You must see how impossible it is. For one thing, it wouldn't--O it's all very well to say 'Conventions be hanged!' but--it wouldn't look right. We're not married."

"Take me with you, Jack," she repeated stubbornly.

He shook his head. "And, fairly and squarely, dear, I can't afford it. I haven't got enough money. Even if we were married, I'd have to leave you here."

For a moment longer the girl kept her hands upon his shoulders, exploring his face with eyes that seemed suddenly to have been robbed of much of their girlishness. Then: "Very well," she said coldly, and releasing him, she sat back and averted her countenance.

Matthias got up, distressed and perplexed.

"You can't mean your love won't stand the strain of a few weeks' separation, Joan!"

She made no answer. He shrugged, moved to the work-table, found a cigarette and lighted it.

"Surely you can wait that long--"

"I'll do my best," she interrupted almost impatiently. "If it can't be, it can't. So don't let's talk any more about it."

"I'd give a good deal to be able to arrange things the way you wish," he grumbled. "But I don't see..."

She was silent. He paced the worn path on the carpet for a few moments, then turned aside to his desk and stood idly examining a little collection of correspondence which had been delivered in his absence. One or two letters he opened, skimmed through without paying much attention to their contents, and tossed aside. A third brought from him an exclamation: "Hello!"

"What is it?" Joan enquired indifferently.

"What do you say to running down to Tanglewood over Sunday?"

"Tanglewood?"

"My Aunt Helena's home--down at Port Madison, Long Island, you know. She has just written, asking us. It would be rather fun. Would you like to go?"

A blunt negative was barely suppressed. Curiosity made Joan hesitate, and temporarily to forego further petulance.

"I've got nothing to wear," she doubted uncertainly.

"Rot: you don't need anything but shirtwaists and skirts. There won't be anybody but you, Helena, George Tankerville and myself." Matthias leaned over the back of her chair and caught her face between his hands. "It'll be a splendid holiday for us, before I start. Say yes--sweetheart!"

Joan turned up her face to his, lifting her arms to encircle his neck. She nodded consent as he bent his lips to hers.

XX

At times Joan was more than half inclined to doubt the reality of some of those unique phases of existence to which her love affair introduced her. Some experiences seemed beyond belief, even to an imagination stimulated by inordinate ambition and further excited by incessant novel-reading and theater-going.

On the Friday morning following the receipt of Helena's invitation she went shopping, squandering upwards of three weeks' savings with that delicious abandonment to extravagance which is possible only to a woman of supremely confident tomorrows. The hundreds she was in subsequent days to disburse as thoughtlessly never afforded her one-half the pleasure that accompanied the expenditure of those seventy hoarded dollars. (For aside from the rent of her room, her association with Matthias had spared her nearly every other expense of daily life.)

Among other things, she purchased for twenty-five dollars a simple evening frock eminently adapted to her requirements. A tolerably faithful copy of a foreign model, it had been designed to fetch a much higher price than that at which Joan was able to acquire it at an end-of-the-season bargain sale. She tried it on before deciding, and had the testimony of the department store mirrors that it was wonderfully becoming to her years and type of beauty. And it was the only garment of its kind that she had ever owned.

As she hurried, tardily, to keep an appointment with Matthias for lunch at Martin's, she told herself that she would never know greater happiness. She could not rid her mind of that wonderful frock and the figure she had cut in it, posing in the dressing-room.

But after luncheon--over which they lingered until they were quite alone in the eastern dining-room--with some hesitation, and having assured himself that there was not even a waiter near at hand, Matthias fumbled in one of his waistcoat pockets, produced a small leather-covered case, and passed it across the table.

"I'd meant to keep this till we got home," he said with an awkward smile. "But I don't think I can wait...."

Joan opened the box--and drew the longest breath of her life. Her heart seemed to leap and then stand stock-still for a full minute before she grasped the magnificence of his present: her engagement ring!

Then and there the girl lost all touch with the tough verities of life; and throughout the day and until she lost consciousness in bed that night, a sensual enchantment held dominion over all her being....

Nor was the great adventure of the visit to Tanglewood of a nature calculated to dissipate that glamour--save, perhaps, in one untoward circumstance which, wholly unforeseen, could not have been provided against.

A woman less shrewd and intelligent than Helena Tankerville, and one as violently opposed to the match, might have planned that short week-end visit to influence and discourage the girl rather than Matthias. But Helena knew that

contrast would have the desired effect only upon the man; to whom its significance would be in inverse ratio to the emphasis lent it. So with infinite tact and thoughtfulness Joan's way was made smooth for her from the moment she alighted from the train until the moment of her leave-taking; and this without the least tangible suggestion that any especial consideration was being shewn her. The smallness of the party sanctioned informality; and George Tankerville's obtuse kindness of heart (which permitted him to see nothing in the stratagems of his wife other than a desire to put the girl completely at her ease) facilitated matters immensely.

Joan was spared the embarrassment of a maid--was, indeed, given no reason to believe there were any such servants attached to the establishment. Suffered to unpack her modest effects and dispose of them herself, she received at Helena's hands the indispensable service of "hooking-up." And her unpretentious, pretty frock was by no means overshadowed by Helena's or by the unceremonious dinner jackets of the men; while the simplicity of the evening meal put her thoroughly at her ease, whose recently acquired but rather extensive acquaintance with New York restaurant ways and waiters robbed the attentions of a butler of their terrors.

Nor was it, possibly, altogether a matter of chance that neighbouring friends telephoned an after-dinner invitation to Helena and Tankerville to run over and make up a table at auction: so that Joan was left alone with her lover to become acquainted with and at home among the charms of Tanglewood....

But it wasn't until the first hours of a still and splendid September Sunday that her sense of wonder was quite ravished by the place: its foreign and luxurious atmosphere, the half-wild loveliness of its grounds, the perfection of its appointments and the uniqueness of its location. Then the sense of unreality resumed full sway over her perceptions: she seemed to move and have her being in a strange, new world of rare and iridescent witchery. And Helena was at pains to leave her no time for doubts or analysis. They motored in the morning to the South Shore and back, and after luncheon took the Enchantress for a short spin up the Sound, returning for tea upon the terrace....

Tankerville and Matthias were wrangling amiably about the least comfortable routes overland to the Pacific; Helena, with binoculars at the balustrade, was simulating an extravagant interest in the manoeuvres of two small yachts far in the distance (and, in the breathing-space thus cunningly contrived, wildly ransacking a rather extensive fund of resource for some subject which might prove a common ground of interest between herself and her guest) and Joan, in the depths of a basket-chair, while seeming smilingly to attend to the light banter of the men, was deeply preoccupied in consideration of her extraordinary sensation of comfort and security in this exotic environment. She was deliciously flattered by appreciation of her own ease and adaptability. The conclusion seemed inevitable that, somehow, strangely, Nature had meant her for just such an existence as this.

The terrace was aflood with the golden glow of the westering sun--the season so far advanced that there was no discomfort in its warmth. The Sound shone like a sapphire, still and vast, and the cup of the skies bending over it was flawless sapphire banded at its rim with an exquisite shade of amethyst. Ashore, the wooded slopes were all aflame in the mortal passion of Indian summer.

In the stirless, suave, and aromatic air hung an impalpable yet ineluctable hint of melancholy....

From landward, with unusual resonance in the deep quiet of that hour, sounded the long, dull, whining purr of a motor-car.

Helena lowered the glasses, turned an ear to the sound, and came slowly back to the tea-table and Joan. Her faint smile, together with a slight elevation of her delicately darkened brows, indicated surprise.

Engrossed in their argument, Matthias and Tankerville gave no heed to the threatened visitation.

Resentfully, Joan detached her attention from the diamond Matthias had given her, and at discretion tossed aside a cigarette which she had been pretending to like because Helena smoked quite openly, and it was consequently the smart thing to do.

Undoubtedly the car was stopping on the drive. Helena moved a few paces toward the house, paused, waited. A woman's laugh with an accent of cheerful excitement came to them. Joan saw Helena start and noticed Matthias break off a sentence in the middle and swing round in his chair. Immediately a woman ran through the doorway to the terrace, a light dust-wrap streaming from her shoulders. A man followed, but at the time Joan hardly noticed him. The woman absorbed all her interest, even though it was an interest compounded of jealousy and hostility. She was unquestionably the loveliest creature Joan had ever seen. Without moving, but staring, the girl sat transfixed with distrust and poignant envy.

With a cry of wonder--"Venetia!"--Helena ran to greet these unpresaged guests.

Meeting, the two women indulged in an embrace almost theatrically perfunctory. The commonplaces of such situations

were breathlessly exchanged. Then Helena, disengaging turned to the man and extended a hand.

"Well, Mr. Marbridge!..." she cried with a light note of semi-reproof in her laughter.

At this, with a brightening smile, Marbridge bent over her hand, saying something indistinguishable to Joan.

She was watching the meeting between Matthias and Vénétia Marbridge.

He held both her hands, and she permitted him to retain them, for a longer moment of silent greeting than Joan thought necessary. But this circumstance alone betrayed whatever constraint was felt by either. A smile, vague and perhaps not lacking a thought of tender sadness, touched the lips and eyes of Vénétia. Matthias returned his twisted and indefinitely apologetic grin.

"More than ever charming, Vénétia!"

"Thank you, Jack."

If there were any hint of challenge in her tone or her straightforward eyes, Joan didn't detect it.

George Tankerville submitted with open resignation to the embrace of his sister.

"I suppose I've got to stand for this," he observed with philosophy. "Do you mean me to infer that you're humble and contrite?"

"Not in the least," Vénétia retorted defiantly.

"Oh, very well," said he. "That being the case, I extend to you my belated blessing. How did you leave things on the other side?"

"Much as usual--and by steamer."

"When'd you get back?"

"Last Monday...."

Vénétia became openly aware of Joan. Matthias interposed.

"Miss Thursday--my fiancée. Joan, this is Mrs. Marbridge."



"Miss Thursday--my fiancee. Joan, this is Mrs. Marbridge."

"Truly?"

The shock told; she had been playing off very deftly a painful contretemps, but this announcement dashed Venetia. Momentarily she hesitated, scarlet lips apart but inarticulate, widening eyes of violet a shade darker, with--if possible--a pallor deeper even than that most striking attribute of her beauty. But the check could have been apparent only to the initiate or to a strongly intuitive intelligence.

"I *am* so glad!" she cried with sincerity--"so glad for both of you!" Impulsively she caught Joan's hands, drew the girl to her--"May I, my dear? We're to be great friends, you know!"--kissed her; then swinging round--"Vincent!" she called gaily. "Such news! Do come here immediately!"

Marbridge showed a face strongly marked with the enquiry of his heavy, lifting eyebrows. His glance comprehended Joan with kindling interest. With Helena he approached, his heavy body rolling a little in spite of the elasticity of his stride.

"My husband, Vincent Marbridge. Vincent, this is Joan Thursday. She's engaged to Jack Matthias. Isn't it wonderful? And aren't they both fortunate? And *isn't* she pretty?"

Marbridge's unctuous and intimate smile accompanied his reply: "Yes to all--twice yes to your last question." His warm strong hand closed over Joan's diffident fingers. "My heartiest congratulations to you both.... Ah, Mr. Matthias, how are you? So we meet again--at Tanglewood!"

The hands of the two men touched and fell apart. But this clue was wasted upon Joan, who stood silently abashed and

sullen with consciousness of her own inept awkwardness as contrasted with the amiable aplomb of these people with whom good breeding was a cult, the practice of the art of self-possession its primary rite.

To Marbridge she stammered: "Pleased to meet you." And immediately felt her face burning and as if she could faint for sheer mortification.

It was Helena who, pitiful for the gaucherie of the girl, saved the situation by raising the issue of tea. Venetia demurred: they were, it seemed, visiting friends in Southampton; had driven over only for a call of a moment; would be late for dinner if they tarried. But Marbridge settled the question by dropping solidly into a chair and announcing that there he was and there would stay pending either tea or a highball. Venetia, unable to disguise a flush of resentment, showed her back to her husband and devoted herself to George Tankerville. As Helena summoned a servant, Marbridge hitched his chair closer and inaugurated a rather one-sided conversation with Joan.

Again in her basket-chair, knees daintily crossed in imitation of a pose mentally photographed from the stage, Joan experienced renewed consciousness of her attractions, and with it regained a little ease. It could scarcely be otherwise under the wondering regard that Marbridge bent upon the girl. His admiration was unconcealed, and to Joan at first the sweeter since it was diverted from his wife.

But insensibly the situation began to affect her less pleasantly. She grew sensitive to an effect of strain in the atmosphere, made up in equal parts of Venetia's indignation, Matthias's annoyance, Helena's suave but quite fruitless efforts to interpose and distract the interest of Marbridge to herself.

And there was a confusing and disturbing element of familiar and personal significance in the man's undeviating and brazen stare. Truly, in the older sense of the word, impudent, it hinted an understanding so complete as to be almost shameful--worse, it elicited a real if unspoken response from the girl; unwillingly she admitted the existence of a bond of sympathy between herself and this man whom she had never seen before, a feeling more true and intimate than that which her association with Matthias had inspired, than any she had ever known. For a time she fought against this impression, in a bewilderment that evoked from her only witless and hesitant responses. Then suddenly encountering his eyes--actually against her will--she was stricken dumb and breathless by comprehension of their intent; in effect, they stripped her: bodily and mentally they made her naked to this man.

Nor was this the sum: for the merest fraction of a moment Joan felt herself answering: in her bosom a strange oppression, strangely troubling and sweet; in her own eyes a kindling light, sympathetic, shameless....

Instantly quenched: distress and affronted modesty incarnadined her face, veiled her eyes. Almost unconsciously she turned away. Indistinctly she saw the white face of Venetia, set and hard, with a scornful lip for her husband. Shifting to view the object of his admiration, it showed no change of expression. Her voice cut incisively through his lazy, drawling accents.

"This is quite impossible," she said coolly, consulting a jewelled watch on her slender, gloved wrist. "If we stay another instant we shall be unforgivably late. But"--to Helena--"thank you so much, dear, for wanting us to stop.... Vincent, I am going."

She moved slowly toward the house. Marbridge kept his seat.

"Nonsense!" he expostulated. "Plenty of time. Tea's just coming. And I'm dying the death of a dog with thirst."

"I am going," Venetia repeated in an uninflected voice.

His dark face darkening, Marbridge glanced to Helena, to Tankerville, ignored Matthias, looked back to Joan: gaining as little encouragement from her, as from his host and hostess, since she dared not again meet his gaze. With a movement of his heavy shoulders and a chuckle he heaved himself out of the chair.

"Oh, *all* right," he called indulgently to his wife: "coming!... All women are crazy, anyhow," he confided to the others. "You've got to let 'em have their own way. So--good night. Hope I'll have the pleasure of seeing you-all soon again."

He extended a hand to Helena--who gave him cool fingertips--and paused before Joan.

"Au revoir, Miss Thursday...."

The girl was unconscious of the proffered hand. Her eyes averted, she murmured a good night.

His smile broadening, Marbridge turned to Matthias; received from him a look that was as good as a kick, gave back a grin of graceless effrontery; and swinging, linked arms with Tankerville.

"Come along, George--take a look at our new car. She's a wonder!"

Civily playing his part, Tankerville submitted.

They disappeared--Marbridge gabbling cheerfully--into the house. Joan uncurtained her eyes. Her lover, with a face of thunder, was looking toward his aunt; who made a slight negative motion of her head, with an admonitory flutter of one hand: a servant with a tray was drawing near. Matthias answered her with a gesture of controlled wrath; turned to the balustrade; stood there staring straight into the angry sunset glow.

On the drive a motor snorted, snored, drew away with a whine diminuendo....

Throughout the remainder of Joan's visit the incident was not once referred to. But it had had its curious and disturbing effect upon the girl. She remembered it all very vividly, reviewed it with insatiable inquisitiveness. From this she derived a feeling, which she resented, of having witnessed a scene fraught with significance indecipherable to her.

XXI

A little after the hour of four on Monday afternoon, Joan emerged from that riotous meander of hideous wooden galleries, ramps, passages, sheds, and vast echoing caves of gloom, which in those days encumbered the site of the new Grand Central Station; and with a long breath of relief turned westward on Forty-second Street.

She walked slowly and without definite aim; yet she had never felt so keenly the quickness and joy of being alive. Her idle fancy invested with a true if formless symbolism her escape from that amazing labyrinth of shadows to the clear, sweet sunlight of the clamorous, busy street: as if she had eluded and cast off convention and formality, the constraint of a settled future and the strain of aspirations to be other than as Nature had fashioned her; and was free again of the enchanting ease of being simply herself.

She had within five minutes said good-bye to her betrothed; her lips were yet warm with their parting kiss, her eyes still moist--and so, the more bewitching--with the facile tears through which she had watched his train draw out of the station.

He was not to be back within a month; more probably his return would not occur within five or six weeks....

She was contrarily possessed by two opposed humours: one approximately saturated with an exquisite melancholy and a sense of heroic emotions adequately experienced; and the other, of freedom untrammelled by restrictions of any sort.

Overruling her faint-hearted protests, Matthias had left her the sum of six weeks' wages (or allowance) in advance, by way of provision against emergencies and delays. Joan had this magnificent sum of one hundred and fifty dollars intact in her pocket-book: more money than she had ever--at least, seriously--dreamed of possessing at one time. Temporarily it represented to her imagination, level-headed as she ordinarily was in consideration of money matters, wealth almost incalculable. It thrilled her tremendously to contemplate this tangible proof of her lover's unquestioning trust and generosity--and at the same time it irked her with gnawing doubts of her worthiness. For continually the knowledge skulked in the dark backwards of her consciousness that only lack of opportunity restrained her from active disloyalty to his prejudices.

Though she had disguised it from him, and even in some measure from herself, she knew that love had not quenched but had quickened her ambition for the stage. To be desired by one man only stimulated her longing to be desired inaccessibly--beyond the impregnable barrier of footlights--by all men.

She wondered how far her strength and constancy would serve her to resist, were opportunity to come her way during the absence of Matthias, when distance should have sapped the strength of his influence and loneliness had lent an accent to her need for occupation and companionship.

Furtively she closed her left hand, until she could feel the diamond in his ring, turned in toward the palm beneath her glove: as if it were a talisman....

Turning north on Broadway, she breasted the full current of the late afternoon promenade. Where the subway kiosks encroach upon the sidewalk, in front of what had been Shanley's restaurant, there was a distinct congestion of footfarers: Joan was obliged to move more slowly, crowded from behind, close on the heels of those in front, elbowed by pedestrians bound the opposite way.

Abruptly she caught sight of Wilbrow, approaching. Almost at the same instant he saw her. Momentarily his eyes clouded with an effort of memory; then he placed her, his lantern cheeks widened with an ironic grin, and he lifted his

hat with elaborate ceremony. Joan flushed slightly, smiled brightly in response, and tossed her head with a spirited suggestion of good-humoured tolerance. In another moment, wondering why she had done this, she realized that it had been due simply to a subconscious valuation of the man's interest, in the event she should ever again decide to try her luck on the stage....

Crossing at Forty-third Street, she turned again north on the sidewalk in front of a building given over almost entirely to the offices of theatrical businesses: a sidewalk darkened the year round with groups of actors sociably "resting."

One of these groups, as Joan drew near, broke up on the urgent suggestion of a special policeman detailed for the purpose; and a member of it, swinging with a laugh to "move on," stopped short to escape collision with the girl. Then he laughed again in the friendliest fashion, and offered his hand. She looked up into the face of Charlie Quard.

"Well!" he cried heartily, "I always was a lucky guy! I've been thinking about you all day--wondering what'd become of you."

Joan smiled and shook hands. "I guess it wasn't worrying you much," she retorted. "If you'd wanted to, you knew where to find me."

Quard needed no more encouragement. Promptly ranging alongside and falling into step: "That's just it," he argued; "I knew where to *start* looking for you, all right, but I was kinda afraid you might be in when I called, and didn't know whether you'd snap my head off or not."

"That's likely," the girl countered amiably. There was a distinctly agreeable sensation to be derived from this association with one upon whom she could impose her private estimate of herself. "What made you want to see me all of a sudden?"

"Then you ain't sore on me?"

"What for?" she evaded transparently.

"Oh, you know what for, all right. I'm sore enough on myself not to want to talk about it."

"Well," said Joan indifferently, "I guess it's none of my business if you're such a rummy you can't hold onto a job. Only, of course, I don't have to stand for that sort of foolishness more than once."

"You said something then, all right," Quard approved humbly. "I can't blame you for feeling that way about it. But le' me tell you an honest fact: I ain't touched a drop of anything stronger'n buttermilk since that night--so help me Klaw and Erlanger!"

"Why?"

"Well, I guess I must've took a tumble to myself. Anyhow, when I got over the katzenjammer thing, I thought it all out and made up my mind it was up to me to behave for the balance of my sentence."

"Is that so?" Joan asked, pausing definitely on the corner at Forty-fifth Street.

"I know I can," Quard asserted convincingly. "Believe me, Joan, I hate the stuff! I'd as lief stake myself to a slug of sulphuric. No, on the level: I'm booked for the water-tank route for the rest of my natural."

"I'm awful glad," observed the girl maliciously. "It's so nice for your mother. Well ... g'dafternoon!"

"Hold on!" Quard protested. "I'll walk down to the house with you."

"No, you won't," she returned promptly.

"Why not?"

"I don't want you to."

"Oh, you don't!" he murmured blankly, pulling down the corners of his wide, expressive mouth.

"So sorry," she parroted. "G'dafternoon."

She was several steps away before the man recovered from this rebuff. Then, with a face of set intent, he gave chase.

"I say--Miss Thursday!"

Joan accepted with a secret smile this sudden change from the off-hand manner of his first addresses. "Miss Thursday, eh?" she said to herself; but halted none the less.

"Well?"--with self-evident surprise.

"Look here--*lis'n!*" insisted Quard: "I got to have a talk with you."

"What about?"

"Oh, this is no good place. When can I see you?"

"Is it quite necessary, Mister Quard?"

He wagged an earnest head at her: "That's right. What are you doing tonight?"

"Oh, I got an engagement with some friends of mine," she said with spontaneous mendacity.

"Well, then, when?"

"Oh, I don't know; you might as well take your chances--call round sometime--in two or three days."

"And I got to be satisfied with that?"

"Why not?"

Quard shook his head helplessly: "I'd like to know what's come over you...."

"Why, what's the matter?" The temptation to lead him on was irresistible.

"You've changed a lot since I seen you last. What you been doing to yourself?"

She bridled.... "Maybe it's you that is changed. Maybe you're seeing things different, now you're sober."

Quard hesitated an instant, his features drawn with anger. Then abruptly: "*Plenty!*" he ejaculated, and as if afraid to trust himself further, turned and marched back to Broadway.

Smiling quietly, Joan made her way home. On the whole, the encounter had not been unenjoyable. She had not only held her own, she had condescended with striking success.

Later, she repented a little of her harshness; she had been hardly kind, if Quard were sincere in his protestations of reform; and a little tolerance might have earned her an evening less lonely.

It was spent, after a dinner which proved unexpectedly desolate, lacking the companionship to which of late she had grown accustomed, in the back-parlour (to which Matthias had left her the key) and in discontented efforts to fix her interest on a novel. Before ten o'clock she gave it up, and climbed to her room, to lie awake for hours in mute rebellion against her friendless estate. She might, it was true, have kept a promise made to her lover just before his departure, to look up and renew relations with her family. But the more she contemplated this step, the less it attracted her inclination. There'd be another row with the Old Man, most likely and ... anyway, there was plenty of time. Besides, they'd want money, if they found out she had any; and while a hundred and fifty was a lot, there was no telling when she'd get more.

Eventually she fell asleep while reviewing her meeting with Quard and turning over her hazy impression that it wouldn't hurt her to be less stand-offish with him, next time.

In the morning she settled herself at her typewriter in a fine spirit of determination to keep her mind occupied with the work in hand--and incidentally to rid her conscience of it--until the feeling of loneliness wore off or at least till its reality became a trifle less unpalatable through familiarity. But not two pages had been typed before the call of the sunlit September day proved seductive beyond her will to resist; a much-advertised "*Promenade des Toilettes*" at a department store claimed the rest of the morning; and after lunch she "took in" a moving-picture show.

But again her evening was forlorn. Theatres allured, but she hardly liked to go alone. In desperation she cast back mentally to the friends of the old days, and after rejecting her erstwhile confidant and co-labourer at the stocking counter, Gussie Innes (who lived too near home, and would tell her father, who would pass it along to the Old Man) Joan settled upon one or two girls, resident in distant Harlem, to be hunted up, treated to a musical comedy, and regaled with a narrative of the rise and adventures of Joan Thursday until their lives were poisoned with corrosive envy.

But the first mail of Wednesday furnished distractions so potent that this project was postponed indefinitely and passed out of Joan's mind, never to be revived. It brought her two letters: manufacturing an event of magnitude in the life of a young woman who had yet to write her first letter and who had thus far received only a few scrappy and

incoherent notes from boyish admirers.

There was one from Matthias, posted in Chicago the preceding morning. Her first love letter, it was scanned hurriedly, even impatiently, and put aside in favour of a fat manila envelope whose contents consisted of a type-written manuscript and a note in scrawling long-hand:

"FRIEND JOAN--

"I hope you are not still mad with me and sorry I got hot under the collar Monday only I thought you might of been a little easy on me because, I am strictly on the Water Wagon and this time mean it--

"What I wanted to talk to you about was a Sketch I got hold of a while ago you know you picked the other one only that was punk stuff compared with this I think--Please read this and tell me what you think about it if you like it, I think I will try it out soon, if it's any good it's a cinch to cop out Orpheum time for a Classy Act like this--

"Your true friend--

"CHAS. H. QUARD.

"P.S. of course I mean I want you to act the Womans part if you like the Sketch, what do you think!"

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"P.S. of course I mean I want you to act the Womans part if you like the Sketch, what do you think!"

It was afternoon before she realized the flight of time.

She turned back to Quard's note, a trifle disappointed that he hadn't suggested an hour when he would call for her answer.

Adjusting her hat before the mirror, preparatory to going out to lunch, she realized without a qualm that there was no longer any question of her intention as between Quard's offer and the wishes of Matthias. Whatever the consequences she meant to play that part--but on terms and conditions to be dictated by herself.

But in the act of drawing on her gloves, she checked, and for a long time stood fascinated by the beauty and lustre of the diamond on her left hand. A stone of no impressive proportions, but one of the purest and most excellent water, of an exceptional brilliance, it meant a great deal to one whose ingrained passion for such adornments had, prior to her love affair, perforce been satisfied with the cheap, trashy, and perishable stuff designated in those days by the term "French novelty jewellery." Subconsciously she was sensitive to a feeling of kinship with the beautiful, unimpressionable, enigmatic stone: as though their natures were somehow complementary. Actively she knew that she

would forfeit much rather than part with that perfect and entrancing jewel. With nothing else in nature, animate or inert, would it have been possible for her to spend long hours of silent, worshipful, sympathetic communion.

If she were to persist in the pursuit of her romantic ambition, it might bring about a pass of cleavage between herself and her lover; it was more than likely, indeed; she knew the prejudices of Matthias to be as strong as his love, and this last no stronger than his sense of honour. Tacitly if not explicitly, she had given him to understand that she would respect his objections to a stage career. He would not forgive unfaith--least of all, such clandestine and stealthy disloyalty as she then contemplated.

The breaking of their engagement would involve the return of the diamond.

Intolerable thought!

And yet....

Staring wide-eyed into her mirror, she saw herself irresolute at crossroads: on the one hand Matthias, marriage, the diamond, a secure and honourable future; on the other, Quard, "The Lie," disloyalty, the loss of the diamond, uncertainty--a vista of grim, appalling hazards....

And yet--she had four weeks, probably six, perhaps eight, in which to weigh the possibilities of this tremendous and seductive adventure. "The Lie" *might* fail....

In that case, Matthias need never know.

XXII

As she drew near to Longacre Square, Joan saw Quard detach himself from an area-railing against which he had been lounging across the street, and move over to intercept her. Since she had anticipated that he might waylay her in some such manner, if he didn't call at the house, she was not surprised by this manoeuvre; but she was a little surprised and not a little amused (if quite privately) to see him throw away his cigar as they drew together, and lift his hat. Such attentions from him were distinctly novel--and gratifying.

Complacent, and at the same time excited beneath a placid demeanour, she greeted him with a cool little nod.

He grinned broadly but nervously.

"I was wondering if you wouldn't happen along soon...."

"Is that so?" Joan returned blandly.

"Mind my walking with you?"

"No-o," the girl drawled.

"Of course, if I'm in the way--"

"Oh, no--I'm just looking for some place to lunch."

"Well, I'm hungry myself. Why not let me set up the eats?"

"All right," she assented indifferently.

"Fine! Where'll we go?"

"Oh, I don't know...."

"Anywheres you say."

"Well, Rector's is right handy."

"That suits me," Quard affirmed promptly.

But Joan's sidelong glance discovered a look of some discomfiture.

"I guess you got my letter, all right?" he pursued as they crossed to the sidewalk of the New York Theatre Building.

"Oh, yes," Joan replied evenly, after a brief pause.

"Wha'd you think of the piece?"

"Oh ... the sketch! Why, it seems very interesting. Of course," Joan added in a tone of depreciation, "I didn't have much time--just glanced through it, you know--"

"I felt pretty sure you'd like it!"

"Oh, yes; I thought it *quite* interesting," said the girl patronizingly.

She seemed unconscious of his quick, questioning glance, and Quard withdrew temporarily into suspicious, baffled silence.

In the pause they crossed Forty-fourth Street and entered the restaurant.

It was rather crowded at that hour, but by good chance they found a table for two by one of the windows; where a heavily-mannered captain of waiters, probably thinking he recognized her, held a chair for Joan and bowed her into it with an emprossement that secretly delighted the girl and lent the last effect to Quard's discomfiture.

"Please," she said gravely as the actor, with the captain suave but vigilant at his elbow, knitted expressive eyebrows over the menu--"please order something very simple. I hardly *ever* have much appetite so soon after breakfast."

"I--ah--how about a cocktail?" Quard ventured, relief manifest in his smoothened brow.

"I thought you--"

"Oh, for you, I mean. Mine's ice'-tea."

"I think," said Joan easily, "I would like a Bronx."

And then, while Quard was distracted by the importance of his order, she removed her gloves and, with her hands in her lap hidden beneath the table, slipped off the ring and put it away in her wrist-bag: looking about the room the while with a boldness which she could by no means have mustered a month earlier, in such surroundings.

Distrustful of her cocktail, when served, for all her impudence in naming it, she merely sipped a little and let it stand.

The mystery of the change in her worked a trace of exasperation into Quard's humour. He eyed her narrowly, with misgivings.

"I guess you ain't lost much sleep since we blew up," he hazarded abruptly.

"Whatever do you mean?" drawled Joan.

"You look and act's if you'd come into money since I saw you last."

"Perhaps I have," she said with provoking reserve.

"Meaning--mind my own business," he inferred morosely.

"Well, now, what do you think?"

"I--well, I'd be sorry to think what some folks might," he blundered.

Joan's eyes flashed ominously. "Suppose you quit worrying about me; I guess I can take care of myself."

"I guess you can," he admitted heavily. "Excuse *me*."

"That's all right--and so'm I." Joan relented a little; lied: "I have come into some money--not much." Her gaze was as clear and straightforward as though her mouth had been the only authentic well-spring of veracity. "Let it go at that."

"That's right, too." His face cleared, lightened. "Le's get down to brass tacks: how about that sketch?"

"Didn't I say it seemed very interesting?"

He nodded with impatience. "But you ain't said how my proposition strikes you. That's what I want to know."

"You haven't made me any proposition."

"Go on! Didn't you read my note?"

"Sure I did; but you only said you wanted me for the woman's part."

"Ain't that enough?"

She shook her head with a pitying smile. "You got to talk regular business to me. I ain't as easy as I was once; I know the game better, and I don't need a job so bad. How much will you pay?"

He hesitated; named reluctantly a figure higher than that which he had had in mind: "Thirty-five dollars...."

"Nothing doing," said Joan promptly.

"But look here: you're only a beginner--"

"It's lovely weather we're having, for September, isn't it?"

"I'd offer you more if I could afford it, but--"

"Have you heard anything from Maizie since she left town?"

"Damn Maizie! How much do you want, anyhow?"

"Fifty--and transportation on the road."

He checked; whistled guardedly and incredulously; changed his manner, bending confidentially across the table: "Listen, girlie, yunno I'd do anything in the world for you--"

"Fifty and transportation!"

"But I had to pay the guy what wrote this piece fifty for a month's option. If I take it up I gotta slip him a hundred more and twenty-five a week royalty as long's we play it: and there's three others in the cast, outside you and me. *David*'ll want fifty at least, and the *Thief* thirty-five and the servant twenty-five: there's a hundred and thirty-five already, including royalty. Add fifteen for tips and all that: a hundred and fifty; fifty to you, two-hundred. The best I can hope to drag down is three, and Boskerk'll want ten per cent commission for booking us, leaving only seventy for *my* bit--and I'm risking all I got salted away to try it out."

He paused with an air of appeal to which Joan was utterly cold.

"It's a woman's piece," she said tersely; "if you get a sure-'nough actress to play it, she'll want a hundred at least, if she's any good at all. You're saving fifty if you get me at my price."

This was so indisputably true that Quard was staggered and temporarily silenced.

"And," Joan drove her argument shrewdly home with unblushing mendacity--"Tom Wilbrow says it's only a question of time before I can get any figure I want to ask, in reason."

Quard's eyes started. "Tom Wilbrow!" he gasped.

"He rehearsed me in 'The Jade God' before Rideout went broke. I guess you heard about that."

The actor nodded moodily. "But I didn't know you was in the cast.... Look here: make it--"

"Fifty or nothing."

After another moment of hesitation, Quard gave in with a surly "All right."

At once, to hide his resentment, he attacked with more force than elegance the food before him.

Joan permitted herself a furtive and superior smile. The success of her tactics proved wonderfully exhilarating, even more so than the prospect of receiving fifty dollars a week; she would have accepted fifteen rather than lose the opportunity. She had demonstrated clearly and to her own complete satisfaction her ability to manage men, to bend them to her will....

There was ironic fatality in the accident which checked this tide of gratulate reflection.

From some point in the restaurant behind Joan's back, three men who had finished their lunch rose and filed toward the Broadway entrance. Passing the girl, one of these looked back curiously, paused, turned, and retraced his steps as far as her table. His voice of spirited suavity startled her from a waking dream of power tempered by policy, ambitions achieved through adulation of men....

"Why, Miss Thursday, how *do* you do?"

Flashing to his face eyes of astonishment, Joan half started from her chair, automatically thrust out a hand of welcome, gasped: "Mr. Marbridge!"

Quard looked up with a scowl. Marbridge ignored him, having in a glance measured the man and relegated him to a negligible status. He had Joan's hand and the knowledge, easily to be inferred from her alarm and hesitation, that she remembered and understood the scene of last Sunday, and was at once flattered and frightened by that memory. His handsome eyes ogled her effectively.

"Please don't rise. I just caught sight of you and couldn't resist stopping to speak. How are you?"

"I"--Joan stammered--"I'm very well, thanks."

"As if one look at you wouldn't have told me you were as healthy as happy--more charming than both! You are--eh--not lonesome?"

His intimate smile, the meaning flicker of his eyes toward Quard, exposed the innuendo.

"Oh, no, I--"

"Venetia was saying only yesterday we ought to look you up. She wants to call on you. Where do you put up in town?"

Almost unwillingly the girl gave her address--knowing in her heart that the truth was not in this man.

"And, I presume, you're ordinarily at home round four in the afternoon?" She nodded instinctively. "I'll not forget to tell Venetia. Two-eighty-nine west Forty-fifth, eh? Right-O! I must trot along. So glad to have run across you. Good afternoon...."

Regaining control of her flustered thoughts, Joan found Quard eyeing her with odd intentness.

"Friend of yours?" he demanded with a sneer and a backward jerk of his head.

"Yes--the husband of a friend of mine," she replied quickly.

The actor digested this information grimly. "Swell friends you've got, all right!" he commented, not without a touch of envy. "Now I begin to understand.... What's Marbridge going to do for you?"

"Do for me? Mr. Marbridge? Why, nothing," she answered blankly, in a breath. "I don't know what you mean."

"That's all right then. But take a friendly tip, and give him the office the minute he begins to talk about influencing managers to star you. I've heard about that guy, and he's a rotten proposition--grab it from me. He's Arlington's silent partner--and you know what kind of a rep. Arlington's got."

"No, I don't," Joan challenged him sharply. "What's more, I don't care. Anyway, I don't see what Arlington's reputation's got to do with my being a friend of Marbridge's wife."

"No more do I," grumbled Quard--"not if Marbridge believes you are."

XXIII

Before leaving the restaurant Quard outlined in detail his plans for producing "The Lie" for vaudeville presentation. He named the other two actors, spoke of hiring a negro dresser who would double as the servant, and indicated his intention of engaging a producing director of the first calibre who, he said, thought highly of the play.

Joan was a little overcome. Peter Gloucester was a producer quite worthy to be named in the same breath with Wilbrow.

"Well, he believes in the piece," Quard explained--"the same as me--and he says he'll give us ten afternoon rehearsals for a hundred and fifty. It'll be worth it."

"You must think so," said Joan, a little awed.

"You bet I do. This means a lot to me, anyway; I gotta do something to keep my head above out-of-town stock--or the movies again." Mentioning his recent experience, he shuddered realistically. "But if this piece ain't actor-proof, I'm no

judge. Gloucester says so, too. And to have him tune it up into a reg'lar classy act will be worth ... something, I tell you!"

His hesitation was due to the fact that Quard was secretly counting on the representations of his agent, Boskerk, who insisted that, properly presented, the sketch would earn at least four hundred and fifty dollars a week, instead of the sum he had named to Joan.

But Joan overlooked this lamely retrieved slip; she was all preoccupied with a glowing sense of gratification growing out of this endorsement of her first surmise, that Quard had only waited on her consent to go ahead. The thought was unctuous flattery to her conceit, inflating it tremendously even in the face of a shrewd suspicion that it was sentiment more than an exaggerated conception of her ability that made Quard reckon her cooperation indispensable. That the man was infatuated with her she was quite convinced; on the other hand, she didn't believe him sufficiently blinded by passion to imperil the success of his venture by giving her the chief part unless he believed she could play it--"actor-proof" or no.

"Lis'n, girly," Quard pursued after one meditative moment: "could you begin rehearsing tomorrow?"

"Of course I could."

"Because if we don't, we lose three days...."

"How?"

"Well," Quard explained with a sheepish grin, "I guess I ain't any more nutty than the next actor you'll meet on Broadway; but I'd as lief slip my bank-roll to the waiter for a tip as start anything on a Friday. And Sat'day and Sunday's busy days for the Jinx, too. I got too much up to wish anything mean onto this piece!..."

At his suggestion they left the dining-room by the hotel entrance on Forty-fourth Street, and Joan waited in the lobby while Quard telephoned Gloucester.

"It's all right," he announced, beaming as he emerged from the booth--"Pete's ready to commence tomorrow aft'noon. Now I got to hustle and round up the rest of the bunch."

"Where will it be?" asked Joan.

"Don't know yet--I'll 'phone you where in the morning, at the latest...."

Hastening home, Joan plunged at once into the study of her part, with the greater readiness since the occupation was anodynous to an uneasy conscience. Though she was always what is known as a "quick study," this new role was a difficult one; by far the longest, and unquestionably the most important, it comprised fully half the total number of "sides" in the manuscript--nearly half as many again as were contained in Quard's part, the next in order of significance. And her application, that first day, was hindered by a perplexing interruption in the early evening, when a box was delivered to her containing a dozen magnificent red roses and nothing else--neither a card nor a line of identification. At first inclining to credit Quard with this extravagance, on second thought she remembered Marbridge, whom she felt instinctively to be quite capable of such overtures. And her mind was largely distracted for the rest of the night by empty guesswork and futile attempts to decide whether or not she ought to run the risk of thanking Quard when next they met.

Eventually she made up her mind to let the sender furnish the clue; and inasmuch as Quard never said anything which the most ready imagination could interpret as a reference to the offering, she came in time to feel tolerably satisfied that the anonymous donor must have been Marbridge.

It was to be long, however, before this surmise could be confirmed; although, on getting home Saturday night, after a hard day's work and a late dinner with Quard, she was informed that a gentleman had called and asked for her during the afternoon, but had left neither word nor card. The same thing happened on Monday, under like circumstances; after which the attempts to see her were discontinued.

And then, Joan noticed that Vénetia didn't call....

Interim, the task of whipping "The Lie" into shape went on so steadily that she had little leisure to waste wondering about Marbridge or feeling flattered by his interest; and she even ceased, except at odd moments, to regard Quard as a man and therefore a possible conquest: Gloucester drilled the actors without mercy and spared himself as little.

A pursy body, with the childish, moon-like face of a born comedian, he applied himself to the work with the extravagant solemnity of a minor poet mouthing his own perfumed verses at a literary dinner. During rehearsals his manner was

immitigably austere, aloof, inspired; but however precious his methods, he achieved brilliant effects in the despised medium of clap-trap melodrama; and under his tutelage even Joan achieved surprising feats of emotional portrayal--and this, singularly enough, without learning to despise him as she had despised Wilbrow.

She learned what either Wilbrow had lacked the time to teach her or she had then been unable to learn: how to assume the requisite mood the moment she left the wings and drop it like a mask as soon as she came off-stage again. She was soon able to hate and fear Quard with every fibre of her being throughout their long scenes of dialogue, and to chat with him in unfeigned amiability both before and after. And her liking and admiration for the man deepened daily, as Gloucester deftly moulded Quard's plastic talents into a rude but powerful impersonation.

Partly because of the brevity of the little play, which enabled them to run through it several times of an afternoon as soon as they were familiar with its lines, and partly because Gloucester was hard up and in a hurry to collect his fee, the company was prepared well within the designated ten days. And through the agent Boskerk's influence, they were favoured with an early opportunity to present it at a "professional try-out" matinee, a weekly feature of one of the better-class moving-picture and vaudeville houses.

The audiences attracted by such trial performances are the most singular imaginable in composition, and of a temper the most difficult--with the possible exceptions of a London first-night house bent on booing whatever the merits of the offering, and a body of jaded New York dramatic critics and apathetic theatre loungers assembled for the fourth consecutive first-night of a week toward the end of a long, hard winter.

On Tuesday afternoons and nights (as a rule) they foregather in the "combination houses" of New York, animated (save for a sprinkling of agents and bored managers) by a single motive, the desire to laugh--preferably at, but at a pinch with, those attempting to win their approbation. Their sense of humour has been nourished on the sidewalk banana-peel, the slap-stick and the patch on the southern exposure of the tramp's trousers; and while they will accept with the silence of curiosity, if not of respect, and at times even applaud, straight "legitimate" acting, the slightest slip or evidence of hesitation on the part of an actor, the faintest suggestion of bathos in a line, or even the tardy adjustment of one of the wings after the rise of the curtain, will be hailed with shrieks of delight and derision.

Before an assemblage of this character, "The Distinguished Romantic Actor, Chas. H. Quard & Company," presented "The Lie" as the fifth number of a matinee bill.

Waiting in the wings and watching the stage-hands shift and manoeuvre flats and ceiling, and arrange furniture and properties at the direction of the *David* (who doubled that role with the duties of stage manager) Joan listened to the dreadful wails of a voiceless vocalist who, on the other side of the scene-drop, was rendering with sublime disregard for key and tempo a ballad of sickening sentimentality; heard the feet of the audience, stamping in time, drown out both song and accompaniment, the subsequent roar of laughter and hand-clapping that signalized the retirement of the singer, and experienced, for the first and only time, premonitory symptoms of stage-fright.

Through what seemed a wait of several minutes after the disappearance of the despised singer--who, half-reeling, half-running, with tears furrowing her enameled cheeks, brushed past Joan on her way to her dressing-room--the applause continued, rising, falling, dying out and reviving in vain attempts to lure the object of its ridicule back to the footlights.

At a word from *David*, the stage-hands vanished, and at his nod Joan moved on. *David* seated himself and opened a newspaper while the girl, trembling, took up a position near a property fireplace, with an after-dinner coffee-cup and saucer in her hands. She was looking her best in the evening frock purchased for the week-end at Tanglewood, and was in full command of her lines and business; but there was a lump in her throat and a sickly sensation in the pit of her stomach as the cheap orchestra took up the refrain of a time-worn melody which had been pressed into service as curtain music.

Peering over the edge of his newspaper, *David* spoke final words of kindly counsel: "Don't you mind, whatever happens. Make believe they ain't no audience."

The house was quiet, now, and the music very clear.

Kneeling within the recess of the fireplace, almost near enough to touch her hand, Quard begged plaintively: "For the love of Gawd, don't let their kidding queer you, girlie. Remember, Boskerk promised he'd have Martin Beck out front!"

Joan nodded--gulped.

The curtain rose. Through the glare of footlights the auditorium was vaguely revealed, a vast and gloomy amphitheatre dotted with an infinite, orderly multitude of round pink spots, and still with the hush of expectancy. Joan thought of a dotted lavender foulard she had recently coveted in a department-store; and the ridiculous incongruity of this comparison in some measure restored her assurance. Turning her head slowly, she looked at *David*, who was properly

intent on his newspaper, smiled, and parted her lips to speak the opening line.

From the gallery floated a shrill, boyish squeal:

"*Gee! pipe the pippin!*"

The audience rocked and roared. Joan's heart sank; then, suddenly, resentment kindled her temper; she grew coldly, furiously angry, and forgot entirely to be afraid of that stupid, bawling beast, the public. But her faint, charming smile never varied a fraction. Turning, she spoke the first line, heedless of the uproar; and as if magically it was stilled. A feeling of contempt and superiority further encouraged her. She repeated the words, which were of no special value to the plot--merely a trick of construction to postpone the ringing of a telephone-bell long enough to let the audience grasp the relationship of those upon the stage.

In a respectful silence, *David* looked up from the newspaper and replied. The telephone-bell rang. Turning to the instrument on the table beside him, he lifted the receiver to his ear and--the plot began to unfold.

David, the husband, in his suburban home, was being called to New York on unexpected business with a client booked to sail for Europe in the morning. It was night; reluctant to go, he none the less yielded to pressure, rang for the coachman and ordered a carriage, in the face of the protests of Joan, his wife. She was to be left alone in the house with their little son; for the maids were out and the coachman slept beyond call in the stable. Reassuring her with his promise to return at the earliest possible moment, *David* departed....

A brief and affectionate passage between the two was rendered inaudible by derisive laughter; but this was almost instantly silenced when Quard showed himself at a window in the back of the set, peering furtively in at the lonely woman in the unguarded house.

An excellent actor when properly guided, and fresh from the hands of one of the most astute producers connected with the American stage, without uttering a word Quard contrived to infuse into this first brief appearance at the window a sense of criminal and sinister mystery which instantly enchained the imagination of the audience.

In the tense silence of the house, the nervous gasp of a high-strung woman was distinctly audible. But it passed without eliciting a single hoot.

Darting round to the door, Quard entered and addressed Joan. She cried out strongly in mingled terror and horror. A few crisp and rapid lines uncovered the argument: Quard was the woman's first husband, who had married and deserted her all in a week and whom she had been given every reason to believe dead. Ashamed of that mad union with a dissolute blackguard, she had concealed it from the husband of her second marriage. Now she was confronted with the knowledge that her innocently bigamous position would be made public unless she submitted to blackmail. Promising in her torment to give the man all he demanded, she induced him to leave before the return of the servant.... Alone she realized suddenly the illegitimacy of the child of her second marriage.

At this, a scene-curtain fell, and a notice was flashed upon it informing the audience that the short moment it remained down indicated a lapse of five hours in the action.

Already the interest of the audience had become so fixed that it applauded with sincerity.

Hurrying to her dressing-room, Joan stepped out of her pretty frock and into a negligee. The removal of a few pins permitted her hair to fall down her back, a long, thick, plaited rope of bronze. Then grasping a revolver loaded with blanks, she ran back to the second left entrance.

The scene-curtain was already up; on the stage, in semi-darkness, the *Thief*, having broken into the house by way of the back window, was attempting to force the combination of a small safe behind a screen.... Quard, kneeling to peer through the fireplace, lifted a signalling hand to Joan. *David* stamped loudly, off-stage. In alarm, the *Thief* hid himself behind the screen; and Joan came on, with a line of soliloquy to indicate that she had been awakened by the noise of the burglar's entrance. As she turned up the lights by means of a wall-switch, Quard re-entered by way of the window, in a well-simulated state of semi-drunkenness which had ostensibly roused his distrust and brought him back to watch and threaten his wife anew....

Here happened one of those terrible blunders which seem almost inseparable from first performances.

As Joan wheeled round to recognize Quard, her hand nervously contracted on the revolver, and it exploded point-blank at Quard's chest. Had it been loaded he must inevitably have been killed then and there; and when, pulling himself together, Quard managed to go on with the business--springing upon Joan and wresting the weapon from her--the audience betrayed exquisite appreciation of the impossibility, and shrieked and whooped with joy unrestrained.

It was some minutes before they were able audibly to take up the dialogue. And this was fortunate, in a way; for the shock of that unexpected explosion had caused Quard to "dry up"--as the slang of the stage terms nervous dryness of the throat whether or not accompanied by forgetfulness. He required that pandemoniac pause in which to recover; and even when able to make himself heard, he repeated hoarsely and with extreme difficulty the line called to him by *David*--who was holding the prompt-book, in the fireplace.

But the instinct of one bred to the stage from childhood saved him. And with comparative quiet restored, he braced up and played out the scene with admirable verve and technique. Joan was well aware that, stronger though her role might be, the man was giving a performance that overshadowed it heavily.

He was drunk and he was brutal: *David* had telephoned that he was at the railroad station and would be home in a few minutes; Quard, not content with promises, insisted on money, of which the woman had none to give him, or her jewels, which were locked away in the safe. When she refused to disclose the combination or to open the safe, Quard in besotted rage attempted to force her to open it. Struggling, they overturned the screen, exposing the *Thief*. Through a breathless and silent instant the two men faced one another, Quard bewildered, the *Thief* seeing his way of escape barred. Then simultaneously they fired--Quard using the woman's revolver. One shot only took effect--the *Thief's*--and that fatally. Quard fell. Joan seized the arm of the *Thief* and urged him from the house; as he vanished through the window, she picked up the revolver which Quard had dropped, and turned to the door. Frantic with alarm, *David* entered. Joan reeled into his arms, screaming: "I have killed a burglar!"

On this tableau the curtain fell--and rose and fell again and again at the direction of the house-manager deferring to an enthusiastic audience. Crude and raw as was this composition, the surprise of its last line and the strength with which it was acted, had won the unstinted approval of a public ever hungry for melodrama.

Quard, revived, bowing and smiling with suave and deprecatory grace, Joan in tears of excitement and delight, and the subordinate members of the company in varying stages of gratification over the prospect of prompt booking and a long engagement, were obliged to hold the stage through nine curtain-calls....

On her way back to her dressing-room Joan was halted by a touch on her shoulder. She paused, to recognize Gloucester, of whose presence in the house she had been ignorant.

"Very well done, my dear," he said loftily; "very well done. You've got the makings of an actress in you, if you don't lose your head. Now run along and dry your eyes, like a good girl, and don't bother me with your silly gratitude."

With this he brusquely turned his back to her.

But Quard, overtaking her in the gangway, without hesitation or apology folded her in his arms and kissed her on the lips. And Joan submitted without remonstrance, thrill and elate.

"Girlie!" he cried exultantly--"you're a wonder!"

"I *knew* you could do it!... But, O my Gawd! you nearly finished me when you let that gun off right in my face!..."

Somehow she found her way home alone, and shut herself up in the hall-bedroom to calm down and try to review the triumph sensibly.

Unquestionably she had done well.

Quard had done much better--but no wonder! She wasn't jealous: she was glad for his sake as well as for her own.

Of course, this meant a great change. There was to come the day of reckoning with Matthias.... She had four letters of his, not one of which she had answered.... If "The Lie" got booking, and she went on the road with it--as she knew in her soul she would: nothing now could keep her off the stage--she would almost certainly lose Matthias.

Quard, however, would remain to her; and of Quard she was very sure. That he loved her with genuine and generous devotion was now the one clear and indisputable fact in her unstable existence. If only he would refrain from drinking....

He was to telephone as soon as he received any encouraging news; and he had expected definite word from Boskerk before the afternoon was over. In anticipation of being called down-stairs at any minute, Joan remained in her street dress, aching for her bed though she was with reaction and simple fatigue. But it was nearly eight o'clock before she was summoned.

"That you, girlie?" the answer came to her breathless "Hello?"

"Yes--yes, Charlie. What is it?"

"I've seen Boskerk--in fact, I'm eating with him now. It's all settled. We're to open next Monday somewhere in New England--Springfield, probably; and we get forty weeks solid on top of that."

"I'm so glad!"

"Sure you are. We're all glad, I guess."

"And--Charlie--" she stammered.

"Hello?"

"Are you--are you all right?"

"Sure I'm all right. Good night, girlie. Take care of yourself. See you tomorrow."

"Good night," said Joan.

Hooking up the receiver, she leaned momentarily against the wall, feeling a little faint and ill.

Was it simply overtaxed imagination that had made her believe she detected a slight constraint in Quard's voice--a hesitation assumed to mask blurred enunciation?

XXIV

But when Joan met Quard in the morning her anxious eyes detected in his assured bearing none of the nervous unrest, in his clear eyes and the even tone of his coarse, pasty-pale skin none of the feverish stains, that are symptomatic of alcoholic excesses.

Surprised and grateful, she treated the man with a tenderness and sweetness she had otherwise been too wary to betray....

By Thursday it was settled that they were to open on Monday at Poli's Theatre in Springfield, for an engagement of a week. If the audiences there endorsed the verdict of the first, Boskerk promised Quard a full season's booking.

From the Springfield house he was to receive three hundred and fifty dollars. He permitted Joan to understand, however, that his fee would be no more than the sum he had first mentioned--three hundred dollars.

It was decided to leave New York by a Sunday train which would put them down in Springfield in the middle of the afternoon, enabling the company to find suitable lodgings before meeting to run through their lines in the evening. They would have an opportunity for a sketchy, scrambly rehearsal on the stage Monday morning, but dared not depend on that; for the greater part of their allotted period would necessarily be consumed in the selection of a practicable "set" from the stock of the theatre, in making arrangements for suitable furniture properties, and in drilling the house electrician in the uncommonly heavy schedule of light cues--any one of which, if bungled, was calculated seriously to impair the illusion of the sketch.

Joan thoughtfully stipulated for twenty-five dollars advance, against expenses. Quard protested, alleging financial straits due to his already heavy outlay, but the girl was firm. True, she still had (unknown to him) one hundred and twenty-five dollars; but not until near the end of their week at Springfield would they know whether or not they were to get further booking.

In the end the actor ungraciously surrendered.

She made her preparations for leaving her hall-bedroom with a craft and stealth worthy of a burglar preparing to break prison.

If her break with Matthias was to become absolute, she was determined not to leave any clue whereby she might be traced.

An enquiry as to the best place to take a dress to be dry-cleaned furnished sufficient excuse for lugging away one well-filled suit-case, which Joan left at a cheap theatrical hotel a few blocks farther uptown and east of Broadway, where she simultaneously engaged a room for Saturday night. And on Saturday afternoon she carried away a second suit-case containing the remainder of her wardrobe, informing Madame Duprat that she was going to visit her folks for a day or two.

But first she had to undergo a bad quarter-hour in the back-parlour.

The sense of her treachery would not lift from her mood. Perhaps she felt its oppression the more heavily because of her uncertainty: she couldn't yet be sure she wasn't committing herself to a step of irrevocable error; she was only sure that she was doing what she wanted to do with all her heart, whatever evil might come of it. And there would be more ease in companionship with Quard; with him she could have her own way in everything, could always be her natural self and still retain his respect--and her own. On the other hand, she could not look up to him, and was by no means as fond of him as of Matthias. Her fiancée was without reproach: he loved her; but his respect she could never own. Dimly she recognized this fact; though he thought he respected her, and did truly honour her as his promised wife, he was his own dupe, passion-blinded. Actually, they were people of different races, their emotional natures differently organized, their mental processes working from widely divergent views of life.

Even in this instance, Joan's perception of the gulf between them was more emotional than thoughtful...

She moved slowly about the room, resentfully distressed, touching with reluctant fingers objects indelibly associated in her memory with the man of her first love.

Sitting at his desk, she enclosed in a large envelope his letters. Two had arrived since Thursday; but these she had not opened. She hardly understood why she desired not to open them; she still took a real and deep interest in his fortunes; but she was desperately loath to read the mute reproach legible, if to her eyes alone, between his lines.

She meant to leave him a note of her own, tenderly contrite and at the same time firmly final; but in spite of a mood saturate with an appropriately gentle and generous melancholy, she could not, apparently, fix it down with ink on paper. Eventually she gave it up: destroyed what she had attempted, and sealed the packet, leaving Matthias no written word of hers save his name on the face of the envelope.

There remained the most difficult duty of all.

With painful reluctance, Joan removed the ring from her finger (where it had been ever since she had last parted with Quard) and replacing it in its leather-covered case, sat for a long time looking her farewell upon that brilliant and more than intrinsically precious jewel.

At length, closing the case, she placed it on top of the envelope, rose and moved to the door. There she hesitated, looking back in pain and longing.

There was no telling what might happen to it before Matthias returned. A prying chambermaid...

And then it was quite possible that "The Lie" would not last out the week in Springfield.

Quard had more than once pointed out: "There's nothing sure in this game but the fact that you're bound to close sooner 'n you looked for."

"Maybe I'll be back inside a week," Joan doubted.

There was always that chance; and she had already left one door open against her return.

"Anyway, it isn't safe, there. And I can mail it to him, registered, when I'm sure he's home."

Turning back, she snatched up the leather case and darted guiltily from the study and out of the house.

XXV

The stage-wise have long since learned to discount a "slump" in the next performance to follow a brilliantly successful premiere: the phenomenon is as inevitable as poor food on a route of one-night stands.

At Springfield, on Monday afternoon, "The Lie" was presented in a manner of unpardonable crudity. Quard forgot his lines and extemporized and "gagged" desperately to cover the consequent breaks in the dialogue; leaving poor Joan hopelessly at sea, floundering for cues that were never uttered.

At the last moment it was discovered that nothing had been provided to simulate, at the beginning of the second scene, the sound of a clock striking twelve, off-stage. The property man could offer nothing better than an iron crowbar and a hammer; the twelve strokes, consequently, resembled nothing in the world other than a wholly untemperamental crowbar banged by a dispassionate hammer. Fortunately, the effect was so thin and dead that it convulsed only the

first few rows of the orchestra.

The light cues went wrong when they were not altogether ignored; and once, when Joan having indicated in a brief soliloquy her depression on being left alone in the gloomy house, gave the cue "*I must have more light,*" at the same time touching a property switch on the wall, every light in the house other than the red "exit" lamps was "blacked out." And at all other times the required changes either anticipated or dragged far behind their cues.

The *Thief* forgot to load his revolver, with the result that Quard fired the only shot in their duel--and then fell dead. This so rattled *David* that he anticipated his first entrance and rushed on the stage only to back off precipitately while Joan was urging the *Thief* to go and leave her to shoulder his crime.

The only misadventure that failed to attend upon the performance was a traditional one of the stage: the theatre cat by some accident did *not* walk upon the scene at a climax and seat itself before the footlights to wash its face.

Nevertheless the sketch "got over" at the matinee, receiving three curtain calls; and at night--when the little company, conscious of its crimes, pulled itself together and acted with an intensity of effort only equalled by that of its first performance in New York--the house gave the piece a rousing reception.

Thereafter they played it well and consistently, with increasing assurance as days passed and use bred the habit in them all.

On Thursday Quard heard from Boskerk, and announced that the company would return to New York the following Monday to play a six weeks' engagement in the Percy Williams houses, beginning with a fortnight in Manhattan and winding up in Greenpoint, Long Island. He added that Boskerk was busy arranging a subsequent tour which would take them to the Pacific Coast and back. He did not add that the agent had successfully demanded as much as four hundred and fifty dollars a week for the offering from many of the more prosperous houses on their list; from which figure the price ranged down to as little as three hundred in some of the smaller inland towns. But even at this minimum, Quard had so scaled his salary list, contrary to his representations to Joan, that his gross weekly profit (excluding personal living expenses) would seldom be less than one hundred dollars a week.

Back in New York, Joan established herself temporarily at a small and very poor hotel on the west side of Harlem. Since their engagement took her no farther south than Sixty-third Street and Broadway during its first week, and the second week was played at One-hundred-and-twenty-sixth Street and Seventh Avenue, she felt tolerably insured against meeting either Matthias or any member of her own family.

She really meant to go home some time and see how her mother and Edna were doing, but from day to day put it off, if with no better excuse on the ground that she was too tired and too busy.

As a matter of fact she was in the habit of waking up at about ten, but never rose until noon; spent the hours between three and four and nine and ten in the theatre; and was ordinarily abed by half-past twelve or one o'clock. Up to the matinee hour, and between that and the night, she managed without great difficulty to kill time, spending a deal of it, and a fair proportion of her earnings, in the uptown department stores. She dined with Quard quite frequently, and almost invariably after the last performance they supped together, often in company with friends of his--for the most part vaudeville people whom he had previously known or with whom he struck up fervent, facile friendships of a week's duration.

They were a quaint, scandalous crew, feather-brained, irresponsible and, most of them, destitute of any sort of originality; but their spirits were high as long as they had a pay-day ahead, their tongues were quick with the patter of the circuits, and their humour was of an order new and vastly diverting to Joan. She had with them what she called a good time, and soon learned to look leniently upon the irregular lives of some who entertained her. Once or twice she was invited to "parties", sociable gatherings in flats rented furnished, at which she learned to regard the consumption of large quantities of bottled beer as a polite and even humorous accomplishment, and to permit a degree of freedom in song and joke and innuendo that would have seemed impossible in another environment.

Probably she would have felt less tolerant of these matters had Quard betrayed the least tendency to "fall off the wagon." But in her company, at least, he refrained sedulously from drink; and since his was one of those constitutions whose normal vitality is so high and constant that alcohol benumbs rather than stimulates its functions, he shone the more by contrast with their occasionally befuddled companions.

Joan admired him intensely for the steadfastness of his stand, and still more when she saw how established was the habit of regular if not always heavy drinking in the world of their peers. No one but herself pretended for a moment to regard the reformation of Quard as anything but a fugitive whim; and now and again she was made aware that his abstinence was resented. She once heard him contemptuously advised to "chuck the halo and kick in and get human

again." At another time he explained a false excuse given in her presence for refusing an invitation: "It's no use trying to travel with that gang unless you're boozing. They got no use for me unless I'm willing to get an edge on. What's the use?"

There was a surliness, a resentment underlying his tone. Intuitively Joan bristled.

"No use," she said sharply. "You know what you're up against better than they do. You've got to stick to the soft stuff if you want to keep going."

"Oh, I know," he grumbled. "But it ain't as easy as you'd think."

"All right," she retorted calmly; "but I give you fair warning, I'll quit you the very first time you come around with so much as a whiff of the stuff on you."

"You don't have to worry," he responded. "I'm on all right.... But," he added abruptly, "you needn't run away with any notion this piece would head for the storehouse if you *was* to quit it. The woods are full of girls who'd jump at your chance."

Joan answered only with an enigmatic smile. It is doubtful if Quard himself realized, just then, as keenly as the girl did, the depth and strength of his infatuation.

But Joan did not doubt her power. Neither did she overestimate it.

It was toward the end of their "time" in New York that she learned of the failure of "The Jade God," the information coming to her through the medium of one of those coincidences which would be singular anywhere but on the stage. An actress in a farcical sketch, which followed the intermission preceded by "The Lie," was assigned to use Joan's dressing-room when the latter was through with it. Naturally, the two struck up a chatting acquaintance. Joan one time replied to a question with the information that "The Lie" was booked for the Pacific Coast, and (Matthias in mind) confessed to some curiosity regarding Los Angeles. The other actress admitted ignorance of the West, but had only that morning received a letter from a sister who was playing with the Algerson stock company in Los Angeles. The letter contained a clipping describing the immediate and disastrous collapse of "The Jade God," which had been withdrawn after its third repetition. Reading the review, Joan was puzzled to recognize some of its references; she was fairly familiar with the play, but here and there she encountered strictures which seemed to involve scenes she couldn't remember. But of the fact of the failure there could be no doubt.

She was genuinely sorry. Her first impulse was to seek Matthias, if he were in town, and tell him of her sympathy; her second (discarded with even less ceremony than the first) to write to him. Two things held her back: sheer moral cowardice, that would not let her face the man whom she had failed even as had his play; and the impossibility of explaining that she loved the stage more than him or anything else in the world--except his ring. And while she never faltered from meaning to return this last "before long," she could not yet bring herself to part with it. Always it was with her, on her finger when at home and alone, in her pocket-book when abroad or with Quard; still in her imagination retaining something of its vaguely talismanic virtue; standing to her for something fanciful and magic, which she could not name, a visible token of the mystical powers that worked for her good fortune....

It was mid-October: sweetest of all seasons in New York; a time of early evenings and long, clear gloamings beneath skies of exquisite suavity and depth; of crisp and heady days whose air is wine in a crystal chalice; when thoughts are long and sweet, gentle with the beauty and the sadness of aging autumn.

At the first hint of winter Joan's heart turned in longing to the thought of furs. She wasted hours studying advertisements, and many more going from place to place, examining, rejecting, coveting. Her fancy was not modest: a year ago she would have been delighted with the meanest strip of squirrel for a neckpiece; today she felt a little ashamed even to price the less expensive furs, and would make no attempt to purchase until she had saved up enough money to meet her desires.

And then, one morning--they were playing at the Orpheum Theatre in Brooklyn--a messenger brought her a package from one of the Fulton Street stores and required a signed receipt. It contained a handsome coat of imitation seal with a collar of rich black fur and lined with golden brocade. Fitting her perfectly, it enclosed her in generous warmth from throat to ankle. Accompanying it was the card of "*Mr. Charles Harborough Quard, Presenting 'The Lie,' the Sketch Sensation of the Year, Address c/o Jas. K. Boskerk, St. James Building, N.Y.*"

Not since that day when she had received his ring from Matthias had she been so happy.

Meeting Quard in the gangway outside her dressing-room, before the matinee performance, she showed her gratitude by lifting her face for his kiss.

In the world in which they existed, kisses were commonplace, quite perfunctory, of little more significance than a slap on the shoulder between acquaintances. Not so Joan's: she had set a value upon her caresses, a standard peculiarly inflexible with respect to Quard. None the less, this was not the second time he had known her lips. But the occasion was one rare enough to render him appreciative.

He wound an arm round her, and held her tight.

"Like it, eh, girlie?"

"I love it!"

"Then I'm satisfied."

"But how did you guess what I wanted most?"

"Maybe I did a little head-work to find out."

"It's dear of you!"

"So long's you think so, I've got no kick coming."

She disengaged, drew a pace or two away.

"But what made you do it, Charlie?"

"Well, I can't afford to have my leading lady out of the cast with a cold."

Joan shook her head at him in gay reproof.

"Or do you want me to tell you what you know already--that I'm crazy about you?"

"Foolish! It's time we were dressing!"

But her laugh was fond, and so was the look she threw over her shoulder as she evaded his arms and vanished into her dressing-room.

Quard lingered a moment, with a fatuous smile for the panels of the closed door, and wagged his head doggishly. He felt that he was winning ground at a famous rate--the difficulties, the coolness and craft of his antagonist, considered. And in a way he was right, though perhaps not precisely the way he had in mind.

Even before his princely gift, Joan had been thinking a great deal about him, and very seriously. Instinctively she foresaw that their relationship could not long continue on its present basis of simple good-fellowship. Quard wasn't the sort to be content at arm's-length: he must either come closer or go farther away, and might be depended upon not to adopt the latter course until the former had proved impracticable.

And Joan didn't want him to go farther away. She was positive about this. But she was also very sure that the arm's-length relationship must be abridged only under certain indispensable conditions--decorously--and soon, if at all: else she must be the one to withdraw, lest a worse thing befall her. It was a problem of two factors: Quard's nature and her own; she had herself to reckon with no less than with him; and herself she distrusted, who was no stronger than her greatest weakness. He attracted her. She often caught herself thinking of him as she had thought of no other man--not Matthias, not the Quard of "The Convict's Return," not even Marbridge except, perhaps, for one shameful instant.

Something in the lawless, ranging, wanton grain of this man called to her with a call of infinite allure: something latent in her thrilled to the call and answered.... That way lurked danger, disguised, but deadly.

They moved on to Greenpoint, thence to Trenton for a week.

Daily Quard's attentions became more constant, intimate and tender. They were much together, and now far more exclusively together than had been possible in New York, where acquaintances commandeered so much of their time. In Trenton they lodged at the same hotel, the other members of the company finding cheaper accommodations at greater distance from the theatre. This increased their close and confidential association. They fell into the habit of breakfasting together. Quard, always first to rise, would telephone to Joan's room, ascertain how soon she would be dressed, and order for both of them accordingly. In return for this privilege he had that of paying for both meals.

A negro waiter spoke of Joan one morning, in her presence, as "the Missus." When he had retired out of earshot, their eyes sought one another's; constraint was swept away in laughter.

"We might's well be married, the way we're together all the time," Quard presently ventured.

"Oh, I don't know about that," Joan retorted pertly.

"I mean, the way other people see us. I shouldn't be surprised if everybody in the hotel thought we was married, girlie."

Joan coloured faintly....

"Well, the room-clerk knows better," she said definitely. "I'd like another cup of coffee, please."

Quard snapped his fingers loudly to attract the attention of the waiter.

He grew aware of an awkward silence: that the thoughts of both were converging to a common point.

"Folks are fools that get married in the profession," he observed consciously. "It's all right if you've got a husband or I've got a wife at home--"

"I don't see it," Joan interrupted smartly. "Anyway, *I* haven't. Have you?"

The actor stared, confused. "Have I--what?"

"Got a wife at home?" Joan repeated, laughing.

"No--nothing like *that!*" he asserted with intense earnestness. "I mean, it's all right if you've got somebody keeping a flat warm for you, some place not too far off Broadway; but if you marry into the business--good *night!* You got all the trouble of being tied up for life, and that's all."

"Why?"

"Managers don't want husband and wife in the same company. They're always fighting each other's battles when they ain't fighting between themselves. So you're always playing different routes, and the chances are they never cross except it's inconvenient and you get caught and nominated for the Alimony Club."

"Do you belong?"

"Didn't I just tell you nothing like that?" Quard protested with unnecessary heat.

"Well," Joan murmured mischievously, "you seem to know so much about it. I only wondered...."

Their place on the bill was near the end, that week: a trick bicyclist followed them, and moving-pictures wound up the performance. Consequently, by the time they were able to leave the theatre in the afternoon the sun was already below the horizon. They emerged the same evening from the stage-door to view a cloudless sky of pulsing amber, shading into purple at the zenith, melting into rose along the western rim of the world. A wash of old rose flooded the streets, lifting the meanest structures out of their ugliness, lending an added dignity to rows of square-set, old-fashioned residences of red-brick with white marble trimmings.

"Which way are you going?" Quard enquired as they approached the corner of a main thoroughfare. "Back to the hotel?"

"No; I'm sick of that hole," Joan replied with a vivid shudder. "I'm going to take a walk. Want to come?"

"I was just going to ask you."

They turned off toward the Delaware.

It was the twenty-first of November--winter still a month away; yet the breath of winter was in the air. It came up cool and brisk from the river, enriching the colour in Joan's cheeks that were bright and glowing from the scrubbing she always gave them after removing grease-paint with cold cream. The blood coursed tingling through her veins. Her eyes shone with deepened lustre. They walked with spirit, in step, in a pensive silence infrequently disturbed.

"Of course," Quard presently offered without preface, "it's different in volveveal, if you stick to it."

"What's different?"

"Being married."

Joan's eyes widened momentarily. Then she laughed outright. "Gee! You don't mean to say you've been chewing *that* rag ever since breakfast?"

"Ah, I just happened to think of it again," said Quard with the air of one whose motives are wantonly misconstrued.

Nevertheless, he wouldn't let the subject languish.

"There's plenty of family acts been playing the circuits Gawd knows how long," he pursued, with a vast display of interest in the sunset glow. "Look't the Cohans, before George planted the American flag in Longacre Square and annexed it to the United States. And they ain't the only ones by a long shot. I could name a plenty that'll stick in the big time until their toes curl. It's all right to trot in double-harness so long's you manage your own company."

"Well?" Joan asked with a sober mouth and mischievous eyes.

"Well--what?"

"If you're getting ready to slip me my two-weeks' notice, why not be a man and say so?"

"What would I do that for?" Quard demanded indignantly.

"Because you're thinking about getting married; and there's only room for one leading lady in any company I play in."

"Quit your kidding," the man advised sulkily; "you know I couldn't get along without you."

"Yes," Joan admitted calmly, "I know it, but I didn't know you did."

Quard shot a suspicious glance askance, but her face was immobile in its flawless loveliness.

He started to say something, choked up and reconsidered with a painful frown. A mature man's perfect freedom is not lightly to be thrown away. And yet ... he doubted darkly the perfection of his freedom...

They held on in silence until they came to Riverside Park.

Over the dark profile of the Pennsylvania hills the sky was jade and amethyst, a pool of light that dwindled swiftly in the thickening shades of violet. Below them, as they paused on a lonely walk, the river stole swiftly, like a great black serpent writhing through the shadows. A frosty wind swept steadily into their faces, making cool and firm the flesh flushed with exercise. There was no one near them. A train of jewelled lights swept over the railroad bridge and vanished into the night with a purring rumble that lent an accent to their isolation. Joan hugged about her voluptuously her wonderful coat, stole a glance warm with gratitude at the face of Quard. He intercepted it, and edged nearer. Aglow and eager, she murmured something vapid about the prettiness of the sky.

He answered only with the arm he passed about her. She suffered him, lashes veiling her eyes, her head at rest in the hollow of his shoulder. The man stared down at her exquisite, suffused face, luminous in the last light of gloaming.

"Joan," he said throatily--"girlie, don't you love me--a little?"

Her mouth grew tremulous.

"I ... don't ... know," she whispered.

"I love you!" he cried suddenly in an exultant voice--"I love you!"

He folded her, unresisting, in both his arms, covering her face with kisses, ardent, violent kisses that bruised and hurt her tender flesh but which she still sought and hungered for, insatiable. She sobbed a little in her happiness, feeling her body yield and yearn to his, transported by that sweet, exquisite, nameless longing....

Then suddenly she was like a steel spring in his embrace, writhing to free herself. Wondering, he tried to hold her closer, but she twisted and fended him off with all the power of her strong young arms. And still wondering, he humoured her. She drew away, but yet not wholly out of his clasp.

"Charlie!" she panted.

"Darling!"

"How do you get married in New Jersey?"

He pulled up, dashed and a little disappointed, and laughed nervously.

"Why, you get a license and then--well, almost anybody'll do to tie the knot."

She nodded tensely: "I guess a regular minister will be good enough for us."

"I guess so," he demurred; and with another laugh: "I wasn't thinking serious' about it, but I guess I might's well be married as the way I am."

"Well," she said quietly, "we've *got* to. It's the only way...."

XXVI

And then, suddenly, the face of life was indescribably changed: Joan Thursday seemed but a memory, a slight and somehow wistful shadow in the shadowed depths of that darkling mirror, yesterday; in her place another creature altogether reigned, the Joan Quard of today, woman, actress, wife; with a gold band round her finger; mature, initiate of mysteries, ripe in wisdom; strong, poised serenely, clear of eye; with added graciousness in her beauty, conscious of added powers over Man, but discreet in their employment.

She thought a great deal about herself in those days: not, perhaps, more than had been common with her in that so-dead yesterday, but much, and more profoundly; reading a new meaning into the riddle of existence, so changed had all things become since her marriage.

Before her pensive vision Life unfolded rare, golden-vista'd promises.

With another man, or in another stratum of society, she might have fulfilled herself wonderfully, even unto her salvation....

To begin with, she was very happy. Fond to distraction of her husband, she never doubted that he worshipped her; he gave her quick wits no cause to entertain a doubt. They were together always, inseparable. She felt that nature must truly have fashioned them solely for one another, and could not forget her wonder that their passion should be so mutual, so complete. She loved him to distraction: all his traits, his robust swagger, his sonorous and flexible tones, the flowery eloquence of his gesture, his broad, easy-going, tolerant good-humour, the way he wore his clothes and the very cut and texture of them. And she ruled him like a despot.

Quard submitted without complaint. She was all his fancy had painted her, and something more; recognizing dimly that she excelled him variously (although he was quite incapable of analyzing these distinctions) he served her humbly, with unconscious deference to her many excellences. She was by way of making him a better wife than he deserved. If at times conscious of some little irk from her amiable but inflexible autocracy, he reminded himself that she was a finer woman than any he had ever known, well worth humouring: it wasn't on every corner a fellow'd pick up one like Joan.

He liked to follow her into hotel lobbies and restaurants and watch people turn to eye her, the men with sudden interest, the women with instinctive hostility. It even amused him to quell a too-ambitious stare with a fixed, grim, and truculent regard backed by the menace of his powerful physique. It gave a man standing, license to swagger, to own a woman like Joan.

He came to pander oddly to this vanity--would leave Joan to go to their room alone, while he strolled off to a bar to meet some crony or acquaintance of the day, tell his best story, and then suddenly excuse himself:

"Well, s'long. The wife's waiting for me."

The response rarely failed: "Ah, let her wait; have another drink. Did *I* ever tell you--"

A lifted, deprecatory palm, a knowing look: "No--guess I'll kick along; y'see, *she's* some wife...."

Conscious only of his adoration, Joan was enchanted by their mode of life, with its constant shifts of scene, its spice of vagabondage. She believed she could never tire of travelling.

Railroad journeys, with their inevitable concomitants of dirt, noise, and discomfort, never discouraged her: she really liked them; they were taking her somewhere--it didn't much matter where. She even derived a sort of pleasure from such nauseating experiences as rising to catch a train at four-thirty in the morning, against their "long jumps." And there was keen delight in napping in a parlour-car chair or with a head upon her husband's shoulder in a day-coach, to wake all drowsy, breathe air foul with coal-smoke, and peer through a black window-pane (shadowed by her hand) to catch a glimpse of some darkly fulgent breadth of strange water, or the marching defile of great alien hills, or a sweep of semi-wooded countryside bleached with moonlight--remembering that, only a few short months ago, the world of her travels had been bounded by Fort George on the north, Coney Island on the south, knowing neither east nor west.

She was discovering America: even as she was discovering Life....

Their route from Trenton took them south through Philadelphia, Wilmington, Baltimore, Washington, Richmond, and Norfolk; whence they doubled back by steamer to New York, took a Sound boat to Fall River, played Boston, and

drifted through New England in bitter cold weather, eventually striking westward again, via Albany, Buffalo, and the middle country.

Quard drew her attention to the fact that it was "a liberal education...."

Sometimes she thought pityingly of Matthias, and wondered if he knew she was married and what she was doing; and whether he were angry, or heart-broken, or eaten up with morbid jealousy; and how he would act should chance ever throw them together again. She was sorry for him: he had lost her. If only he had been a little more enterprising.... She wondered what would have happened if Matthias *had* been more enterprising; he could have possessed her at any time during the brief period of their infatuation. If he had married her then, would she be as contented as she was now, with Charlie? She doubted it; Quard was so completely his opposite....

She ceased to worry about the ring. She meant to return it some day, perhaps. Though she did not wear it and had never so much as mentioned Matthias to Quard, it remained a possession whose charms tugged at her heart-strings. At times she amused herself formulating idle little intrigues, with the object (if ever set in motion) of excusing the appearance of the jewel upon her hand. But all her schemes seemed to possess some fatal flaw, and she was desperately afraid of the truth. Meanwhile, the ring lay perdue at the bottom of a work-basket of woven sweet-grass which she had purchased shortly after her marriage; twisted in an old, empty needle-paper and mixed in with a worthless confusion of trash, such as women accumulate in such receptacles, its hiding place was well calculated to escape detection by even an informed purloiner.

Quard's tardy engagement ring was set with an inferior diamond flanked by artificial pearls. Joan despised it secretly. For a long time it was the sole blemish on the bright shield of her happiness....

And then, the night of their opening day in Cincinnati, Quard escorted her from the theatre to the hotel, left her at the door, and turned back to "see a friend" who happened to be playing on the same bill.

This was quite the usual thing, and Joan went contentedly off to her room and in due course to bed, confident that Quard would return within an hour.

Five hours later she awoke to startled apprehension of the facts, first that she must have dropped off to sleep without meaning to, next that Quard had not returned, finally that it was past four o'clock in the morning.

With a little shiver of sickening premonition she rose, slipped into a dressing-gown, called a bell-boy, and instructed him to look for her husband. Some time later the boy reported that the bar was closed and the gentleman not to be found.

It was broad daylight when Quard staggered in with the assistance of the same bell-boy and his negro dresser. His eyes were glazed, his face ghastly, his mind wandered: he was as helpless as a child. With the aid of the boys, Joan managed to undress the man and put him to bed. At once he fell asleep, with the cold stump of a half-burned cigar obstinately clenched between his teeth. It was an hour before the muscles of his jaw relaxed enough to release it.

Dressing, Joan left the hotel, swallowed some coffee and rolls, tasteless to her, in a nearby restaurant, and wandered about until eight o'clock, when she found a drug-store open, and consulted the clerk. He advised bromo seltzer and aromatic spirits of ammonia. Armed with these, she returned to her husband, and shortly after noon, daring to delay no longer, roused him by sprinkling cold water in his face--all other methods having failed even to interrupt his stertorous breathing. Even then it was some time before she could induce him to swallow the medicine, and it required no less than three powerful doses, together with much black coffee and followed by a cold bath, to restore him to presentable condition. In the end, however, she succeeded in getting him to the theatre in time for the matinee.

Through it all she uttered no single word of reproach, but waited on the man with at least every outward sign of sympathy and devotion.

His remorse (when another nap at the hotel after the matinee had brought him to more complete realization of what had happened) was touching and, as long as it lasted, unquestionably sincere. Joan accepted without comment his lame explanation as to the manner of his temptation and fall during an all-night session at poker "with the boys," and gave genuine credulity to his protestations that it would never, never happen again.

But three weeks later in Chicago he repeated the performance, though under somewhat less distressing circumstances. As before, he left her in the lobby, "to finish his cigar and chin with Soandso." Within an hour he was half-led, half-carried to their room, in a hopelessly sodden condition. The actor with whom he had been drinking accompanied him, apparently quite sober, but puzzled; and after Quard had been helped to bed, explained to the girl that her husband's collapse had been incomprehensibly due to no more than three drinks.

"I never seen nothin' like it!" the man expostulated, with an air of grievance. "There he was, standin' up against the bar, with his foot on the rail, laughin' and kiddin', same's the rest of us; and he'd only had three whiskeys--though I will say they was man-size drinks; and then, all of a sudden, he turns white as a sheet and starts mumblin' to himself, and we all thinks he's joshin' until he keels over, limp's a rag. If the stuff gets to him like that, he's got no business touchin' it, ever!"

These experiences continued at varying intervals; and presently Joan began to understand that Quard had not only primarily a weakness to tempt him, but a constitutional inability to assert his will-power after he had surrendered to the extent of a single drink. One modest dose of alcohol seemed to exercise upon him a sort of hypnotic power, driving him on whether he would or not to the next, the next, and the next--until the nadir of unconsciousness was reached. It was not that he invariably succumbed to moderate indulgence, but that once started he rarely stopped until his identity was completely submerged. Indeed, the way of alcohol with him seemed never twice to follow the same route; but its end was invariably the same.

Hoping against hope, fighting with him, pleading, reasoning, threatening with him, even praying, Joan endured for a long time--much longer than, in retrospective days, seemed possible even to her; for she was honestly fond of her husband, far more so than she was ever of any other living being save herself.

They reached San Francisco the third week in April. For some time Quard had been drinking rather methodically but stealthily. A threat made by Joan, while he was sobering up from his last debauch, to the effect that on repetition of the offence she would leave him without an hour's notice, had frightened the man to the extent of making him hesitate to add one drink to another except at intervals long enough to retard the cumulative effect; but never a day passed on which, in spite of her watchfulness, he did not contrive to throw several sops to the devil in possession, if without ever quite losing his wits.

Detected with reeking breath, he would adopt one of three attitudes: he was a man, subject to the domination of no woman and of no appetite, had learned his lesson and now knew when to stop; or he was sorry--hadn't stopped to think--and wouldn't let it go any further; or nothing of the sort had happened, he had drunk nothing except a glass of soda-fountain nerve- tonic, or possibly it was his cigar that she smelled. With the first, Joan had no patience; and since she had a temper, it was the last resort in Quard's more sober stages, seldom employed save when potations had made him either indifferent or vicious. In his contrition, whether real or assumed, she tried hard to believe. But his lies never deceived her: to these she listened in the silence of contempt and despair.

On the Wednesday afternoon of their week in San Francisco, the girl did a bit of shopping after the matinee; it was half after five before she returned to the hotel, and walked into their room to find Quard, with his coat off, seated in a chair that faced the door. His back was to the windows, through which the declining sun threw a flood of blinding golden light, so that Joan's dazzled vision comprehended only the dark silhouette of his body.

She said "Hello, dearie!" lightly enough in the abstraction of reviewing some especially pleasing purchases, closed the door, walked over to the bureau, put down her handbag and a small parcel, and removed her hat. Then the fact that Quard had not answered penetrated her reverie. Disposing of her hat, she looked half casually over her shoulder, to discover that he hadn't moved. Two surmises struck through her wonder: that he had fallen asleep waiting for her; with poignant apprehension, that he had been drinking again. But this seemed hardly likely: he had been entirely rational and unintoxicated during the matinee.

She said sharply: "What's the matter?"

Quard made no answer.

With a troubled sigh she moved to his chair and bent over him. His eyes, wide and blazing, met hers with a look of inflexible hostility and rage; his mouth was set like a trap, his lips, like his face, were almost colourless. The air was pungent with his breath, but intuitively she divined that it was not drunkenness alone which had aroused this temper, the more dismaying since it was for the time being under control.

From the look in his eyes she started back as from a blow.

"Charlie! What's the matter?"

Quard opened his lips, gulped spasmodically, closed them without speaking. The muscles on the left side of his face twitched nervously.

Abruptly he shot up out of his chair, strode to the door, locked it and pocketed the key. His face as he turned was terrible to see.

She shrank away, but his eyes held hers in the fascination of fright.

"Why--Charlie!--what--"

He interrupted with an imperative gesture, took a step toward her, and shook his hand in her face. Between his thumb and forefinger glittered something exquisitely coruscant in the sunlight.

"What's that?" he demanded in a quivering voice.

She moved her head in assumed bewilderment, staggered to recognize the symbol of her broken troth with Matthias.

"I don't know. What is it? You keep moving it around so, I can't see...."

"There, then!" he cried, steadying the hand under her nose.

Instinctively her gaze veered to her trunk. Its lid was up. On the floor lay her work-basket in the litter of its former contents. Her indignation mounted.

"What were you doing in my trunk?" she demanded hotly.

Quard's eyes clouded under the impact of this counter attack. Momentarily his dazed expression made it very plain that he had taken advantage of her absence to drink heavily. And this was even more plain in the blurred accents, robbed of the sharpness rage had lent them, in which he endeavoured to justify himself.

"I wanted--shew on s'pender button--wanted work-basket...."

Anger returned; his voice mounted: "And I found this! What is it?"

Joan snatched at the ring, but he drew back his hand too quickly for her.

"It's mine. Give it to me!"

"Where'd you get it? Tha'sh what I wanna know!"

"None of your business. Give it--"

"T' hell it ain't my business. I'm your husband--gotta right to know where you get diamonds"--he sneered--"diamonds like this! I never bought it."

"No," she flamed back; "you're too stingy!"

"Stingy, am I?" He faltered swaying. "Tha'snough. I'm tightwad, so s'nother guy gets chansh to buy you diamonds. Tha's way of it, hey?"

"You give me that ring, Charlie," Joan demanded ominously.

"You got anotha good guess coming. What I'll give you is jush two minutes to tell me name of the fellow't give it to you."

"Don't be a fool, Charlie!"

"I don't intend to be fool--any longer. You tell me or--"

He checked, searching his befuddled mind for a compelling threat.

With a shift of manner, Joan extended her hand in pleading.

"Give me the ring, Charlie, and be sensible. I haven't done anything wrong. I can explain."

"Well...." Grudgingly he dropped the ring into her palm. But immediately her fingers had closed upon it, mistrust again possessed him. "Now, you tell me--"

"Very well," she interrupted patiently. "You needn't shout. I don't mind telling you now. It's my engagement ring."

"Your *what?*" sharply.

"My engagement ring. I was engaged last summer to Mr. Matthias, before we began to rehearse the sketch."

"Engaged?" he iterated stupidly. "Engaged for what?"

"Engaged to be married. He was in love with me. I meant to marry him until you and I met the second time--"

"Meant to marry who?"

"Mr. Matthias. We--"

"Matthias? What Matthias?"

"John Matthias, the author--the playwright. He wrote 'The Jade God.'"

Quard wagged his head cunningly. "Ymean to tell me you was engaged to that guy, and--didn't marry him?"

"Certainly. I married you, didn't I, dear?"

"And if that's true, how't happen you didn't give'm back his ring? *Eh?*"

"I meant to, Charlie, but he was out of town and I didn't know his address."

"That's likely!" The actor laughed harshly. "Tha'sh *good* one, that is! You going to marry him, and didn't know his address. Expect me to believe that?"

"It's true, Charlie--it's God's truth."

"You're a liar!"

"Charlie--!"

"I say, you're a liar! Wha'sh more, I mean it."

Quard waved his hand, palm down, to indicate his scornful disposition of her yarn. Then he staggered, steadied himself by clutching the back of a chair, and conscious how this betrayed his condition, worked himself into a towering rage to cover it.

"I know better. 'F you'd ever got a chance to marry that feller, you'd 've jumped at it. He'd never've got away. You wouldn't 've given him no more chance'n you did me--you'd 've pulled wool over his eyes same way. *I* know what'm talking about. You're a *liar*, a dam' dirty little liar, tha's what you are."

Joan's colour deserted her face entirely.

"Charlie! don't you say that to me again."

"And what'll you do? Think I care? I know what you'll do, all right, because I'm going make you do it."

"What do you mean?"

"Wha's more, I know now who gave you that ring. I was fool not to guess it before. I didn't give it to you--no! Mist' Matthias didn't give it to you--no! But somebody *did* give it to you--*eh?* Tha's right, isn't it? And his name--s name was *Vincent Marbridge!* Wasn't it?"

He thrust his inflamed face close to hers, leering wickedly.

"Marbridge!" Joan echoed blankly.

"Vincent Marbridge--tha's the feller't give you the ring. He's the feller't could do it, too--got all the money in the world--enough to buy dozens'r rings--enough to buy you all them good clothes you got hold of after you threw me down and before I was ass enough to take up with you again! A' that, you were a fool not to get more outa him."

The insult ate like an acid into the pride of the girl. She flushed crimson, then in an instant paled again. Her eyes grew cold and hard.

"That will do," she said bitterly. "You've said enough--too much. After all I've endured from you--your drunkenness, your--"

There was a maniac glare in the eyes of the man as he thrust his face still closer.

"And what'll you do, eh?" he shouted violently. "What'll *you* do?"

She turned her face aside, in disgust of his reeking breath.

"And what'll *you* do? Tell me that!"

"I'll leave you--"

"You betcha life you'll leave me. I knew *that* before you come into this room!"

"And I'm sorry I didn't go long ago--"

"The hell you are!" In a gust of uncontrollable frenzy, Quard struck her sharply over the mouth. "You go--d'you hear?--you damn'----"

In blind fury Joan flung herself upon him, sobbing, biting, scratching, kicking. He reeled back before that unexpected assault, then, sobered a trifle by its viciousness, caught her wrists, held her helpless for an instant, and threw her violently from him. She fell to her knees, lurched over on her side....

The door slammed: he was gone.



The door slammed. He was gone.

She knew the man too well not to know he would make instantly for the nearest bar; the only question was what guise intoxication would assume in him, this time. It was possible that he would drink himself raving mad and return fit for murder.

She must make her escape with all possible expedition....

Instantly Joan sat up, dried her eyes, convulsively swallowed her sobs, and felt of her bruised mouth.

Before her on the carpet the diamond ring winked sardonically in the sunset light.

She pondered savagely the wide and deep damnation it had wrought in her life.

It seemed impossible that only a few minutes had elapsed since she had entered this room, an affectionate, patient, and not unhappy wife. Now she sifted her heart and found in it not one grain of the love it had once held for Quard. This alone would have rendered irrevocable her decision to leave him.

The thing was over--settled--finished.

She gave a gesture of finality.

With all her heart she hoped that the sketch would go to the devil without her...

Rising, she went to the mirror, to stare incredulously at the face it presented for her inspection, a cruel caricature, lined, distorted, blowsy, stained with tears. At this vision, hysteria threatened again.

With a great effort she fought it down, and controlled and smoothed out the muscles of her face. Now she was more recognizable. Even her mouth was not seriously disfigured; he had struck with the flat of his hand only; her lips were sore and slightly but not markedly swollen. A veil would disguise them completely.

At the wash-stand she devoted some very valuable moments to sopping her face with cold water, and particularly her mouth and eyes. The treatment toned down the inflammation of weeping, rendered her flesh firm and cool once more, and left her with a feeling of spiritual refreshment, with nerves again under control and her will even more inalterably fixed than before.

Rouge and powder completed her rejuvenescence.

Turning to her trunk, she took out the tray--and paused with a low cry of consternation. From the tumbled and disordered state of its contents, it was plain that, having discovered the ring, Quard had searched diligently for further confirmation of his suspicions.

With quickening breath, the girl dropped to her knees and hastily but thoroughly ransacked and turned out upon the floor all her belongings. Within a brief period she satisfied herself of one appalling fact: Quard had not only insulted and struck her and cast her off--he had stooped to rob her. Her hands were tied: she had not money enough to leave him.

Probably, with the low cunning and fallacious reasoning of dipsomania, he had pouched her savings with that very thought in mind. Meaning to break with her, to have his scene and satisfy his lust for brutality, he had also planned to prevent Joan's leaving the cast of "The Lie" until a successor could be found and broken in. Penniless (he had argued) she would be obliged to play on, at least until Saturday, to earn her fare back East.

It was Quard's practice to carry his money in large bills folded in a belt of oiled silk which he wore buckled round his waist, beneath his underclothing--with a smaller fund for running expenses in a leather bill-fold more accessibly disposed. But Joan (finding a money-belt uncomfortable because of her corsets) had adopted the shiftless plan of secreting her savings in a pocket contrived for that purpose in an old underskirt. And since she had always held her husband rigidly to account for her individual fifty dollars per week, she had managed thus to set aside about three hundred dollars. Unfortunately, it had been their habit to carry duplicate keys to one another's luggage by way of provision against loss.

So that now she was left with less than twenty dollars in her pocket-book.

She paced the floor in wrathful meditation, pondering means and expedients. Once or twice she noticed the ring, but passed it several times before she paused, picked it up, and abstractedly placed it on her finger.

It did not once occur to her that she could raise money by hypothecating the jewel at a pawn-shop: by hook or crook she was determined to regain her own money. She was wondering what good it would do her to threaten Quard with arrest. Had a wife any right to her earnings, under the law?

After a time, she opened her handbag, found her personal bunch of keys, and unlocked her husband's trunk. Her pains, however, went for nothing; she investigated diligently every pocket of his clothing without discovering a piece of money of any description. But one thing she did find to make her thoughtful--Quard's revolver...

Removing this last, she relocked the trunk and rang for a bell-boy. Then she put the weapon on the bureau and covered

it with her hat.

The youth who answered had an intelligent look. Joan appraised him narrowly before trusting him. She opened negotiations with a dollar tip.

"I want you to find my husband for me," she said. "If he's anywhere around the hotel, he'll probably be in the bar. But look everywhere, and then come and tell me. You needn't say anything to him. I just want to know where he is. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'm."

"You'd know him if you saw him--Mr. Quard, the actor?"

"Yes, ma'm."

"That's all. Hurry."

As soon as the boy was gone she turned again to her luggage, selecting indispensable garments and toilet articles and packing them in a suit-case. By the time a knock sounded again upon the door, she had the case strapped and locked.

"He ain't nowhere about the house, ma'm," the bell-boy reported. "He was in the bar a while, but he's went out."

Joan nodded, was dumb in thought.

"Do you want as I should go look for him, ma'am?"

"Can you leave the hotel?" Joan asked quickly.

"I'm just going off-duty now, ma'm; the night shift came on about ten minutes ago, at six o'clock."

"And you think you could possibly find him?"

"He took a cab, ma'm. The driver's stand is in front of the hotel. If I can find him, I can find where your husband went. Anyhow, it ain't hard to follow up a gentleman as--"

"As drunk!" Joan put in when the boy hesitated.

"Yes, ma'm."

Joan weighed the chance distrustfully; but it was at least a chance, and this was no time to be careful. Taking a five-dollar gold-piece from her scanty store, she gave it to the boy.

"Go find him," she said. "And if he seems to know what he's doing--just hang around until he doesn't: he won't keep you waiting long. Then bring him to me. But first take this suit-case down to the Union Ferry house, check it in the baggage-room, and give me the check when you bring him back. And--don't say anything to anybody."

"Yes, ma'm--no, ma'm."

Supperless, she sat down to wait, Quard's revolver ready to her hand.

Twilight waned; night fell; hours passed. Motionless and imperturbable, Joan waited on, the tensivity of her mood betrayed only by the burning of her baleful, dangerous eyes.

At half-past nine a noise of scuffling feet, gruff voices and heavy breathing in the hallway, following the clash of an elevator gate, brought her to her feet. Going to the bureau, she opened a drawer and put the revolver away.

There would be no need of that, now.

Answering a knock, she threw the door wide. Two porters staggered in, one with the shoulders, one with the feet of Quard. The bell-boy followed. When they had lugged to the bed that inert and insensate thing she had once loved, Joan tipped the men and they departed. The boy lingered.

"Is there anything more I can do, ma'm?"

"Where did you find him?"

"Down on the Coast. I don't know what wouldn't've happened to him if you hadn't sent me after him. He was up an alley--had been stuck up by a couple of strong-arms. I seen 'em making their get-away just as I come in sight."

She uttered a cry of despair: "Robbed--you mean?"

"Yes, ma'm. He ain't got as much's a nickel on him."

Overwhelmed, Joan sank into a chair. The boy avoided her desolate eyes; he was a little afraid she might want part of the five dollars back.

"Hadn't I better send the hotel doctor up, ma'm?"

"Perhaps," she muttered dully.

"Yes, ma'm. And here's the check for your suit-case. Nothing else? Good night, ma'm."

The door closed.

Of a sudden, Joan jumped up and ran to the bed in the alcove.

Quard's condition was pitiable, but in her excited no compassion. His face was pallid as a death-mask save on one cheek-bone, where there was an angry and livid contusion. His hands were scratched, bleeding, and filthy, his clothing begrimed and torn, his pockets turned inside out. He seemed scarcely to breathe, and a thin froth flecked his slack and swollen lips.

With feverish haste she unbuttoned his shirt and trousers and tugged at his undershirt. Then she sobbed aloud, a short, dry sob of relief. She had discovered the money-belt. In another minute she had unbuckled and withdrawn it from his body. She took it to the other room, to the light, and hastily undid its fastenings.

There were perhaps two dozen fresh, new bills, for the most part of large denominations, folded once lengthwise to fit into the narrow silken tube; but someone knocked before she found time to reckon up their sum.

Hastily cramming the money, together with the tell-tale belt, into her handbag, Joan took a deep breath and said "Come in!"

There entered a grave man of middle-age, carrying a physician's satchel.

He said, with a slight inclination of his head: "Mrs. Quard, I believe?"

"Yes," Joan gasped. She nodded toward the alcove: "Your patient's in there."

He murmured some acknowledgment, turning away to the bedside. For several minutes he worked steadily over the drunkard. While she waited, her wits awl, Joan mechanically pinned on her hat.

Presently the physician stepped back into the room, removed his coat, turned back his cuffs, and produced a pocket hypodermic. With narrowing eyes he recognized Joan's preparations for the street.

"Is he all right, doctor?" she said with a feint of doubt and fear.

"He's in pretty bad shape, but I guess we can pull him round, all right. But I need your help. You were going out?"

She met his eyes steadily. "I was only waiting to hear how he was. I've got to hurry off to the theatre. I'm late now. If we miss the performance tonight, we may lose our booking. And he's just been held up--all we've got's what's coming to us next Saturday."

"I see. And you can do without him?"

"His understudy'll take his part--we'll manage somehow."

"Then I am afraid I shall have to call in assistance--a trained nurse."

"Do, please, doctor."

"Very well."

He moved toward the telephone.

"I'll be back in about an hour."

"Very well, Mrs. Quard."

He stared, perplexed, at the door, when she had shut it....

Avoiding the elevator and lobby, she slipped down the stairs and through a side door to the street.

In ten minutes she was at the Union Ferry.

Within an hour she was in Oakland, purchasing through tickets for her transcontinental flight.

XXVII

When he had finished breakfast, Matthias lighted a pipe, and setting his feet anew in the groove they had worn diagonally from door to window, began his matutinal tramp toward inspiration.

But this morning found his brain singularly sluggish: thoughts would not come; or if they showed themselves at all, it was only to peer mischievously at him round some distant corner which, when turned, discovered only an empty impasse.

Distressed, he tamped down his pipe, ran long fingers through his hair, and wrapped himself in clouds of smoke. Then a breath of cool, sweet air fanned his cheek, and he looked round in sharp annoyance. It was like that fool maid to leave the windows open and freeze him to death! And truly enough, they were both wide open from top to bottom; though, for all that, he wasn't freezing. And outside there was a bright crimson border of potted geraniums on the iron-railed balcony. He hadn't noticed them before; Madame Duprat must have set them out before he was up. Curious whim of hers! Curious weather!

Disliking inconsistencies, he stopped in one of the windows to investigate these unseasonable phenomena.

In one corner of the back-yard a dilapidated bundle of fur and bones, conforming in general with a sardonic Post-Impressionist's candid opinion of a tom-cat, lay blinking lazily in a patch of warm yellow sunlight.

In the next back-yard a ridiculous young person in bare-legs, blue denim overalls and a small red sweater, was industriously turning up the earth with a six-inch trowel, and chanting cheerfully to himself an improvisation in honour of his garden that was to be.

At an open window across the way a public-spirited and extremely pretty young woman appeared with a towel pinned round her shoulders and let down her hair, a shimmering cascade of gold for the sun's rays to wanton with and, incidentally, to dry.

Somewhere at a distance a cracked old piano-organ was romping and giggling rapturously through the syncopated measures of Tin Pan Alley's latest "rag."

A vision drifted before Matthias' eyes, of the green slopes of Tanglewood, the white chateau on its windy headland, the ineffable blue of the Sound beyond....

Incredulous, he turned to consult his calendar: the day was Wednesday, the seventeenth of April.

It was true, then: almost without his knowledge the bleak and barren Winter had worn away and Spring had stolen upon Town, flaunting, extravagant, shy and seductive, irresistible Spring....

For a little Matthias held back in doubt, with reluctant thoughts of his work. Then--all in a breath--he caught up hat and stick, slammed the door behind him, and blundered forth to fulfill his destiny....

She was seated on a bench, in a retired spot sheltered from the breeze, open to the sun, when Matthias, having swung round the upper reservoir, came at full stride down the West Drive, his blood romping, his eyes aglow, warm colour in his face: for the first time in half a year feeling himself again, Matthias the lover of the open skies divorced from Matthias of the midnight lamp and the scored and intricate manuscripts--that Matthias whom the world rejected.

At a word, her companion rose and moved to intercept him; and at the sound of his name, Matthias paused, wondering who she could be, this strange, sweet-faced woman, plainly dressed.

"Yes?" he said, lifting his hat. "I am Mr. Matthias--yes--"

"Mrs. Marbridge would like to speak to you."

His gaze veered quickly in the direction indicated by her brief nod. He saw Venetia waiting, and immediately went to her, in his surprise forgetful of the woman who had accosted him. This last moved slowly in the other direction and sat down out of earshot.

"This is awfully good of you, Vēnetia," he said, bending over her hand. "I didn't see you, of course--was thinking of something else--"

"But I was thinking of you," she said. "I've been wanting to see you for a long time, Jack."

"Surely Helena could have told you where to find me...."

"I knew we'd run across one another, somehow, somewhere, sometime--today or tomorrow, without fail. So I was content to do without the offices of Helena. Do sit down. I want so much to talk to you."

"Most completely yours to command," he said lightly, and took the place beside her.

But his heart was on his lips and in his eyes, and Vēnetia was far from blind.

"Then tell me about yourself," she asked. "It's been so long since I've had any news!"

"Is it possible? I should have imagined my dotting aunt--"

She interrupted with a slight, negative smile and shake of her head: "Helena doesn't approve of me, you know, and of late there has been a decided coolness between the families. I'm afraid George fell out with Vincent for some reason--not too hard to guess, perhaps."

He looked away, colouring with embarrassment.

"So," she pursued evenly--"about yourself: are you married yet?"

Matthias started, laughed frankly. "You didn't know about that, either?... Well, it's true even Helena couldn't have told you much, for I told her nothing.... No, I'm neither married, nor like to be."

"She was so very sweet and pretty--"

"Joan was wholly charming," he agreed gravely, "but--well, I fancy it was inevitable. We were lucky enough to be obliged to endure a separation of some weeks before, instead of after, marriage; and so we had time to think. At least, she must have foreseen the mistake we were on the point of making, for the break was her own doing--not mine."

"You think it would have been a mistake?"

"Oh, unquestionably. I confess I'd not have known it, probably, until too late, if she hadn't made me think when she threw me over. I hope it doesn't sound caddish--but I was conscious of a distinct sense of relief when I got back from California and found she'd cleared out without leaving me a line."

"I think I understand. And did you never hear from her?"

"Not from--by accident, *of* her. She was predestined for the stage--I can see that clearly now, though I objected then. She was offered a chance during my absence, jumped at it, and made a sort of a half-way hit in a very successful sketch which, oddly enough, I happened to have written--under a pseudonym. It had been kicking round my agent's office for a year; he didn't believe in it any more than I did; and I disbelieved in it hard enough to be ashamed to put my own name to it. That's often the way with a fellow's work; one always believes in the cripples, you know.... Well, some actor chanced to get hold of the 'script one day, fell in love with it and put it on with Joan as his leading woman. If it had been anybody else's sketch, I'd never have known what became of her, probably. As it was, I knew nothing until I got back from the Coast.... I believe they got married very shortly after it was produced; and now they're playing it all over the country. Odd, isn't it?"

"Very," Vēnetia smiled. "And so your heart wasn't broken?"

He shook his head and laughed: "No!"

But a spasm of pain shot through his eyes and deceived the woman a little longer.

"And what have you been doing?" she pursued, meaning to distract him. "I mean, your work?"

He shrugged. "Oh, I've had an average luckless year. To begin with, Rideout fell down on his production of 'The Jade God'--the only time it ever had a chance to get over--and a man named Algerson bought his contract and put it on at his stock theatre in Los Angeles. That's why I went out there--to see it butchered."

"It failed?"

"Extravagantly!"

"But didn't you once have a great deal of confidence in it?"

"Every play is a valuable property until it's produced," he answered, smiling. "This one was killed by its production. Nothing was right: it needed scenery, and what they gave it had served a decade in stock; it needed actors, and what actors were accidentally permitted to get into the cast got the wrong roles; finally, it needed intelligent stage direction, and that was supplied by the star, whose idea of a good play is one in which he speaks everybody's lines *and* his own. Then they rewrote most of the best scenes and botched them horribly."

"You couldn't stop them?"

"When I attempted to interfere, I was told civilly to go to the devil. Under my contract, I could have stopped them: but that meant suing out an injunction, which in turn meant putting up a bond, and--I didn't have the money."

"I'm so sorry, Jack!"

"Oh, it's all in the game. I learned something, at least. But the greatest harm it did me was to sap the faith of managers here. One man--Wylie--who was under contract to produce my 'Tomorrow's People,' paid me on January first a forfeit of five hundred dollars rather than run the risk after 'The Jade God.'"

"And so you lost both plays?"

"Oh, no; I still have 'Tomorrow's People,' and only a short time ago signed up with a manager who isn't afraid of his shadow. We'll put it on next Autumn."

"And you believe in that, too?"

"I know it will go," Matthias asserted with level confidence. "It's only a question of intelligence at the producing end--and I've arranged to get that."

"And meanwhile--you've been working?"

"Oh"--he spread out his hands--"one doesn't stop, you know. It's too interesting!"

And then he laughed again. "But, you see, you flatter a fellow into talking his head off about himself! Forgive me, and let me do a little cross-examining. How are you? And what have you been doing? You--you know, Venetia--you're looking more exquisitely pretty than ever!"

And so she was--more strangely lovely than ever in all the long span of their friendship: with a deeper radiance in her face, a clearer, more translucent pallor, in her eyes a splendour that lent new dignity to their violet-shadowed mystery.

"I'm glad of that," she said quietly. She folded listless hands in her lap, her eyes seeking distances. "I'm going to be very happy ... I think..."

He looked up sharply.

That she wasn't happy now, he could well understand: that Marbridge was behaving badly was something rather too broadly published by the very publicity of his methods. Marriage had not been permitted to interfere--at least, not after his return from Europe--with the ordinary tenor of his bachelor ways. Matthias himself had seen him not infrequently in theatres and restaurants, but only once in company with Venetia--most often he had been dancing attendance upon a Mrs. Cardrow: she who had given her lips to Matthias, thinking him Marbridge, that long-ago night at Tanglewood. She was said to be stage-struck; and Marbridge was rumoured to be deeply, though quietly, involved in the financing of certain theatrical enterprises.

Surely, then, Venetia must know what everybody knew, and be unhappy in that knowledge.

But now she was so calmly confident that she was "going to be happy"!

He wondered if she were contemplating divorce....

And then in a flash he understood. That woman who had stopped him was not of Venetia's caste; if he guessed not wildly, she was a nurse. And Venetia afoot instead of in her limousine....

She turned her eyes to his, smiling with a certain diffident, sweet sedateness. "You didn't know, Jack?"

He shook his head, looking quickly away.

"But you've guessed?"

"Yes," he replied in a low voice.

Her hand fell lightly over his for a single instant. "Then be glad for me, Jack," she begged gently. "It's--it's compensation."

"I understand," he said, "and I'm truly very glad. It's kind of you to--to tell me, Vènetia."

"It changes everything," she said pensively: "all my world is changed, and I am a new strange woman, seeing it with new eyes. I have learned so much--and in so short a time--I can hardly believe it. To think, it's not a year since that time at Tanglewood--!"

"Please!" he begged.

"Oh, I didn't mean to hurt you, Jack. But it's that I wanted to talk to you about. You won't mind, when you understand, as I have learned to understand.... I tell you, I'm altogether another woman. Marriage is like learning to live in a foreign land, but motherhood is another world. I find it difficult to realize Vènetia of a year ago: she's like some strange creature I once knew but never quite understood. And yet, little as I understood her, I can make excuses for her: I know her impulses were not bad. I know, better than she knew ... she loved you, Jack."

"You must not say that, Vènetia!"

"But it's true, my dear, most true," she insisted in her voice of gentle magic. "The rest ... was just madness, the sort of madness that some men have the power to--to kindle in women. It's a deadly power, very terrible, and they--who have it--use it as carelessly as children playing with matches and gunpowder--"

"Oh, I understand, Vènetia, I understand! Don't--"

"No--let me tell you. I've got to, Jack. I've had this so long in my heart to tell you!... You must be patient with me, this once, and listen.... You must know that I loved you then when I--ran to you--threw myself into your arms--made you ask me to marry you and promised I would and--and thought that I was safe from *him* because of my promise. But I didn't know myself--nor him. He seemed able to make his will my law so easily--so strangely!... Even when I ran away with him, I knew that happiness could never come of it.... It was just the madness ... I couldn't help myself ... I just could not *help* myself.... And then--ah, but I have paid for my madness--many times over!..."

For the moment he couldn't trust himself to speak. The woman bent forward to gain a glimpse of his half-averted face, and searched it anxiously with her haunted eyes.

"You do understand, Jack?... You forgive?..."

"There isn't any question of forgiveness," he said. "And I always understood--half-way. You know that--you must have known it, or you couldn't have said--what you have--to me."

The woman laughed a little, tender, broken laugh.

"I am so glad!" she said softly. "Perhaps it's wrong.... But you've made me a little happier. I have needed so desperately someone to confess to--someone on whose sympathy I could count. And--Jack--the only one in the world was you.... You--you've helped."

She rose, holding out both hands to him, and as he took them and held them tight he saw that her lovely eyes were wide and dim with tears.

"You've proved my faith in you," she said--"my gentle man--my knight sans peur et sans reproche!"

He bent his head to her hands, but before his lips could touch them, very gently she drew them away, and turned and left him.

Bareheaded and wondering, for a long time he stood staring at the spot where, in company with the nurse, she had disappeared.

XXVIII

As soon as the porter had made up the lower berth in the section Joan had reserved for her sole accommodation--in spite of the strain of thrift ingrained in her nature--she retired to it, buttoned securely the heavy plush portieres, and

prepared for rest by reducing herself to that state of semi-undress in which she had learned to travel by night. Then, by the light of the small electric lamp above her pillow, she turned out the contents of her handbag and counted the money she had stolen from Quard.

The sum of it, more than twenty-one hundred dollars, staggered her. She hadn't dreamed that Quard possessed so much ready cash.

Carefully folding the bills of larger denomination into a neat, flat packet, she wrapped them in a handkerchief and hid them in the hollow of her bosom, secured by a safety-pin to her ribbed silk undervest. The remainder, more than enough to cover all ordinary expenses en route to New York, she disposed of more accessibly, half in her handbag, half in one of her stockings.

Then extinguishing the light, she lay back, but not to sleep. The pressure of her emotions was too strong to let her lose touch with consciousness. As a general rule, sleeping-cars had no terrors for Joan; never a nervous woman, her thoroughly sound and healthy organization permitted her to sleep almost at will, even under such discouraging circumstances as those provided by modern railway accommodations. But that night she lay awake till dawn flushed the windows with its wash of grey, awake and staring wide of eye into the gloom of her section, listening to the snores of conscienceless neighbours, and thinking, thinking--thinking endlessly and acutely.

But they were thoughts singularly uncoloured by remorse for what she had done or fear of its consequences.

She was not in the least sorry she had taken Quard's money; she was glad. The mere amount of it was proof enough for Joan that her husband had lied to her about the earnings of the sketch, had lied from the very beginning; otherwise he could by no means have laid by so much in the term of their booking to date. And for that, he deserved to suffer. She was only sorry he might not be made to understand how heavily he was paying for those months of deception. But that was something Quard would never know: with the story of the bell-boy he must be content; he must go through life placing the blame of his misfortune upon the heads of those nameless "stick-up men" of the Barbary Coast.

Nor was he likely to suffer otherwise. Joan was confident the man would manage somehow to find his feet financially, almost as soon as physically. A telegram to his agent, Boskerk, would bring him aid if all else failed; the play was too constant an earner of heavy commissions for Boskerk to let it fall by the wayside for lack of a few hundred dollars. So was it too strong a "draw" on the vaudeville circuits to be blacklisted and barred by managers because of the temporary break-down: something which Quard would readily explain and excuse (and Joan could imagine how persuasively) with his moving yarn of foot-pads and knock-out drops. Nor would it be more than a temporary break-down; with Quard restored to his senses, the absence of the leading woman would prove merely a negligible check. Joan entertained no illusions as to her indispensability: once, in Denver, when she had been out of the cast for two consecutive performances, suffering with an ulcerated tooth, another actress had gone on and actually read the part from manuscript without materially lessening the dramatic effect of the playlet as a whole. Other women by the score could be found to fill her place acceptably enough, if few as handsomely (Joan soothed her pride with this reservation). "The Lie" would go on its conquering way without her--never fear!

And Quard? Joan curled a lip: *he* wouldn't pine away for her. She had come to know too well his shallow bag of tricks; and life to him was not life if he lacked one before whose dazzled vision he could air his graces and accomplishments--strut and crow and trail a handsome wing in the dust. Looking back she could see very clearly, now, how love had waned as soon as lust was sated in the man. That night in Cincinnati had been the turning point: he had refrained from drink only as long as his wife continued to intoxicate his senses.

And Joan?... In the stifling gloom of her curtained section the girl stretched luxuriously, breathed deep, and smiled a secret, enigmatic smile. No more than he, would she waste herself away with grief and longing. She was no longer another's but now her own mistress: a free adventurer, by the gold band upon her finger licensed to cruise with letters of marque.

Shortly before sunrise she fell asleep, still smiling, and slept on sweetly well into mid-morning. Then, rising, she refreshed herself in the wash-room, and went to a late breakfast with countenance as clear and firm and bright as if she had never known a wakeful hour.

The eyes of men followed her wherever she moved, and when she was seated alone in her section, dreaming over a magazine or gazing pensively out of the window, men discovered errands that took them to and fro in her vicinity more often than was warranted by any encouragement she gave them. For she gave them none, she ignored them every one. She was through with Man for good and all!

It was a brand new role, and to play it diverted her immensely for the time being....

She spent the greater part of her waking hours, during the next few days, planning what she would do with all that money. Clothes, of course, figured ever first in these projections, and then a suite of rooms at some ostentatious hotel, and taxicabs when she went out to call on managers. How many times hadn't she heard Maizie Dean solemnly affirm that "a swell front does more to put you in *right* than anything else, with them lowlifers"?

And again she was pleurably diverted by a vision of herself, extravagantly gowned, returning to recount her Odyssey to an admiring audience composed of Ma, Edna, and, perhaps, Butch; at the close of which she would distribute largesse, not forgetting to return Butch's loan with open-handed interest, and go on her way rejoicing, pursued by envious benedictions....

New York received her like a bridegroom, clothed in April sunshine as in a suit of golden mail, amazingly splendid and joyous. After that weary grind of inland towns and cities, differing one from another only in degrees of griminess, greyness, and dullness, New York seemed Paradise Regained to Joan. She had not believed it could seem so beautiful, so magnificent, so sensuously seductive.

In the exaltation of that delirious hour she plunged madly into a department store near the Pennsylvania Station, even before securing lodgings, and bought herself a pair of cheap white kid gloves, simply for the sheer voluptuousness of possessing once again something newly purchased in New York.

It was the beginning of an orgy. Joan hadn't thought how shabby and travel-worn she must seem until she donned those fresh and staring gloves and saw them in relief against the wrinkled and dusty garments she had worn across the continent.

Thoughtful, she sought a nearby mirror and looked herself over, then shook her head and turned away to check her suit-case at the parcels desk and surrender herself body and mind to the sweet dissipation of clothing herself afresh from top to toe....

But first of all she visited the hairdressing and manicuring department: she meant to be altogether spick-and-span before venturing forth to woo and win anew this old and misprized lover, her New York.

It was the head saleswoman of the suit department whose remote disdain led Joan deeper into extravagance.

The girl had selected a taffeta costume which, while by no means the most expensive or the handsomest in stock, possessed the advantage of fitting well her average figure, requiring no alterations. On paying for it she announced her desire to put it on at once and have her old suit sent home.

"Reully?" drawled the saleswoman, disappointed in her efforts to induce the girl to buy a higher-priced suit which did require alterations. Conjuring a pencil from the fastnesses of her back-hair, she produced an order pad. "Miss--what did you say? Ah, Thursday! Thanks. What numba, please? *Is it in the city?*"

Joan flushed, but controlled her impulse to wither and blast this insolent animal.

"The Waldorf-Astoria," she said quietly--though never once had she ventured within the doors of that establishment--and withdrew in triumph to make her change of clothing.

And having committed herself to this extent, she enjoyed ordering everything sent to that hotel, which in her as yet somewhat naive understanding was synonymous with the last word in the sybaritism of metropolitan life.

Her long experience on the road had served thoroughly to break her in to the ways of hotels, however, and she betrayed no diffidence in the matter of approaching the room-clerk for accommodations. Nor did she, apparently, find anything dismaying in the price she was asked to pay for a bedroom with private bath. It was only when, at length relieved of the attentions of the bell-boy whose unconcealed admiration alone was worth the quarter Joan gave him as a tip, she had inspected first her new quarters and then herself in a pier-glass, that the girl gave herself over to alternate tremors of self-approval and trepidation. These last were only increased when she reckoned up the money she had left, and appreciated how much she had spent in that one wild afternoon of shopping.

On the other hand, she reminded herself, a complete new wardrobe was a necessity to one whose former outfit was lost beyond recall. Quard would never have forwarded the clothing she had left behind in San Francisco, even if she could have found the effrontery to write and demand it. And if she had expended upwards of five hundred dollars since reaching New York, there was less extravagance in that than might have been suspected; she had purchased cannily in almost every instance and, at worst, but few things that she could well have done without in that sphere of life to which she felt herself called.

The excitement of unwrapping those parcels which began presently to arrive in shoals, and of reviewing such purchases as she had not worn to the hotel on her back, in time completely reassured her. It was with the composure of

restored self-confidence and esteem that she presently went down to dinner.

Conscious that she was looking her handsome best in a modish afternoon gown, she was able to receive the attentions of the head-waiter with just the proper degree of indifference, to order a simple meal and consume it appreciatively without seeming aware that she dined in strange surroundings.

But all the while she was consumed with admiration of herself for her audacity, as well as with not a little awe-stricken wonder at the child of fortune, who in the space of one brief year--of less, indeed, than that full period--had risen from the stocking-counter of a department store and the squalor and poverty of East Seventy-sixth Street to the dignity of a leading woman and the affluence of lodging at the Waldorf!

True, she now lacked an engagement; but she had to support her demands for new employment the prestige of a successful season with "The Lie"--"the vaudeville sensation of the year," as Quard had truthfully described it.

Need she fret herself with vain questionings of an inscrutable future, who had made such amazing progress in so short a time?

Surely she was justified in assuming that the end for her was not yet, that she was dedicated to some far richer and more gorgeous destiny than any she had ever conceived in her most wild imaginings.

She had only to watch herself: she was her own sole enemy, with her fondness for the admiration of men and their society. Let them realize that weakness, and she was lost, doomed to the way too many capable girls had gone, to the end of infamy and despair. But if only she had the wit and art to make men think her weakness theirs....

And that much Joan was sure she possessed: she believed she had learned to know Man better than herself.

She meant to go far, now, a great deal farther than she had ever thought to go in those quaint, far-off days when the crown of her ambition had been to paint her pretty face, wear silken tights upon her pretty legs, and beat a drum in the chorus of Ziegfield's Follies.

XXIX

After dinner Joan treated herself to the experience of lounging in one of the corridors of the hotel, the one (she fancied: she wasn't sure) known through the Town as "Peacock Alley."

She pretended to be waiting for somebody, made her gaze seem more abstracted than demure. Inwardly she quivered with the excitement, the exaltation of forming a part of that rich and sensuous scene.

There were women all about her, many women of all ages and from every grade of society, alike in one respect alone, that they were radiantly dressed and, like Joan, found pleasure in sunning themselves in the soft, diffused glow of the many shaded electric lamps as well as in the regard, as a rule less shaded, of that endless parade of men who moved, sometimes alone, again with other men, more commonly with women, continually from one part to another of the hotel.

Muted strains from an excellent orchestra, not too near, added the final touch of enchantment to this ensemble.

Entranced though, indeed, seeming little more conscious of her surroundings than one in a day-dream, Joan was acutely sensitive to all that passed in her vicinity. Not a woman came within the range of her vision without being critically inspected, dissected, analyzed, catalogued, both as to her apparel and as to the foundations for her pretensions to social position or beauty. Not a man strolled by, were he splendid in evening dress or merely "smart" in the ubiquitous "sack suit" of the period, without being scrutinized and appraised with a minute attention to detail that would have flattered him had it been less covert.

Joan felt the lust for this life burning like a fire through all her being: there was nothing she could imagine more desirable than to live always as lived, apparently, these hundreds of well-groomed, high-spirited, carefree people....

She had been steeping her soul in the blandishments of this atmosphere for fully half an hour, and was beginning to think it time to return to her room, when she was momentarily startled out of her assumed preoccupation by sight of one who hadn't been far from her thoughts at any time since her break with Quard.

He came walking her way from the general direction of the bar, with another man--both attired as richly as masculine conventions permit in America, and not altogether unconscious of the fact, each in his way guilty of a mild degree of swagger. Of the two, the one betraying the most ease and freedom from ostentation was one known to Joan, chiefly

through the medium of his portraits published in *The Morning Telegraph* and other theatrical organs, as "Archie" Arlington, a producing manager locally famous both for his wit and the shrewdness and success with which he contrived to gauge, year in, year out, public taste in musical comedies. Broadway had tagged him "the only trustworthy friend of the Tired Business Man." Infrequently Arlington ventured in plays without music or dancing, but as a rule with far less success.

His companion, the man whom, Joan felt, she had been subconsciously waiting for ever since entering the hotel, was Vincent Marbridge.

She was impressed with the appositeness of his appearance there to her unexpressed desire, this man who had been so plainly struck by her charms at first sight and who was credited with silent partnership in many of Arlington's enterprises. And comprehending for the first time fully how much she had been subjectively counting on meeting him again and enlisting his sympathies--his sympathies at least--she steeled herself against the shock of recognition, lest she betray her fast mounting anxiety. He must not for a moment be permitted to suspect she considered him anything but the most distant of acquaintances or believed him to have been the anonymous author of that magnificent gift of roses....

But Marbridge passed without seeing her, at all events without knowing that he saw her. Rolling a little as he walked, with that individual sway of his body from the hips, he leaned slightly toward Arlington and gesticulated with immense animation while recounting some inaudible anecdote which seemed to amuse both men mightily. And in the swing of his narrative his glance, wandering, flickered across Joan's face and on without in the least comprehending her as anything more than a lay figure in a familiar setting.

But Arlington, less distracted, looked once keenly, and after he had passed turned to look again.

In spite of this balm to her vanity, Joan flushed with chagrin. She knew in her heart that Marbridge had not other than inadvertently slighted her; yet she felt the cut as keenly as though it had been grossly intentional.

Nevertheless she waited there for many minutes more, in the hope that he would return and this time know her.

At length, however, she saw the two men again, at some distance, standing by the revolving doors at the Thirty-third Street entrance. Both now wore top-coats and hats. Marbridge was still talking, and Arlington listening with the same expression of faintly constrained but on the whole genuine amusement. And almost as soon as Joan discovered them, they were joined by two women in brilliant evening gowns and wraps. An instant later the party was feeding itself into the inappeasable hopper of the revolving door, and so disappeared.

A prey to a sudden sensation of intense loneliness and disappointment--and with this a trace of jealousy; for in spite of the distance she had been able to see that both women were very lovely--Joan got up and returned to her room...

An hour later she rose from a restless attempt to go to sleep, went to the telephone and asked the switchboard operator to find out whether or not Mr. Vincent Marbridge was a guest of the hotel.

The answer was in the affirmative, if modified by the information that the party wasn't in just then.

Intensely gratified, the girl went back to bed and promptly fell asleep formulating ingenious schemes to meet Marbridge by ostensible accident.

On the following day she lunched at the hotel, spent two fruitless hours in its public corridors between tea time and time to dress for dinner, and another in Peacock Alley after dinner, seeing nothing whatever of Marbridge.

And the day after provided her with a fatiguing repetition of this experience.

She began to be tremendously bored by this mode of existence, to sense the emptiness, the vapidness of hotel life for a friendless woman.

Once or twice she revived and let her fancy play about her project to revisit her family in the guise of Lady Bountiful, but only to defer its execution against the time when she could go to them with another engagement to drive home the stupendous proportions of her success.

Besides (she told herself) they seemed to be worrying along without her, all right. If they cared anything about her, they could have written, at least; Edna had the West Forty-sixth Street address....

Not once or twice but many a time and oft she found herself yearning back to the homely society of the Sisters Dean's salon in the establishment of Madame Duprat. And though she held back from revisiting the house through fear of meeting Matthias, she wasted many an hour promenading Broadway from Thirty-eighth Street north to Forty-eighth, in

the hope of encountering Maizie or May or one of their friends.

But it was singularly her fate to espy not one familiar face among the multitude her wistful eyes reviewed during those dreary mid-afternoon patrols.

Everybody she knew, it would seem, was either busy or resting out of town.

On her fourth morning at the Waldorf, reading *The Morning Telegraph* over the breakfast tray in her room, Joan ran across an illuminating news item that carried a Buffalo date line. It chronicled the first performance of Arlington's most recent venture, "Mrs. Mixer," announced as a satirical comedy of manners by an author unknown either to Joan or to fame, and projected by Arlington as a vehicle to exploit the putative talents of Nella Cardrow, "the stage's latest recruit from the Four Hundred." The Buffalo performance was, it appeared, the first of a fortnight's trial on the road, following which the production was to be withdrawn pending a metropolitan debut in the Autumn.

The story of the first night was infused with a thinly sarcastic humour.

"After the final curtain," it pursued, "the audience filed reverently from the house, omitting flowers, and Arlie Arlington broke a track record reaching the nearest Western Union office to summon several well-known ante-mortem specialists of New York to the bedside of the patient. Meanwhile, Vincent Marbridge was hastily organized into a posse of one to prevent Undertaker Cain from laying hands upon the sufferer and carting it off to what might prove premature interment in the mausoleum of his celebrated storage warehouses...."

Dropping the paper, Joan went directly to the telephone and asked the office to have her bill ready within an hour's time.

From this she turned to pack her new possessions in a trunk as new.

It had never occurred to her that Marbridge might have left the hotel.

Now she said that it was "just her luck!..."

By one o'clock that afternoon she had shifted bag and baggage to a stuffy and poorly furnished bedchamber in a crowded, noisy, and not overclean theatrical hotel situated on a corner of Longacre Square.

This establishment consisted of an old and rambling structure of four storeys, of which the street floor was given over to tradesmen. An all-night drug-store held the corner shop, while other subdivisions were occupied by a "tonorial parlor," a dairy-lunch room in the favour of many taxicab chauffeurs, a boot-blackening business, and a theatrical hair-dresser's. Next door, off Broadway, stood one of those reticent brown-stone residences with perennially shuttered windows and a front-door to all appearances hermetically sealed, but negotiable, none the less, to those whom fortune had favoured with the password and sufficient money and witlessness to make them welcome with proprietors of crooked gambling layouts. Across the street rose the side wall of a theatre, decorated with an angular iron fire-escape.

The day was almost unseasonably warm, but the hour appointed when the city should blossom out in awnings had not arrived. Joan's room was hot with sunlight that mercilessly enhanced the shabbiness of all its appointments, from the stained and threadbare carpet to the cheap bureau with its mottled, dark mirror, and the scorched and blistered edges of its top where cigarettes had been suffered to burn out, forgotten.

But when Joan had unpacked and disposed of her belongings, she went to the window as she was, in a loose kimono generously open at the throat, and stood there for a long time, contentedly looking out.

Taxicabs darted or stood with motors sonorously rumbling in the street below. Round the corner, Longacre Square roared with the traffic of its several lines of surface-cars and its unending procession of motor-driven vehicles. The windows of the theatre across the way were open, and through them drifted the clatter of a piano with the surge of half a hundred feminine voices repeating over and over the burden of a chorus--betraying the fact that a rehearsal was in progress. At one of the open fire-escape exits lounged a youth in his shirt-sleeves, smoking a cigarette, and conversing amiably with a young woman in a stiffly-starched white shirtwaist, ankle-length skirt, and brazen hair: principals, Joan surmised, waiting for their turn, when the chorus had learned its business acceptably.

Nearer at hand, in the room to the right of Joan's, a woman with a good voice was humming absently an aria from "La Tosca," while to the left another woman was audible, her strained and nervous accents stuttering on in an endless monologue of abuse, evidently aimed at the head of a husband who, if he had been "drinking again," retained at least wit enough to attempt no sort of interruption or rejoinder.

Joan smiled in comprehension.

Breathing long and deep of tepid air flavoured strongly with dust and the effluvia of dead cigars and cigarettes, she turned away from the window, lifted her arms and spread them wide, luxuriously.

"Thank God!" she murmured with profound sincerity--"for a place you can stretch in!"

XXX

With scant delay Joan began to pick up acquaintances: nothing is easier in that milieu to which the girl dedicated herself.

The process of widening her circle began with meeting the girl whom Joan had heard singing in the adjoining bedchamber. They passed twice in the corridors of the Astoria Inn before Joan had been resident there twenty-four hours, and on the second occasion the girl with the voice nodded in a friendly way and enquired if Joan didn't think the weather was simply awfully lovely today. Joan replied in the affirmative, and their acquaintanceship languished for as long as twelve hours. Then, toward six in the evening, the girl presented herself at Joan's door in a condition of candid deshabille, wishing to borrow a pair of curling-irons. Being accommodated, she came on into the room, perched herself on the edge of the bed, and made herself known.

Her name was Minnie Hession and she had been singing in the chorus for seven years. Originally a prettyish, plump-bodied brunette, she was at present what she herself termed "black-and-tan": in the middle of the process of "letting her hair go back." Her father was Chief of Police of some Western city (name purposely withheld: Joan was, however, assured that she would be surprised if she knew *what* city) and her folks had heaps of money and had been wild with her when she insisted on going on the stage.

"But, goodness, dearie, when you've got tempryment, whatcha goin' to do? Nobody outsid the business ever understands."

All the same, much as the folks disapproved of her carving out a career for herself, whenever she got hard up all she had to do was telegraph straight back home...

She was, of course, at present without employment; but Joan was advised to wait until Arlie Arlington got back into Town; Arlie never forgot a girl who had not only a good voice but *some* figure, if Miss Hession did say it herself.

They went shopping together the following afternoon, and in the evening dined together at a cheap Italian restaurant, counterpart of that to which Quard had first introduced Joan and the Sisters Dean. Joan paid the bill, by no means a heavy one, and before they went home stood treat for "the movies."

After that their friendship ripened at a famous rate, if exclusively at Joan's expense.

Before it had endured a week Joan had loaned Minnie ten dollars. Toward the end of its first fortnight she mortally offended the girl by refusing her an additional twenty, and the next day Minnie moved from the Astoria Inn without the formality of paying her bill or even of giving notice. The management philosophically confiscated an empty suit-case which she had been too timorous to attempt to smuggle out of the house--everything else in her room had mysteriously vanished--and considered the incident closed. In this the management demonstrated its wisdom in its day and generation: it never saw Miss Hession again.

Nor did Joan.

But through the chorus girl, as well as independently, Joan had contracted many other fugitive friendships. She never lacked society, after that, whether masculine or feminine. Men liked her for her good looks and unaffected high spirits; women tolerated her for two reasons, because she was always willing to pay not only her own way but another's, and because she was what they considered a "swell dresser": her presence was an asset to whatever party she lent her countenance.

Frankly revelling in freedom regained, and intoxicated by possession of a considerable amount of money, she let herself go for a time, quite heedless of expense or consequence. Within a month she had become a familiar figure in such restaurants as Burns', Churchill's, and Shanley's; and her laughter was not infrequently heard in Jack's when all other places of its class boasted closed doors and drawn blinds.

Inevitably she acquired a somewhat extensive knowledge of drink. Most of all she learned to love that champagne which Matthias had been too judicious to supply her and from which she had abstained out of consideration for

Quard's weakness. But now there was no reason why she should not enjoy it in such moderation as was practised by her chosen associates. She preferred certain sweetish and heady brands whose correspondingly low cost rendered them more easy to obtain....

But with all this she never failed to practise a certain amount of circumspection. In one respect, she refrained from growing too confidential about herself. That she had been the leading woman with "The Lie" was something to brag about: the very cards which she had been quick to have printed proclaimed the fact loudly in imitation Old English engraving. But that she had been wife to its star was something which she was not long in discovering wasn't generally known. The success of the sketch was a by-word of envy among actors facing the prospect of an idle summer; and the route columns of *Variety* told her that, in line with her prediction, Quard had somehow surmounted his San Francisco predicament and was continuing to guide the little play upon its triumphal course. But Quard himself had always been too closely identified with stock companies of the second class to have many friends among those with whom his wife was now thrown: actors for the most part of the so-called legitimate stage, with scant knowledge or experience (little, at least, that they would own to) of theatrical conditions away from Broadway and the leading theatres of a few principal cities. So Joan kept her own counsel about her matrimonial adventure: its publication could do her no good, if possibly no harm; and she preferred the freedom of ostensible spinsterhood. Her wedding-ring had long since disappeared from her hand, giving place to the handsome diamond with which Matthias had pledged her his faith.

Furthermore, such dissipation as she indulged in was never permitted to carry her beyond the border-line which, in her understanding, limited discretion in her relations with men. She enjoyed leading them on, but marriage had made her too completely cognizant of herself to permit of any affair going beyond a certain clearly defined point: she couldn't afford to throw herself away. And more than once she checked sharply and left an undrained glass, warned by her throbbing pulses that she was responding a trace too ardently to the admiration in the eyes of some male companion of the evening.

But there were only two whom she held dangerous to her peace of mind, one because she was afraid of him, the other because she admired him against her will.

The first was an eccentric dancer and comedian calling himself Billy Salute. A man of middle-age and old beyond his years in viciousness, the gymnastic violence of his calling in great measure counteracted the effects of his excesses and kept him young in body. He was a constant and heavy but what was known to Joan's circle as a safe drinker; drunkenness never obliterated his consciousness or disturbed his physical equilibrium; in spite of its web of wrinkles, his skin remained fair and clear as a boy's, and retained much of the fresh colouring of youth. But his eyes were cold and hard and profoundly informed with knowledge of womankind. His regard affected Joan as had Marbridge's, that day at Tanglewood; under its analysis she felt herself denuded; pretence were futile to combat it: the man *knew* her.

He made no advances; but he watched her closely whenever they were together; and she knew that he was only waiting, patient in the conviction that he had only to wait.

And thus he affected her with such fear and fascination that she avoided him as much as possible; but he was never far out of her thoughts; he lingered always on the horizon of her consciousness like the seemingly immobile yet portentous bank of cloud that masks the fury of a summer storm....

The other man pursued her without ceasing. He was young, not over twenty-five or six--an age to which Joan felt herself immeasurably superior in the knowledge and practice of life--and happened to be the one man of her acquaintance who was neither an actor nor connected with the business side of the stage. By some accident he had blundered from newspaper reporting to writing for cheaply sensational magazines, and from this to writing for the stage. It is true that his achievements in this last quarter had thus far been confined to collaboration with a successful playwright on the dramatization of one of his stories; but that didn't lessen his self-esteem and assertiveness. He claimed extraordinary ability for himself in a quite matter-of-fact tone, and on his own word was on terms of intimacy with every leading manager and star in the country. Nobody Joan knew troubled to contradict his pretensions, and despite that wide and seasoned view of life she believed herself to possess she was still inexperienced enough to credit more than half that he told her, never appreciating that, had the man been what he claimed, he would have had no time to waste toadying to actors.

He might, if not discouraged, prove very useful to her.

In fact, he promised to--repeatedly.

More than this, his attentions flattered her more than she would have cared to confess even to herself. He didn't lack wit, wasn't without intelligence, and the power of his imagination couldn't be denied; thus he figured to her as the only man of mental attainments she had known since Matthias. It was something to be desired by such as this one, even

though his abnormally developed egotism sometimes seemed appalling.

It manifested itself in more ways than one: in his strut, in the foppishness of his dress, in his elaborate affectation of an English accent. He was a small person by the average standard, and slender, but well-formed, and wore clothing admirably tailored if always of an extreme cut. His cheeks were too fleshy, almost plump: something which had the effect of making his rather delicate features seem pinched. Near-sighted, he wore customarily a horn-rimmed pince-nez from which a wide black ribbon dangled like a mourning-band.

His name was Hubert Fowey.

So Joan tolerated him, encouraged him moderately through motives of self-interest, checked him with laughter when he tried to make love to her, secretly admired him even when his conceit was most fatiguing, and wondered what manner of women he had known to make him think that she would ever yield to his insistence....

She had been nearly six weeks in New York when she awoke one morning to rest in languorous regret of a late supper the preceding night, and to wonder whither she was tending, spurred to self-examination by that singularly clear introspective vision which not infrequently follows intemperance--at least, when one is young.

She was reminded sharply that, since returning to Town, she had made hardly a single attempt to find work, beyond having her professional cards printed.

And this was the edge of Summer....

Where would the Autumn find her?

Slipping quickly out of bed, she collected her store of money, and counted it for the first time in several weeks.

The sum total showed a shocking discrepancy between cold fact and the small fortune she had all along been permitting herself to believe she possessed. Even allowing for these heavy initial purchases on returning to New York, her capital had shrunk alarmingly.

She began anew, that day, the rounds of managers' offices.

Also, she laid down for her guidance a rigid schedule of economies. Only by strict observance thereof would she be able to scrape through the Summer without work or financial assistance from some quarter.

Characteristically, she mourned now, but transiently, that she had so long deferred going to see her mother and Edna--something now obviously out of the question; they would want money, to a certainty, and Joan had none to spare them.

A few days later she moved to share, half-and-half, the expenses of a three-room apartment on Fiftieth Street, near Eighth Avenue, with a minor actress whom she had recently met and taken a fancy to. Life was rather less expensive under this regime; the young women got their own breakfasts and, as a rule, lunches that were quite as meagre: repasts chiefly composed of crackers, cold meats from a convenient delicatessen shop, with sometimes a bottle of beer shared between two. If no one offered a dinner in exchange for their society, they would dine frugally at the cheaper restaurants of the neighbourhood. But their admirers they shared loyally: if one were invited to dine, the other accompanied her as a matter of course.

An arrangement apparently conducive to the most complete intimacy; neither party thereto doubted that she was in the full confidence of the other. There were, none the less, reservations on both sides.

Harriet Morrison, Joan's latest companion, was a girl whose very considerable personal attractions and innate love of pleasure were balanced by greenish eyes, a firm jaw, and the sincere conviction that straight-going and hard work would lead her to success upon the legitimate stage. She knew Joan for an incurable opportunist with few convictions of any sort other than that she could act if given a chance, and that men, if properly managed, would give her that chance. For one so temperamentally her opposite, Hattie couldn't help entertaining some unspoken contempt. On the other hand, she believed Joan to be decent, as yet; and halving the cost of living permitted her to indulge in the luxury of a week-end at the seaside once or twice a month.

One day near the first of July the two, happening to meet on Broadway after a morning of fruitless search for engagements, turned for luncheon into Shanley's new restaurant--by way of an unusual treat.

They had barely given their order when Matthias came in accompanied by a manager who had offices in the Bryant Building, and sat down at a table not altogether out of speaking-distance.

To cover her discomfiture, which betrayed itself in flushed cheeks, Joan complained of the heat: an explanation

accepted by Hattie without question, since Matthias had not yet looked their way.

Joan prayed that he might not; but the thing was inevitable, and it was no less inevitable that he should look at the precise instant when Joan, unable longer to curb her curiosity, raised her eyes to his.

For a moment she fancied that he didn't recognize her. But then his face brightened, and he nodded and smiled, coolly, perhaps, but civilly, without the least evidence of confusion. They might have been the most casual acquaintances.

And, indeed, the incident would probably have passed unremarked but for the promptings of Joan's conscience. She was sure the glance of Matthias had shifted from her face to the hand on which his diamond shone, and had rested there for a significant moment.

As a matter of fact, nothing of the sort had happened. Matthias was absorbed in negotiations concerning an old play which had caught the fancy of the manager. Joan, though he knew her at sight, was now too inconsiderable a figure in his world for him to recall, off-hand, that he had ever made her a present.

Nevertheless the girl coloured furiously, and blushed again under the inquisitive stare of her companion.

"Who's that?"

"Who?" Joan muttered sullenly.

"The fellow who bowed to you just now."

"Oh, that?" Joan made an unconvincing effort at speaking casually: "A man named Matthias--a playwright, I believe."

"Oh," said the other girl quietly. "Never done anything much, has he?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know him very well?"

There was a touch of irony in the question that struck sparks from Joan's temper.

"That's my business!"

"I'm sure I *beg* your pardon," Hattie drawled exasperatingly.

And the incident was considered closed, though it didn't pass without leaving its indelible effect upon their association.

With Joan it had another result: it made her think. Retrospectively examining the contretemps, after she had gone to bed that night, she arrived at the comforting conclusion that she had been a little fool to think that Matthias "held that old ring against her." He hadn't been her lover for several weeks without furnishing the girl with a fairly clear revelation of his character. He was simple-hearted and sincere; she could not remember his uttering one ungenerous word or being guilty of one ungenerous action, and she didn't believe he could make room in his mind for an ungenerous thought.

Now if she were to return it, he would think that fine of her...

Of course, she must take it back in person. If she returned it by registered mail, he would have reason to believe her afraid to meet him--that she had been frightened by his mere glance into sending it back.

Not that she hadn't every right in the world to keep it, if she liked: there was no law compelling a girl to return her engagement ring when she broke with a man.

But Matthias would admire her for it.

Moreover, it was just possible that he hadn't as yet arrived at the stage of complete indifference toward her. And he had "the ear of the managers."

Nerving herself to the ordeal, two days later, she dressed with elaborate care in the suit she had worn on her flight from Quard. Newly sponged and pressed, it was quite presentable, if a little heavy for the season; moreover, it lacked the lustre and style of her later acquisitions. It wouldn't do to seem too prosperous....

It was a Saturday afternoon, and Hattie had taken herself off to a nearby ocean beach for the week-end; something for which Joan was grateful, inasmuch as it enabled her to dress her part without exciting comment.

To her relief, a servant new to the house since her time, answered her ring at the bell of Number 289, and with an

indifferent nod indicated the door to the back-parlour.

Behind that portal Matthias was working furiously against time, carpentering against the grain that play to discuss which he had lunched at Shanley's; the managerial personage having offered to consider it seriously if certain changes were made. And the playwright was in haste to be quit of the job, not only because he disapproved heartily of the stipulated alterations, but further because he was booked for some weeks in Maine as soon as the revision was finished.

Humanly, then, he was little pleased to be warned, through the medium of a knock, that his work was to suffer interruption.

He swore mildly beneath his breath, glanced suspiciously at the non-committal door, growled brusque permission to enter, and bent again over the manuscript, refusing to look up until he had pursued a thread of thought to its conclusion, and knotted that same all ship-shape.

And when at length he consented to be aware of the young woman on his threshold, waiting in a pose of patience, her eyes wide with doubt and apprehensions, his mind was so completely detached from any thought of Joan that he failed, at first, to recognize her.

But the alien presence brought him to his feet quickly enough.

"I beg your pardon," he said with an uncertain nod. "You wished to see me about something?"

Closing the door, Joan came slowly forward into stronger light.

"You don't remember me?" she asked, half perplexed, half wistful of aspect. "But I thought--the other day--at Shanley's--"

"But of course I remember you," Matthias interrupted with a constrained smile. "But I wasn't--ah--expecting you--not exactly--you understand."

"Oh, yes," Joan replied in subdued and dubious accents--"I understand."

She waited a moment, watching narrowly under cover of assumed embarrassment, the signs of genuine astonishment which Matthias felt too keenly to think of concealing. Then she added an uneasy:

"Of course...."

"Of course!" Matthias echoed witlessly. "You wanted to see me about something," he iterated, wandering. With an effort he pulled himself together. "Won't you sit down--ah--Joan?"

"Thank you," said the girl. "But I'm afraid I'm in the way," she amended, dropping back into the old, worn, easy-chair.

"Oh, no--I--"

The insincerity of his disclaimer was manifest in an apologetic glance toward the manuscript and a hasty thrust of fingers up through his hair. Joan caught him up quickly.

"Oh, but I know I am, so I shan't stay," she said, settling herself comfortably. "I only ask a minute or two of your time. You don't mind?"

"Mind? Why, I--certainly not."

She looked down as if disconcerted by his honest, perplexed, questioning eyes.

"I was afraid you might, after--after what's happened--"

He fumbled for a cigarette, beginning to feel more calm, less nervous than annoyed. The fact of her unruffled self-possession had at length penetrated his understanding.

"No," he said slowly, rolling the cigarette between his palms, "I don't mind in the least, if I can be of service to you."

"But I was very foolish," Joan persisted, "and--and unkind. I've been sorry ever since...."

"Don't be," Matthias begged, his tone so odd that she looked up swiftly and coloured.

Thus far everything had gone famously, quite as rehearsed in the theatre of her optimistic fancy; but the new accent in his voice made her suddenly fear lest, after all, the little scene might not play itself out as smoothly as it had promised to.

"Don't be," Matthias repeated coolly. "It's quite all right. Take my word for it: as far as I'm concerned you've nothing at all to reproach yourself with."

Her flush deepened. "You mean you didn't care--!"

Matthias smiled, but not unkindly. "I mean," he said slowly--"neither of us really cared."

"Speak for yourself--" Joan cut in with a flash of temper; but he obtained her silence with a gentle gesture.

"Please ... I mean, we both lost our heads for a time. That was all there was to it, I think. Naturally it couldn't last. You were wise enough to see that first and--ah--did the only thing you decently could, when you threw me over. I understood that, at once."

"But I," she began in a desperate effort to regain lost ground--"I was afraid you'd hate and despise me--"

"Not a bit, Joan--believe me, not for an instant. When I had had time to think it all out, I was simply grateful. I could never have learned to hate or despise you--as you put it--whatever happened; but if you hadn't been so sensible and far-sighted, the affair might have run on too far to be remedied. In which case we'd both have been horribly unhappy."

This was so far from the attitude she had believed he would adopt, that Joan understood her cause to be worse than forlorn: it was lost; lost, that is, unless it could be saved by her premeditated heroic measure.

Fumbling in her bag, she found his ring.

"Perhaps you're right," she said with a little sigh. "Anyhow, it's like you to put it that way.... But what I really came for, was to return this."

She offered the ring. He looked, startled, from it to her face, hesitated, and took it. "O--thanks!" he said, adding quite truthfully: "I'd forgotten about that"; and tossed it carelessly to his work-table where, rolling across the face of a manuscript, it oscillated momentarily and settling to rest, seemed to wink cynically at its late possessor.

Joan blinked hastily in response: there was a transient little mist before her eyes; and momentarily her lips trembled with true emotion. The scene was working out more painfully than she had ever in her direst misgivings dreamed it might.

Deep in her heart she had all along nursed the hope that he would insist on her retaining the ring. That would have been like the Matthias of her memories!

But now he seemed to think that she ought to be glad thus to disburden her conscience and by just so much to modify her indebtedness to him!

Struck by this thought, Joan gasped inwardly, and examined with startled eyes the face of Matthias. It was her first reminder of the fact that he had left her one hundred and fifty unearned dollars. She had forgotten all about that till this instant. Otherwise, she would have hesitated longer about calling. She wondered if he were thinking of the same thing; but his face afforded no index to his thoughts. He wasn't looking at her at all, in fact, but down, in abstraction, studying the faded pattern of the carpet at his feet.

She wondered if perhaps it would advance her interests to offer to return the money, to pay it back bit by bit--when she found work. But wisely she refrained from acting on this suggestion.

"I'm sorry I was so long about bringing it back," she resumed with an artificial manner. "I was always meaning to, you know, and always kept putting it off. You know how it is when you're on the road: one never seems to have any time to one's self."

"I quite understand," Matthias assured her gravely.

She grew sensitive to the fact that he was being patient with her.

"But I really mustn't keep you from your work," she said, rising. "You--you knew I was working, didn't you?"

"I heard," Matthias evaded--"in a roundabout way--that you were playing in vaudeville."

The girl nodded vigorously. "Oh, yes; I was all over, playing the lead in a sketch called 'The Lie.' It was a regular knock-out. You ought to have seen how it got over. It's still playing, somewhere out West, I guess."

"You left it, then?" Matthias asked, bored, heartily wishing her out of the house.

She was aching to know if he had learned of her marriage. But then she felt sure he couldn't possibly have heard about

it. Still, she wondered, if he did know, would it modify his attitude toward her in any way?

"Yes," she resumed briskly, to cover her momentary hesitation, "I left it the week we played 'Frisco. I had to. The star and I couldn't seem to hit it off, somehow. You know how that is."

"And yet you must have managed to agree with him pretty well, from all I hear."

"What did you hear?"

(Did he really know, then?)

"Why," Matthias explained ingeniously, "you must have been with the sketch for several months, by your own account. You couldn't have been bickering all that time."

Confidence returned.... "Oh, that! Yes, of course. But I could see it coming a long ways ahead. So I quit, and came back to look for another engagement. You--"

She broke off, stammering.

"Beg pardon?" Matthias queried curiously.

Joan flushed again. "You don't know of anything I could do, just now, I suppose?"

He shook his head. "Not at present, I'm afraid."

"If you should hear of anything, it would be awful' good of you to let me know."

"Depend upon me, I shall."

"Care of The Dramatic Mirror will always get me."

"I shan't forget."

"Well...." She offered him her hand with a splendidly timid smile. "I suppose it's good-bye for good this time."

Matthias accepted her hand, shook it without a tremor, and released it easily.

"I've a notion it is, Joan," he admitted.

She turned toward the door, advanced a pace or two, and paused.

"They say Arlington's going to make a lot of new productions next Fall...."

"Yes?"

"Well, I was wondering if you wouldn't mind putting in a good word for me."

"I would be glad to, but unfortunately I don't know Mr. Arlington."

"But you know Mr. Marbridge, and everybody says he's Arlington's silent partner."

Matthias looked as uncomfortable as he felt.

"I am not sure that is true," he said slowly, "and--well, to tell the truth, Marbridge and I aren't on the best of terms. I'm afraid I couldn't influence him in any way--except, perhaps, to prejudice him."

"Oh!" Joan said blankly....

It came to her, in a flash, that the two men might have quarrelled about her, thanks to the obvious fascination she had exerted over Marbridge, that age-old day at Tanglewood.

"I suppose," she ventured pensively, "I might go to see him--Mr. Marbridge--myself--?"

"I'm afraid I can't advise you."

This time the accent of finality was unmistakable. Joan bridled with resentment. After all, he'd no real call to be so uppish, simply because she hadn't let him stand between her and her career....

"You don't really think I ought to go and see him, do you?"

"I wish you wouldn't ask me, Joan."

"But I've got no one to advise me.... If you don't think it wise, I wish you'd say so. I thought perhaps it was a chance...."

Matthias shrugged, excessively irritated by her persistence. "I can only say that I wouldn't advise any woman to look to Marbridge for anything honourable," he said reluctantly.

"Oh!" the girl said in a startled tone.

"But--I'm sorry you made me say that. It's none of my affair. Please forget I said it."

"But you make it so hard for me."

"I?" he cried indignantly--"I make it hard for you!"

"Well, I come to you for advice--friendly advice--and you close in my very face the only door I can see to any sort of work. It's--it's pretty hard. I can act, I know I can act! I guess I proved that when I was with Charlie--Mr. Quard--the star of 'The Lie,' you know. I couldn't've stuck as long as I did if I hadn't had talent.... But back here in New York, all that doesn't seem to count. Here I've been going around for two months, and all they offer me is a chorus job with some road company. But Arlington ... he employs more girls than anybody in the business. I know he'd give me a chance to show what I can do, if I could only get to him. And then you tell me not to try to get to him the only way I know."

Abruptly Joan ceased, breathing heavily after that long and, even to her, unexpected speech. But it had been well delivered: she could feel that. She clenched her hands at her sides in a gesture plagiarized from a soubrette star in one of her infrequent scenes of stage excitement; and stood regarding Matthias with wide, accusing eyes.

His own were blank...

He was trying to account to himself for the fact that this girl seemed to have the knack of making him feel a heartless scoundrel, even when his stand was morally impregnable, even though it were unassailable.

Here was this girl, evidently convinced that he had not dealt squarely with her, believing that he deliberately withheld--out of pique, perhaps--aid in his power to offer her...

He passed a hand wearily across his eyes, and turned back toward his work-chair.

"You'd better sit down," he said quietly, "while I think this out."

Without a word the girl returned to the arm-chair and perched herself gingerly upon the edge of it, ready to rise and flee (she seemed) whenever it should pardonably suggest itself to Matthias that the only right and reasonable thing for him to do was to rise up and murder her...

On his part, sitting, he rested elbows upon the litter of manuscript, and held his head in his hands.

He was sorry now that he had yielded to the temptation to be plain-spoken about Arlington and Marbridge. But she had driven him to it; and she was an empty-headed little thing and ought really to be kept out of *that* galley. On the other hand, he was afraid that if he allowed himself to be persuaded to help her find a new engagement, she would misunderstand his motives one way or another--most probably the one. He couldn't afford to have her run away with the notion that his affection for her had been merely hibernating. He had not only himself, he had Vénétia to think of, now. To her he had dedicated his life, to a dumb, quixotic passion. Some day she might need him; some day, it seemed certain, she would need him. She was presently to have a child; and Marbridge was going on from bad to worse; things could not forever endure as they were between those two. And then she would be friendless, a woman with a child fighting for the right to live in solitary decency....

But Joan!... If she were headed that way, toward the Arlington wheel within the wheel of the stage, even at risk of blame and misunderstanding Matthias felt that he ought to do what could be done to set her back upon the right road. It was too bad, really. And it was none of his business. The girl had given herself to the theatre of her own volition, after all. Or had she? Had the right of choice been accorded her? Or was it simply that she had been designed by Nature especially for that business, to which women of her calibre seemed so essential? Was she, after all, simply life-stuff manufactured hastily and carelessly in an old, worn mould, because destined solely to be fed wholesale into the insatiable maw of the stage?

He shook his head in weary doubt, and sighed.

"Probably," he said, fumbling with a pen and avoiding her eyes--"I presume--you'd better come back in a day or two--say Tuesday. That will give me time to look round and see what I can scare up for you. Or perhaps Wednesday would be even better...."

He dropped the pen and rose, his manner inviting her to leave.

"Wednesday?" she repeated, reluctantly getting up again.

"At four, if that's convenient."

"Yes, indeed, it is. And ... thank you so much ... Jack."

"No, no," Matthias expostulated wearily.

"No, I mean it," she insisted. "You're awfully sweet not to be--unkind to me."

"Believe me, I could never be that."

"Then--g'dafternoon."

"Good afternoon, Joan."

But as he moved to open the door, his eyes were caught by the flash from a facet of the diamond; and the thought came to him that its presence there assorted ill with his latest assurance to the girl. Catching it up, he offered it to Joan as she was about to go.

"And this," he said, smiling--"don't forget it, please."

Automatically her hand moved out to take it, but was stayed. Her eyes widened with true consternation, and she gasped faintly.

"You--you don't mean it?"

"Oh, yes, I do. Please take it. I've really no use for it, Joan, and--well, you and I know what professional life means." He grinned awry. "It might be of service to you some day."

With a cry of gratitude that was half a sob, but with no other acknowledgment, the girl accepted the gift, stumbled through the door in a daze, and so from the house.

XXXI

So it seemed that all men were much alike. Joan knew but two types, the man who lived by his brains and the man who lived by his wits, but had no more hesitation in generalizing from these upon masculine society as a whole than a scientist has in constructing a thesis upon the habits of prehistoric mammalia from the skull of a pterodactyl and the thigh-bone of an ichthyosaurus....

They were all much alike: if you knew how to get round one kind, you knew how to win over the other; there was a merely negligible difference in the mode of attack. You appealed to their sympathies, or to their sentiments, or their appetites, and if these failed you appealed to their pride in their self-assumed role of the protectors.

It was no great trick, once you had made yourself mistress of it.

By this route Joan achieved the feat of looking down on Matthias; and that was not wholesome for the girl, leaving her world destitute of a single human soul that commanded her respect.

She had needed only to stir up his jealousy of Marbridge and his innate chivalry....

As if she didn't know what Arlington's companies were like! The facts were notorious; nobody troubled to blink them; Arlington's employees least of all. It wasn't their business to blink the facts; a girl without following had as little chance of securing a place in one of his choruses as a girl without a pretty figure.

But, of course, a handsome girl with a good figure....

Joan glanced in a shop window, en passant; but she saw nothing of the display of wares. The plate glass made a darkling mirror for the passers-by: Joan could see that her refurbished travelling suit fitted her becomingly, even though it was a trifle passe.

She hurried home and changed it, and hurried forth again to keep an appointment with Hubert Fowey.

They dined at a pretentious hotel, in an "Orange Garden" whose false moonlight and tinkling, artificial fountain manufactured an alluring simulacrum of romantic night, despite the incessant activities of a ragtime-bitten orchestra and the inability of the ventilating system to infuse a hint of coolness into the heavy, superheated air.

Joan had little appetite--the day had been too over-poweringly hot--but she was very thirsty; and Fowey provided a brand of champagne less sweet and heady than she would have chosen, and consequently more insinuating.

During the meal Billy Salute appeared at a table across the room and invisible to Fowey, whose back was toward it, but still not far enough removed to prevent Joan from recognizing that look in the dancer's eyes which she resented so angrily. She didn't once look at the man; but she never quite lost sight of him, and was well aware that he was ridiculing Fowey to his companion--an actor, by many an indication, but a stranger to Joan.

Provoked, she demonstrated her contempt of Salute by flirting outrageously with Fowey. Unconscious of her motive, that aspiring little dramatic author lost his head to some extent. Now and again his voice trembled when he spoke to her, and once he mumbled something about marriage, but checked at discretion, and let his words trail off inarticulately.

Joan was not to be denied.

"What did you say?" she demanded, with her most distracting smile.

"Oh, nothing of any importance," muttered Fowey, his face reddening.

"But you did say something. I only caught part of it. Hubert, I want to know!"

It was the first time she had used his given name.

"I--I only wondered if you were married," he stammered. "You talk so cursed little about yourself!"

"Does it matter?" she parried, surrender in her eyes.

He choked and gulped on his champagne.

"But you're not, are you?" he persisted.

"What's that to you?"

He hesitated and changed the subject, fearful lest his tongue compromise him.

"What shall we do now? Don't say a roof garden. Let's get out of this infernal smother. I vote for a taxi ride to Manhattan Beach."

Joan assented.

Leaving, they passed Salute's table. Joan gave the dancer a distant and chilling greeting, and swept haughtily past, ignoring his offer to rise. The insolent irony of his eyes was incredibly offensive to her. They said: "I am waiting, I am patient, I make no effort, I am inevitable."

She swore in her soul that she would prove them wrong.

In the taxicab Fowey made some slighting reference to the dancer.

"He's the devil!" Joan declared with profound conviction.

But she wouldn't explain her reasons for so naming him.

When occasion offered, in the more shadowed stretches of their course to the sea, Fowey attempted to kiss her. But she would have none of him then, fending him off by main strength and raillery; and she was pleased with the discovery that she was stronger than he. Yet another evidence of the inferiority of man!

At the beach, Fowey ordered a claret cup. Joan demanded an ice and drank sparingly; but when again in the motor-car, homeward-bound, she was abruptly smitten with amazement to find herself in Fowey's arms, submitting to his kisses if not returning them.

For a time she remained so and let him talk love to her.

It was pleasant, to be--wanted....

Arrived at the little flat, she had to prevent Fowey's following her in, again by main strength, slamming the door in his face.

Bolting the door, she turned to a mirror "to see what a fright she must have looked." But it seemed a radiant vision that smiled back at her.

She thought hazily of Hubert Fowey.

"That kid!" she murmured, not altogether in contempt, but almost compassionately.

It was a shame to tease him so....

Not until the next day, that dawned upon her consciousness amid the thunders of a splitting headache, did she appreciate how far the affair had gone.

Penitent, she vowed reformation. She wasn't going to let any man think he could make a fool of her, much less that conceited little whippersnapper.

As it happened, she didn't see the amateur dramatist again for some days. He, too, had vowed reformation, and on much the same moral grounds.

Her appointment with Matthias, for Wednesday at four, Joan failed to keep. And since that was her own affair, and since she had not left him her address, Matthias kept to himself the word that he had for her and, in accordance with his original intention, boarded the Bar Harbor Express that same evening, and forgot New York for upwards of ten weeks.

It had rained all day Tuesday, and Wednesday was overcast but dry and, by contrast with what had been, cool. Dressing for her interview with Matthias, Joan donned a summery gown of lawn, liberally inset with lacework over her shoulders and bosom: a frock for the country-house or the seashore, never for the Broadway pavements. None the less it was quite too pretty to be wasted on Matthias alone. She set out to keep her appointment with an hour to spare, purposing to employ the interval by running, at leisure, the gauntlet of masculine admiration on Broadway as far south as Thirty-eighth Street. For this expedition she would have preferred company; but Hattie, having looked her over, announced that she couldn't dress up to Joan's style, didn't mean to try, and didn't care to be used as a foil; furthermore, it was much more sensible to loaf round the flat in little or no clothing at all, and read up on Pinero.

From the Astor Theatre corner Joan struck across Broadway to the eastern sidewalk, chiefly to avoid the throng of loungers in front of the Bryant Building: it is good to be admired, but Joan had little taste for the form of admiration that becomes vocal at once intimately and publicly.

Half-way down the New York Theatre Building block, she turned abruptly and scuttled like a frightened quail into the lobby, from the back of which, turning, she was able to see, without being seen by, Quard.

Brief as the term of their dissociation was, in mere point of elapsed time, Joan had so completely divorced herself from her husband that she was actually beginning to forget him; physically no less than mentally she was beginning to forget him. An outcast from her life, he no longer had any real existence in her world. By some curious freak of sophistry she had even managed to persuade herself she was never to see him again. Thus it seemed the most staggering shock she had ever experienced, to recognize the man's head and shoulders looming above the throng before the entrance to the moving-picture show, just south of the lobby to the New York Theatre proper.

But Quard hadn't seen her. He was with companions, a brace of vaudeville actors whom Joan knew through him. But while she waited for them to pass, two other friends accosted the three, directly before the lobby entrance, and they paused to exchange greetings. Quard slapped both newcomers on their shoulders, and kept his hand on the last he slapped, bending forward and engaging their interest with some intimate bit of ribaldry. He had been drinking--Joan saw that much at a glance--not heavily, but enough to render his good-fellowship boisterous.

Otherwise he looked well. He was hardly to be identified with that sodden wreck which had been brought from the Barbary Coast back to the woman he had insulted and abused. His colour was good, his poise assured. He was wearing new clothing--a loud shepherd's-plaid effect which Joan couldn't possibly have forgotten. No one could possibly have forgotten it. And he had acquired a dashing Panama hat which at least looked genuine at that slight distance. Useless to have wasted pity on the man: he had fallen, but not far, and he had fallen on his feet.

Joan eyed him with fear, despair, and loathing.

Had he come to render New York too small to contain them both?

She skulked in the farthest corner of the lobby, in shadows, not quite round the corner of the elevator shaft--where she could just see and ran least risk of being seen--and waited. But the group on the sidewalk seemed to have settled down to a protracted session. When Quard had finished talking, and the laughter had quieted down, another fixed the

attention of the group with a second anecdote, of what nature Joan could well surmise.

Of course, it was only a question of time before Quard would propose a drink.

Then she would be free to proceed to her appointment.

But through some oversight the suggestion remained temporarily in abeyance; and Joan was unlucky in that none of the policemen appeared, who are assigned to the business of keeping actors moving in that neighbourhood.

After a minute or two Quard shifted his position so that he could, by simply lifting his eyes, have looked directly into the lobby.

At this Joan turned in desperation and entered the cage of an elevator, which happened just then to be waiting with an open gate.

There were several theatrical enterprises with offices on one of the upper floors: no reason why Joan shouldn't wait in one of these until it would be safe to venture forth again. There was Arlington's, for instance.

Joan's was no strange figure there. She had long since made several attempts to see Arlington or one of his lieutenants; but her professional cards, borne in to them by a disillusioned office-boy, had educed no other response than "Mist' Arlington says they's nothin' doin' just' present."

But it was as good a place as any for Joan's purpose, and there could be no harm trying again.

The same world-weary boy received her card when she entered the suite of offices. He considered it, and Joan as well, dispassionately.

"Whoja wanna see?" he mumbled with patent effort.

Joan's prettiest smile was apparently wasted upon the temperament of an anchorite.

"Mr. Arlington, please."

The boy offered to return the card: "He ain't in."

"That's what you always tell me."

"He ain't never in."

"Very well," said Joan sweetly: "I'll wait."

The boy started to say something pointed, hesitated, regarded her with dull suspicion, and suddenly enquired:

"Whaja wanna see 'm 'bout?"

"A matter of private business."

"Ah," drawled the boy with infinite disgust, "tha's what they all say!" An embittered grimace shaped upon his soiled face. "Lis'n!" he said, almost affably--"if yuh'll think up a good one, I'll fetch this inta his sec'try. Now cud anythin' be fairer 'n that?"

"I'll go you," Joan retorted, falling in with his spirit. "Tell him a friend of Mr. Marbridge's wants to see him."

She esteemed this a rather brilliant bit of diplomacy, and at the same time considered herself stupid not to have thought of it before. But it failed to move the office-boy. His head signalled a negative.

"Havta do better'n that," he announced. "If I fell for ev'ry wren what claims she's a nintimate frien' of Mista Marbridge--"

"But I am a friend of his--truly I am!" Joan insisted warmly.

The boy rammed a hand into a trouser's-pocket. "Betcha--" he began; but reconsidered. "Yuh never can tell 'bout a skirt," he reminded himself audibly. "But, jus' to prove I'm a sport, I'll go yuh."

Motioning Joan through the door of the reception room, he shambled off with an air of questioning his own sanity.

The reception room was perhaps thirty feet long by fifteen wide: an interior room, lighted, and none too well, by electricity, ventilated, when at all, through the doorways of adjoining offices. A row of cane-seated chairs was aligned against the inner wall. In the middle of the floor stood a broad and substantial table of oak; it was absolutely bare. Here

and there a few unhappy lithographs, yellowing "life-size" photographs of dead or otherwise extinguished stars, and a framed play-bill or two of Arlington's earlier ventures, decorated the dingy drab wall. There was no floor-covering of any description.

In this room herded some two-score people of the stage, waiting hopefully for interviews that were, as a rule, granted to not more than one applicant in ten: a heterogeneous assemblage, owning a single characteristic in common: whenever, at the far end of the room, the door opened leading to the offices of the management, every head turned that way, and every voice was hushed in reverence.

Yet it was seldom that the door disclosed anything more unique than a second office-boy, even more dejected than the first, who, peering through, would, after examining the card in his hand for the name of the applicant, painfully recite some stereotyped phrase worn smooth--"Mista Brown? Y'ur party says t' come back next week!" "Miss Holman? Y'ur party's went out 'n' won't be back th'safternoon!" "Miss Em'rson? Mista Arlington says ever'thin's full up just'present. Call 'n ag'in!" or more infrequently: "Mista Grayson's t' step in, please...."

Joan found a vacant chair.

She had no hope whatever of being admitted to the Presence, despite the unexpected condescension of the office-boy. Marbridge's name might prove the Open Sesame; but she doubted that vaguely: "it wouldn't be her if *that* happened!"

The atmosphere was stifling with heat complicated by stale human breath and the reek of perfumery, all stratified with layers of tobacco smoke which entered over the transoms of the communicating offices. Above the muted murmurings of the unemployed's apprehensive voices could be heard the brisk chattering of two or three type-writing machines; and telephone bells rang incessantly, near and far, one taking up the tune as soon as another ended. The throng of applicants shuffled their feet uneasily, expectantly, morosely.

Joan was so uncomfortable and oppressed that she was tempted to rise and go without waiting for the discounted answer. Only dread of encountering Quard restrained her. The longer she delayed, the slighter the chance of finding him still in front of the theatre....

Her thoughts drifted into reverie dully coloured with misgivings. She thought of Charlie Quard as a bird of ill-omen whose appearance could presage nothing but suffering and disaster; ignoring altogether the truth, that through his good offices alone, however tainted with self-interest, she had been suffered to enter into the profession whose ranks she had elected to adorn; with that other truth, that she owed him for the clothing she wore, the food she ate, the very roof that sheltered her--and meant never to repay....

The voice of the second office-boy chanted her name twice before she heard it.

"Miss Thursd'y?... Miss Joan Thursd'y?"

Joan started to her feet.

"Yes--?"

"Th' party you ast for says please t' step this way!"

XXXII

Between gratification and misgivings, Joan followed her guide in a flutter of emotion. When intending nothing more than to provide an excuse for using the anteroom as a temporary refuge, she hadn't for an instant questioned her right to use Marbridge's name. But now that it appeared she was to gain thereby the boon of an audience with Arlington, she was torn by doubts.

After all, her acquaintance with Marbridge had been one of the most tenuous description. True, the man had seemed attracted by her at the time; but that was many months ago; and only recently he had looked her fair in the face without knowing her. She had really gained her advantage through false pretences. And when Marbridge learned of this, would he not resent it? Had she not, through her presumption, put herself in the way of defeating her own ends?

She brought up before a closed door in a state of nervousness not natural with her.

"You're to wait a minute," her guide advised.

She was thankful he wasn't the guardian of the outer defences: just at present she was in no fit mood to bandy

persiflage successfully.

But she was uncomfortably conscious that this present boy eyed her curiously as he threw open the office door.

She entered, and he closed it after her.

The room was untenanted, but a haze of cigar smoke in the air indicated that it had been only recently vacated. It was handsomely furnished, carpeted and decorated. The broad, flat-topped desk in one corner boasted an elaborate display of ornate desk hardware. In the middle of the blotting-pad a sheaf of letters lay beneath a bronze paperweight of unique design. All in all, an office owning little in common with the generality of those to which Joan had theretofore penetrated....

She sat herself down uneasily.

A door communicating with the adjoining office, though a solid door of oak, was an inch or so ajar. Through it penetrated sounds of masculine voices in conversation--but nothing distinguishable.

Five minutes passed. Then the conference in the next room broke up amid laughter; the doorknob rattled; and Joan rose automatically.

Marbridge entered.

For a moment, in her surprise and consternation, Joan could only stare and stammer. But obvious though her agitation was, Marbridge ignored it gracefully. Shutting the door tight, he advanced with an outstretched hand and a smile there was no resisting--with, in short, every normal evidence of friendly pleasure in their meeting.

"Well, Miss Thursday!" he said, gratification in his carefully modulated voice. "This is public-spirited of you!"

Joan shook hands limply, her face crimson beneath his pardonably admiring stare.

"I--thank you--but--"

"Really," he went on smoothly, "I consider it mighty nice of you to look me up. Fancy your remembering me! Do sit down. We must have a chat. Fortunately, you've caught me in an off-hour."

Retaining her hand coolly enough, he introduced the girl to a capacious lounge-chair beside the desk, then settled himself behind it.

Joan shook her wits together.

"You're awfully kind--"

"I--kind?" Marbridge denied the implication with an indulgent smile. "My dear Miss Thursday, if you get to know me well--and I sincerely hope you will some day--you'll find there's not a spark of human generosity in my system. I think only of my own pleasure. How can there be kindness to you in my seizing this chance to improve our acquaintance? I declare, I thought you'd forgotten me!"

"Oh, no!" Joan protested.

"Really? That's charming of you. But tell me about yourself. How long have you been back?"

"Not long," Joan replied instinctively to the first stock question that marks every other similar meeting in the theatrical district of New York. "That is--I mean--a couple of months."

"Oh, then you didn't stay with 'The Lie'?"

"You knew about that?"

Marbridge nodded briskly. "Indeed, I did! Pete Gloucester told me all about you--how splendidly you were doing at rehearsals--and then, one afternoon in Chicago, I saw the sketch billed and dropped in at the theatre for the sole purpose of seeing you. And if I hadn't had a train to catch, I'd have come right round back to congratulate you. Fact! You were wonderful. You were more than wonderful: you were downright adorable, and no mistake!"

Under the tonic stimulus of his flattery, Joan recovered her self-possession with surprising readiness--so swiftly that she almost forgot to cover the phenomenon with prolonged evidences of pretty confusion.

She looked down, her colour high, and smiling traced with a gloved forefinger an invisible seam in her skirt; and then, looking up shyly, she appraised Marbridge with one quick, shrewd, masked glance.

Her instinct had not misled her: this man esteemed her at a high value.

"It's awfully kind of you to say so," she murmured demurely.

Marbridge bent forward, leaning on the desk, his gaze ardent.

"I only say what I think, Miss Thursday. I watched you act that afternoon--and so far as I was concerned, you were the whole sketch!--and made up my mind then and there you were a girl with a great big future."

"Oh, but really, Mr. Marbridge--"

"Give you my word! I said to myself then and there: 'Here's a little woman worth watching, and if ever I get a chance to lend her a helping hand and don't do it, I'd better quit fussing with this theatrical game.' And that was the effect of seeing you play just once, mind you!"

"I'm afraid you're a dreadful kidder, Mr. Marbridge."

His injured look was eloquent of the injustice that she did him.

"You don't believe me? Very well, Miss Thursday--wait! Some day I'll surprise you." He swung back in his chair, smiling genially. "Some one of these days you'll set your heart on something I have the say in--and then you'll be able to judge of my sincerity."

"If I dared believe you," Joan told him boldly, "I might put you to the test sooner than you think."

"Well, and why not? I'm ready."

But as Joan would have gone on, the desk-telephone rang sharply, and Marbridge, excusing himself with a mumbled apology, turned to the instrument and lifted the receiver to his ear.

"Hello.... Who?... Oh, send her in to see Mr. Arlington.... Oh, he did, eh?... Well, say I'm not in either.... Yes, gone for the day."

Replacing the instrument, he swung round again. "There's proof already," he informed her cheerfully. "That was Nella Cardrow--one of the biggest propositions on our list--star of 'Mrs. Mixer.' And I'm putting her off solely to show you how sincerely I'm interested in what you have to say to me." He bent forward again, confidentially. "Now tell me: what can I do for you?"

"Give me a job," Joan informed him honestly. "That's all I want just now--work--a part in anything you have influence with."

"Then you *have* left 'The Lie'?" Marbridge persisted incredulously.

Joan nodded. "I had to. I couldn't stand it any longer."

"But--without you--why, I don't know what they were thinking of, to let you go!"

"I just couldn't get along with the star, and that's all there was to it," Joan declared. "He was a boozier and--well, I had to quit."

"And the sketch--"

"Oh, it went on, all right, I guess."

"Without you! Well, that's hard to credit. However...." Marbridge leaned back and for a moment stared thoughtfully out of the window. "I really can't think of anything we've got open just now that's good enough to offer you."

"Please don't think of me that way, Mr. Marbridge," Joan pleaded earnestly, more than half deceived. "I'm ready for anything, to get a chance to show these people what I can do. Anything--however small--just so it gives me a show--I don't care what!"

Marbridge preserved admirably his look of intent gravity. "Let me think a moment," he requested, pursing his full lips.

Joan watched him closely through that brief silence, her mood one of curious texture, compounded in almost equal parts of hope and doubt, of wonder and misgivings, of appreciation of her own courage and shrewdness, and of admiration for Marbridge.

He was by no means what she would have termed handsome, but he was uncommonly individual, a personality that left an ineffaceable impression of strength and masculinity; and with this he had an air of being finished and complete, as

though he not only knew better than most how to take care of himself in all ways, but slighted himself in none. She thought his mode of dress striking, combining distinction and taste to an extraordinary degree.... And when in his abstraction he pinched his chin gently between thumb and forefinger, she was impressed with the discovery that a man's hand could be at once well-manicured and muscular...

He turned back abruptly with a sparkle of enthusiasm in his bold and prominent eyes.

"By George, I think I have it!..."

"Yes--?" she breathed excitedly.

He considered an instant longer, shook his head, and jumped up. "I must consult Arlington first," he declared. "I wouldn't care to commit him without his consent. No--don't get up. Just excuse me one minute. I'll be right back."

And before she could protest--had she entertained the faintest idea of doing anything of the sort--he left the room by the same door which had admitted him.

Immediately she was again aware of a rumble of voices in the next office, but now it was even more indefinite.

And again she waited a full five minutes alone....

When Marbridge rejoined her, it was with an air apologetic and disappointed.

"It's too bad," he announced, aggrieved, "but it seems Arlington has really gone for the day. I shan't see him before evening, likely, possibly not until tomorrow. So I must ask you to trouble yourself to come back, if you don't mind."

"Mind!" Joan laughed, rising. "Oh, I guess not."

"Well," Marbridge assured her, "I don't think you'll have any wasted time to regret. But I can't promise anything until I'm sure Arlington hasn't made other arrangements, or until I've managed to put a crimp into 'em if he has."

"But you mustn't do that--"

"Hush!" Marbridge paused to chuckle infectuously. "There's one trouble," he amended, more gravely, "and that is, I haven't got any too much time. I'm booked to sail for Europe Saturday, and have got so many little things to attend to, I'm running round in circles. But don't you fret: I've got this matter right next to my heart, Miss Thursday, and I'm going to put it through if it humanly can be done. Now let me think when I can ask you to call again."

"Any time that suits your convenience, Mr. Marbridge."

"Well, it's a question. I'd like mighty well to have you lunch with me before I go, but.... The truth is, I haven't got hardly a minute unengaged. You just happened to catch me right, today.... I wonder if you could call in Friday, say, about half-past three?"

"Of course I can, but I don't want you to--"

"Didn't I tell you, *hush!*" Marbridge interrupted, mock-impatient. "Not another word. Remember what I told you about how I felt that day I saw you act, out in Chicago. The time's coming when I'm going to be powerful' glad you gave me this chance to give you a lift, Miss Thursday. And then"--he paused in the act of opening the door, and took Joan's hand, subjecting it to a firm, friendly pressure before continuing--"and then, perhaps, I'll be coming round and begging favours of you."

For an instant Joan's eyes endured, without a tremor, the quick searching probe of the man's.

She nodded quietly, saying in a grave voice: "I guess you won't have to beg very hard--not for anything I could ever do for you, Mr. Marbridge."

His smile was as spontaneous and bright as a child's. "It's a bargain!" he declared spiritedly. "And you can bet your life I won't forget my end of it!... Good afternoon, Miss Thursday. Remember--Friday at three-thirty...."

XXXIII

As one result of her interview with Marbridge, Joan returned to her quarters in a state of thoughtfulness which was responsible not only for her forgetting the appointment with Matthias and the risk she ran of encountering Quard at

every corner, but also for her unquestioning acceptance of Hattie's absence from the flat in the face of her expressed determination not to go out that afternoon.

Hattie, however, was nothing loath to explain her change of mind when she blew in cheerfully shortly before dinner-time.

"Hello!" she exclaimed, tossing her hat one way and her parasol another. "Did you miss me?"

Joan looked up blankly from the depths of her musing. "No," she said dully. "Why?"

"Well, you went off half-peevèd because I wouldn't go trapesing with you--and then I went out after all."

"Oh--I'd forgotten," Joan admitted without much interest.

"Well, I didn't mean to go out, but Billy Emerson sent me a tip and ... I bet you can't guess who I've seen."

Joan shook her head.

"Arlington!"

"Arlington!" Joan exclaimed.

"Well, and why not?"

"Nothing--only I thought you weren't looking for anything in musical shows."

"No more am I, and it wasn't a musical show I went to see him about. Billy sent me a card of introduction with the tip, and Arlington saw me and--well, I guess it's just about settled. I'm to understudy Nella Cardrow in 'Mrs. Mixer.' Arlington wouldn't promise, but told me to come in Saturday morning, and the understanding is he'll have contracts ready to sign then. I do believe my luck's turned at last!"

"But," Joan argued, perplexed, "I don't understand.... Of course, it's fine to get the job, and all that--and I'm awf'ly glad for you, Hattie--but you act as excited as if it was the title role you expected to play."

"Maybe I do," Hattie retorted. "That's what an understudy's for, isn't it--to play the star part in case of an emergency?"

"Yes, but--"

"Anyhow, I don't mind telling you that's what I'm looking forward to."

"You mean you think Mrs. Cardrow--?"

"Now don't you ask me any questions; I can't tell you what I think; it's a secret." Having made this statement, Hattie sat down on the edge of the bed, lighted a cigarette, vacillated one second, and proceeded to divulge the secret: "You see, I called around to thank Billy Emerson, after my talk with Arlington, and he told me the whole story in confidence. Nobody's to know it yet, so you mustn't breathe a word to anybody; but the thing's all fixed, and Nella Cardrow's never going to play 'Mrs. Mixer' before a Broadway audience. She couldn't play it anyhow--'s just a plain-boiled dub--never did anything before she persuaded Marbridge to put her on in this show. It's *his* money that's behind it, mostly--Arlington's too wise to risk much on an uncertain proposition like the Cardrow. Marbridge just hides behind Arlington."

"What for?"

"Well, I guess he figures home would be none the happier if Friend Wife knew he was footing the bills for Nella Cardrow's show. He and Cardrow, Billy Emerson says, are just about as friendly as the law allows--and that isn't all."

"But," Joan persisted stupidly, "if that's the case, I don't see what makes you think he'll throw her down to give you the part--"

"If they ever caught anybody on Broadway as innocent as you pretend to be," Hattie commented with a scorn for grammar as deep as for Joan's obtuseness--"they'd arrest 'em, that's all! Who ever told you Marbridge was the kind of a guy to stick to a woman forever--not to say when she's losing money for him? Billy Emerson saw the show when they put it on up in Buffalo, a while ago, and he says the play's a wonder but Cardrow can't even look the part, much less act it. He says if they ever let her loose on the stage of a Broadway theatre--well, Marbridge and Arlington can just kiss their investment a fond farewell. For reasons of his own, Marbridge isn't ready to break with Cardrow yet, but he knows he's got a big success on his hands in this 'Mrs. Mixer' with her out of it. So they're going right ahead, just as if she was to be the star, but when the show opens it'll be little Miss Understudy who'll do all the acting."

The actress tossed aside her cigarette and bent forward, regarding Joan with mock solicitude.

"Does it begin to penetrate, dearie?"

"It sounds to me like a pretty mean trick to play on Mrs. Cardrow," Joan suggested.

"Don't you worry about her. She'll survive, all right. And anyhow, when you've been as long in this game as I have, you'll realize that the motto of the profession is 'Everybody for himself and the devil take the hindermost!' I've waited seven years for this chance, and I'm not going to let it get past me through any sentimental considerations, not if I know myself. And you'd do just the same thing in my place, too."

"I don't see what right you've got to say that--"

"Then you don't know yourself as well as I know you," Hattie laughed. "But listen: I oughtn't to have told you all this. You won't say anything, will you, dear?"

"No, I won't say anything...."

Nor did Joan consider it necessary to repay confidence with confidence by confessing the fact of her coincidental interview with Marbridge. The reflection that they must have been in adjoining offices at much the same time, in spite of Marbridge's assertion that Arlington was out, counselled reticence, even if envy hadn't served to impose silence upon Joan. And she was profoundly envious of Hattie's good fortune.

Why could it not have been her own, instead?

If Marbridge honestly esteemed her abilities one-half as highly as he had pretended to, why could he not have seen to it that Joan Thursday rather than Hattie Morrison was selected for Mrs. Cardrow's understudy?

Still, the matter was not yet definitely settled. Hattie's contract remained a thing of the future, and she might be congratulating herself prematurely.

Struck by this reflection, Joan withdrew even more jealously into her reserve....

But she anticipated her appointment for Friday afternoon with an impatience that lent each hour the length of three, and when the time drew near prepared herself for it with such exacting attention to the minutiae of her toilet that a final survey in a cheval-glass sent her forth radiant with consciousness that she had never looked more charming.

To her surprise and somewhat to her disappointment, Marbridge didn't receive her alone. She was shown into Arlington's office, finding there Marbridge in company with the great man himself.

Entrenched behind his desk, Arlington didn't move when she entered, and only when Marbridge formally presented Joan deigned to rise half out of his chair and extend to her, across the mahogany barrier, a hand almost effeminately white, soft, and bedizened with rings.

"Pleasure to meet you, Miss Thursday, I'm sure," he drawled, his clasp as languid as the glance with which he looked Joan over; and sank wearily back into his chair. "I've been hearing wonderful things about you--ah--from Mr. Marbridge."

"He's very kind," said Joan in her best manner.

"Not at all," Marbridge protested. "I've only been describing how splendid your work was in 'The Lie.' But Mr. Arlington is the original of the gentleman from Missouri: you've got to show him. However, I know you can--so that's all right."

"Oh, I hope so," Joan replied with becoming diffidence--"if I ever get a chance."

"You'll get that, never fear," Arlington observed dispassionately. "Marbridge has fixed it all up for you. It's a risk, a pretty big risk to take with an actress of your--ah--comparative inexperience, but as a rule I find it advisable to give Marbridge his head when he sets his heart on anything."

"You're awfully good," Joan murmured.

"Don't think it," Arlington returned in a tone of remote amiability, teetering in his chair. "I've nothing whatever to do with it, beyond engaging you and being responsible for your salary. It's all Marbridge's doing."

He examined with a perplexed air his highly polished fingernails....

"You're to have a small part in a new comedy we're putting on next September," he announced, "and at the same time

you will understudy the star--Nella Cardrow in 'Mrs. Mixer.' Your salary will be sixty a week unless through some accident you're called upon to play the title role regularly--and accidents will happen in the best regulated theatrical enterprises. In which case you'll draw one-hundred a week for the first season. There are some details which Marbridge will explain to you--and if you'll drop in any time Monday and ask for Mr. Grissom he will have your contracts ready. And now if you'll excuse me, I've an appointment."

Consulting his watch, he rose and moved round from behind his desk. "Good day, Miss Thursday," he said with a shadow of a formal smile. "I shall see much of you, no doubt, when the rehearsals begin."

"Oh, thank you--thank you!" Joan cried.

Arlington disclaimed title to her gratitude with a weary gesture. "Don't thank me, please--thank Marbridge.... You won't be long, Vin?" he added, at the door.

"I'll be with you in ten minutes."

"Right you are. Good afternoon, Miss--ah--Thursday...."

Alone with Marbridge, Joan began impulsively to protest her thanks, but on glancing up, fell silent, abashed by an expression that glowed in the man's eyes like a reflection of firelight.

She lowered demure lashes to cloak her confusion, a smile about her lips at once sophisticated and timid: a distractingly pretty woman fully conscious of her allure and of his attraction for her: a vision of provoking promise.

Marbridge drew a deep breath.

"If you persist in looking like that," he said in a voice that trembled between laughter and a sigh--"don't blame me if I forget myself and take you in my arms and kiss you. There are limits to my endurance...."

Joan looked up, smiling.

"Well--" she said with a little nervous laugh--"Well, what of it?"

XXXIV

Before Joan left Marbridge, they had arrived at an understanding which was not less complete and satisfactory in that it was largely implicit.

Without receiving any definite explanation of the circumstances complicating the production of "Mrs. Mixer," Joan carried away with her a tolerably clear notion thereof, both confirming and supplementing the second-hand information of Hattie Morrison.

Mrs. Cardrow owned a heavy interest in the play, Joan had gathered; and there existed, as well, a contract between her and Arlington which would have to be eliminated before it would be possible to go ahead and make the production with another actress in place of the erstwhile star. Some very delicate diplomatic manoeuvring was indicated....

Interim, Joan was to be privately drilled by Peter Gloucester for some weeks prior to calling together the full company to rehearse for the September production. Gloucester was just then out of Town, but she would be advised when and where to meet him on his return.

Marbridge was to be absent from New York until the middle of September or longer; but he promised to be back a week or two before the opening performance.

There were other promises exchanged....

With her future thus schemed, the girl was very well content, who had attained by easy stages to one of mental development in which those primary moral distinctions upon which she had been reared were no longer perceptible--or, if perceptible, had diminished to purely negligible stature.

It was not in nature for her to disdain or reject her bargain on moral grounds: she knew, or recognized, none that applied.

For over a year during the most impressionable period of her life, Joan Thursday had breathed the atmosphere of the stage. She had become thoroughly accustomed to recognize without criticism those irregular unions and regular

disunions that characterized the lives of her associates. She had observed many an instance where the most steadfast and loyal love existed without bonds of any sort, and as many where it existed in matrimony, and as many again where neither party to a marriage made aught but the barest pretence of fidelity.

She had remarked that material and artistic success seemed to depend upon neither the observance nor the disregard of sexual morality. She knew of husbands and wives against whom scandal uttered no whisper and whose talents were considerable, but who had struggled for years and would struggle until the end without winning substantial recognition. And she knew of the reverse. The one unpardonable sin in her world was the sin of drunkenness, and even it was venial except when it "held the curtain" or prevented its rising altogether.

As far as concerned her attitude toward herself, she considered Joan Thursday above reproach, seeing that she had withdrawn from her marriage long before even as much as contemplating any man other than her husband. She held that she was now free, at liberty to do as she liked, untrammelled by opinion whether public or private: that she had outgrown criticism.

True, Quard might divorce her. But what of that? If he did, Joan Thursday wouldn't suffer. If he didn't, he himself would be the last to pretend he was leading a life of celibacy because of her defection.

Marbridge she really liked; his appeal to her nature was stronger than that of any man she had as yet encountered. He attracted her in every way, and he excited her curiosity as well. He was a new type--but in what respect different from other men? He was famously successful with women: why? He had wealth, cultivation of a certain sort (real or spurious, Joan couldn't discriminate) and social position; and this flattered, that such an one should reject the women of his own sphere for Joan Thursday--late of the stocking counter.

And if she could turn this infatuation of his to material profit, while at the same time satisfying the several appetites Marbridge excited in her: why not? Other women by the score did as much without censure or obvious cause for regret. Why not she?

How many women of her acquaintance--women whose interests, running in grooves parallel to hers, were intelligible to Joan--would have refused the chance that was now hers through Marbridge? Not one; none, at least, who was free as Joan was free; not even Hattie Morrison, whose views upon the subject of such arrangements were strong, whom Joan considered straitlaced to the verge of absurdity. Hattie, Joan believed, would have jumped at the opportunity.

But of course, denied, Hattie would be sure to decry it, and with the more bitterness since Joan had won it in the wreck of Hattie's hopes.

And here was the only shadow upon the fair prospect of Joan's contentment. She who had questioned Hattie's right to become a party to the conspiracy against Mrs. Cardrow--how could she ever go home and face the girl, with this treachery on her conscience?

True: Hattie didn't know, wouldn't know before morning, might never learn the truth during the term of their association.

None the less, to be with Hattie that night would be to sit with a skeleton at the feast of her felicity....

On impulse Joan turned to the left on leaving the New York Theatre building, and moved slowly, purposelessly, down Broadway.

It was an afternoon of withering heat: the pavements burning palpably through the paper-thin soles of her pretty slippers, and the air close with the smell of hot asphaltum. The rays of the westering sun made nothing of the fabric of Joan's white parasol, their heat penetrating its sheer shield as though it were glass. Mankind in general sought the shadowed side of the street and moved only reluctantly, with its coat over its arm, a handkerchief tucked in between neck and collar--effectually choking off ventilation and threatening "sun-stroke."

Waiting upon the northeast corner of Forty-second Street for the traffic police to check the cross-town tide, Joan felt half-suffocated and thought longingly of the seashore....

Once across the street, she turned directly in beneath the permanent awning of the Knickerbocker Hotel, and entered the lobby, making her way round, past the entrance to the bar, to the recess dedicated to the public telephone booths.

A semi-exhausted and apathetic operator looked up reluctantly as Joan approached, with one glance appraising her from head to heels. At any other time the dainty perfection of Joan's toilet would have roused antagonism in the woman; today she found energy only sufficient for a perfunctory mumble.

"What numba, please?"

Joan hesitated, feeling herself suddenly upon the verge of dangerous indiscretion, but stung by the operator's look of jaded disdain, took her courage in hand and pursued her original intention.

"One Bryant," she said.

The operator jammed a plug into one of the rows of sockets before her and iterated the number mechanically.

In another moment she nodded, indicating the rank of booths.

"Numba five--One Bryant," she said.

Joan shut herself in with the sliding door and took up the receiver.

"Hello--Lambs' Club?" she enquired.... "Is Mr. Fowey in the club?... Will you page him, please.... Miss Thursday.... Yes, I'll hold the wire."

The booth was hermetically sealed. Perspiration was starting out all over her body. And somewhere in that airless box, probably at her feet, lurked a long unburied cigar. She thrust the door ajar, but only to close it immediately as Fowey's voice saluted her.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Hubert," Joan drawled, with a little touch of laughing mockery in her accents.

"Is that you, Joan--really?" the voice demanded excitedly.

"Real-ly!" she affirmed. "What're you doing there, shut up all alone by yourself in that stupid club, Hubert?"

Prefaced by a brief but intelligible pause, the man's response came briskly: "Where are you now, anyway?"

"That doesn't matter," she retorted. She had meant to ask him to meet her at the hotel, but reconsidered, fearing lest Marbridge might chance to see them. "What really matters is that this is my birthday and I'm going to give a party. Have you got anything better to do?"

"No--"

"Then meet me in half an hour on the southbound platform of the Sixth Avenue Lat Battery Place."

"Battery Place! What in thunder--"

"Never mind--tell you all about it when we meet. Will you come?"

"Will I! Well, rawther!"

"Half an hour, then--"

"I'll be there, with bells on!"

"Then good-bye for a little--Hubert."

"Good-bye."

Fowey reached the point of assignation only one train later than Joan.

As he hurried down the platform, almost stumbling in his impatience to join her, the girl surveyed with sudden dislike and regret his slight, dandified figure fitted with finical precision into clothing so ultra-English in fashion that it might have belonged to his younger brother. And the confident smile that lighted up his pinched, eager countenance seemed little short of offensive. She was sorry now that she had yielded to the temptation to make use of him: he was so insignificant in every way, so violently the opposite in all things of the man who now filled all her thoughts--Marbridge; and so transparent that even she could read his mind: he entertained not the least tangible doubt that now, after the manner in which they had last parted, she had at length wakened to appreciation of his irresistible charms, that her requesting him to meet her was but the preface to surrender.

But she permitted nothing of her thoughts to become legible in her manner. After all, she had only wanted an escort for the evening, an excuse to postpone that unavoidable return to the company of the girl she had betrayed; and Fowey had seemed the most convenient and the least dangerous man she could think of. If in the inflation of his insufferable conceit he dreamed for an instant another thing.... Well, Joan promised herself, he'd soon find out his mistake!...

Keeping up the fiction of her imaginary birthday, she outlined her plans: they would take one of the Iron Steamboat

Company's boats from Pier 1, North River--a short walk from the station--to Coney Island. When that resort palled, they would drive to Manhattan Beach and dine, perhaps "take in" Pain's Fireworks; and return to New York by the same route.

Fowey's objections were instant and sincere and well-grounded: the boats would be crowded beyond endurance with an unwashed rabble liberally sown with drunks and screaming children. If she would only let him, he'd get a taxicab--or even a touring-car.

Quietly but firmly Joan overruled him. It must be her party or no party, as she proposed or not at all.

He yielded in the end, but the event proved him right in all he had foretold. Joan was very soon made sorry she hadn't suffered herself to be gainsaid.

They had half an hour to wait for the boat, and the waiting-room upon the second-storey of the pier was like an oven, packed with a milling, sweating mob exactly fulfilling Fowey's prediction. They were elbowed, shouldered, walked upon, and at one time openly ridiculed by a gang of hooligans, any one of whom would have made short work of Fowey had he dared show any resentment.

Upon the boat, when at length it turned up tardily to receive them, conditions were little better, save that the open air was an indescribable relief after the reeking atmosphere of the pier. Fowey managed to secure two uncomfortable folding stools, upon which they perched, crowded against the rail of the upper deck; a wretched "orchestra" wrung infamous parodies of popular songs from several tortured instruments; children scuffled and howled; burly ruffians in unclean aprons thrust themselves bodily through the throng, balancing dripping trays laden with glasses of lukewarm beer and "soft drinks" and bawling in every ear their seductive refrain--"Here's the waiter! Want the waiter? *Who* wants the waiter?"--and an alcoholic, planting his chair next to Joan's, promptly went to sleep, snoring atrociously, and threatened every instant to topple over and rest his head in her lap.

A single circumstance modified in a way Joan's regret that she hadn't heeded Fowey's protests.

As the boat swung away from the pier, a larger steamship of one of the coastwise lines, outward bound from its dock farther up the North River, passed with leeway so scant that the dress and features of those upon its decks were clearly to be discerned. And at the moment when the two vessels were nearest, Joan discovered one who stood just outside an open cabin door, leaning upon the rail with an impressively nonchalant pose, and smoking a heavy cigar. He wore clothing of a conspicuous shepherd's-plaid, and his pose was an arrested dramatic gesture.

In a moment a woman emerged from the open door behind him and joined him at the rail, placing an intimate hand on his forearm and saying something which won from him a laugh and a look of tender admiration: a handsome, able-bodied woman, expensively but loudly dressed, her connection with the stage as unquestionable as was his.

Joan dissembled the odd emotion with which she recognized the man, and turned to Fowey.

"What boat is that, do you know, Hubert?"

Fowey raked her with an indifferent glance, fore and aft. "Belongs to the New Bedford Line," he announced--"can't make out her name--connects at New Bedford for the boats to Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. Ever been up that way?"

"No. What's it like?"

"Pretty islands. Don't know Martha's Vineyard very well, but Nantucket's my old stamping-ground. Go up there in the middle of the summer--about now--and you'll find every actor and actress you ever heard of, and then some. Great place. Wish we were going there."

"Don't be silly...."

The boats were drawing apart. Joan looked back for the last sight she was ever to have of her husband.

Though she couldn't have known this, she sighed a little, in strange depression.

Perplexed, she tried vainly to analyze her emotion: was it regret--or jealousy?

Of a sudden, in the heart of that immense crowd, with Fowey attentive at her elbow, she was conscious of a feeling of intense loneliness.

When, after a long and tedious voyage over a sea as flat as a plate and unflawed by a single cooling drift of air, the steamboat was made fast to the end of that long iron pier which juts out from the flat, low coast of Coney Island, its passengers rose en masse and crowded toward the gangways. Joan and Fowey, attempting to hang back until the crowd had thinned out sufficiently to enable them to go ashore in comfort, were caught in the swirl of it and swept along willy-nilly.

Once on the pier-head the multitude had more elbow room and spread out, the main body streaming headlong shorewards, keen-set for the delights promised by the two great amusement parks which had grown up in the heart of that frontier settlement of gin-mills, dance-halls, side-shows, eating-houses, and dives unspeakable.

Joan and Fowey followed more at their leisure, constraint and silence between them like a wall. The girl was deeply disappointed with the expedition, as far as it had gone, doubting whether anything better would follow, and still labouring under that unaccountable depression which had settled down upon her spirits at sight of Quard on the New Bedford boat. Fowey, no less disgusted, was puzzled by his companion's attitude, at once tolerant and aloof, keenly watchful for an opening through which to pursue his conquest, and wondering how it would end. If she were simply bent on tantalizing him again, for her own amusement....

He swore angrily but inaudibly.

Near the shore end of the pier they delayed to watch the antics of the hundreds of bathers churning the shallows in front of huge and hideous bathing establishments. In countless numbers, they dotted the sea like flies and darkened the sun-baked, unclean sands, into which their feet had trodden the wreckage of ten thousand lunches.

Fowey said something inexpressively cynical about the resemblance of the scene below to a congregation of bacilli crawling upon a slide beneath a microscope.

Joan heard without response, either vocal or mental. She resented bitterly the superior attitude adopted by her companion. For her part, she would have asked nothing better than to mingle with the throng and taste those crude pleasures so dear to its simple heart and, had she but dared admit it, to her own. But she had Fowey to live up to.

Very heartily she regretted the impulse which had dictated her invitation. She had been far happier alone--though it would have been strange had she been suffered to remain long alone.

By the time they left the pier, the evening was so far advanced that the myriad lights of the tawdry town were flashing into being. They debouched into a roaring mob which filled the wide avenue from curb to curb, packed so densely, though in constant motion, that trolley cars and automobiles forced a way through it only at a snail's pace and with great difficulty. Encouraged by the excessive heat which rendered Town intolerable to all who had the means to escape it, the week-end swarming had begun in all sincerity. In spite of the terrific congestion which already obtained in all the streets and avenues and beaches, piers, amusement parks, catch-penny shows, saloons, and restaurants, scarcely a minute passed without the arrival at some one of the trolley terminals of a car packed to the guards with more visitors.

A good-natured if rowdy mob, for the most part, with only a minimum element of the downright vicious in its composition, it was none the less bent on amusement in its cheapest form, that is to say, at somebody else's expense. It gathered thickest round the places of free entertainment, where acrobats performed on open-air stages or crawled upon high, invisible wires, or where slides were supplied gratis for public diversion: grinning always, but howling with delight when treated to real misadventure, as when some girl, negotiating a bamboo slide upon a grass mat, her skirts wrapped tight about her, would lose balance and shoot headlong, sprawling, to the level; the greater the exposure, the greater the diversion....

Nor was Fowey permitted to escape unteased: his conspicuous clothing, and the broad black ribbons dangling from his horn-rimmed glasses were too tempting to be resisted. Once his Panama was smashed down over his eyes; and his glasses were so frequently jerked by their moorings from his nose that he was fain at length to pocket them and poke owlshly along at Joan's guidance.

Dazzled to blindness by those ten million glaring bulbs which lifted up tier upon tier against the blank purple skies; deafened by an indescribable cacophony of bands, organs, bells, horns, human tongues incessantly clattering; suffering acutely from the collective heat of the multitude added to that of the still and muggy night; buffeted and borne hither and yon at the will of the mass: they contrived in the end to engage an open, horse-drawn vehicle, of the type colloquially known in those days as "low-neck hack," and ordered themselves driven to the Manhattan Beach Hotel.

When presently they had gained the darkling peace of a long road between marsh-lands, Fowey resumed with his glasses his hateful cynicism.

"That was considerable treat, all right," he said pensively.

"Glad you liked it," Joan replied with the curtness of chagrin.

"We'll go back and have some more after dinner," he suggested.

"Thanks--I've had plenty."

"No, but really!" he insisted. "We haven't seen half of it--"

"Oh, shut up!"

Her anger was real; and when he would have mollified the girl with soft words and an arm that sought to steal round her waist, she repeated her injunction with added coarseness and struck his hand away with a force that he felt.

In spite of this, he schooled himself to patience.

Dinner, served perfunctorily by a weary waiter and consumed upon the verandah of the hotel at a table, the best they could command, far removed from the comparative coolness and ease of those beside the railing, did little if anything to modify Joan's temper.

She, who had set out, believing herself the happiest of mortals, to spend an evening of real enjoyment, felt utterly wretched and forlorn.

Moment by moment her distaste for Fowey was gaining strength. She was put to it to listen to his bragging and to make response civilly. She did not relish her food, her company, or her surroundings; and in utter ennui tried to stimulate herself with her favourite brand of sweet champagne, insisting on another bottle when they had emptied one between them. It served only to stimulate a fictitious gaiety in her, one swift to wane.

For all this, she was reluctant to contemplate going home. Anything were preferable to that--at least until she could feel reasonably sure of finding Hattie abed and asleep.

They finished their meal at an hour too late to make it worth while to patronize one of the open-air entertainments with which she had promised herself diversion; and since she would neither go home nor, at Fowey's mischievous suggestion, return to Coney Island, they moved to another table, nearer the railing, and whiled away one more hour listening to the band music over their cigarettes and liqueurs.

Toward eleven o'clock, Joan suddenly announced that she was sick of it all and ready to go. Fowey revived his preference for a motor-car, and got his way against scanty opposition. In a saner humour, Joan would have stuck to her original plan. As it was, she accepted the motor ride with neither gratitude nor graciousness.

Curiously enough, once established in the car, her hat off, the swift rush of night air cooling her moist brows, her head resting back against the cushions, she permitted Fowey to repeat his ardent love-making which had made their previous ride together memorable. Her dislike of him was no less thorough-paced, but had passed from an active to a passive stage; she was at once too indifferent to resist him and so bored that she welcomed anything that promised excitement. She suffered his kisses, confident in her power to control him, and drew a certain satisfaction from reminding him, now and again forcibly, that there were limits to her toleration. But for the most part she lay in his arms in passive languor, her eyes half closed, and tried to forget him, or rather to believe him someone else, one whose embraces she could have welcomed....

When they came to lighted streets, she bade Fowey "behave," and would not permit him even so slight a lapse from decorum as that of "holding hands."

She sat up, rearranging the disorder of her hair, adjusted her hat, surreptitiously restored the brilliance of her lips with a stick of rouge.

The man drew back sullenly into his corner, fuming....

At her door, dismissing the car, he followed her up to the stoop.

"Joan--" he began angrily.

She turned back from using her latch-key, with a wondering, child-like stare.

"Yes, Hubert?" she enquired with hidden malice.

"You're not--you're not going to send me off like this?"

"Why not?" she demanded with fine assumption of simplicity. "It's awful' late."

Fowey seized her wrist.

"Now, listen to me!"

Joan broke his grasp with little or no effort.

"Silly boy!" she said. "Do you really want to come in and visit a while before you say good night?"

Her look was false with a winning softness. Fowey stammered.

"You--you know--"

"Then come along!" she said, with a laugh; and turning fled lightly before him up the darkened stairway.

She had opened the door to the tiny private hallway of the flat when he overtook her, panting. She paused, with a warning finger to her lips.

"S-sh!" she warned. "Don't wake Hattie!"

He swore viciously, discountenanced; and she laughed and, leaving the door wide, went on into the small sitting-dining-room, meanly exulting in the discomfiture she had planned, knowing quite well that he had either forgotten Hattie or believed her to be spending this week-end out of Town, as before.

In the act of lighting the gas, she heard the door close and saw Fowey come, white and shaken, into the room.

"Hush!" she said gaily. "I'll make sure she isn't awake--"

Removing her hat, she passed on into the adjoining bedroom, and stopped short with a sensation of sinking dismay. The room was empty, the bed she shared with Hattie untouched. So much was visible in the faint light entering through windows that opened on a well.

Wondering, Joan struck a light. Its first glimmer revealed to her the fact that Hattie's trunk was gone. The flare of the gas-jet disclosed greater changes in the aspect of the room, due to the disappearance of Hattie's toilet articles and knick-knacks.

Hattie had left, bag and baggage--had gone for good!

But why?

Had she discovered Joan's treachery? Or what had happened?

And in her surprise and perplexity, the girl was conscious anew of that sense of loneliness. She had been afraid to return to the one whom she had betrayed so lightly; but now she was afraid to be without her.

Going back to the adjoining room, she found Fowey standing beside the table and with a slight smile examining a sheet of paper.

"I found this lying here," he announced, handing it over--"didn't realize it was anything until I'd read half of it."

His smile was again confident, bright with premature pride of conquest. But Joan didn't heed it. She was reading rapidly what had been written, swiftly and in a sprawling hand, upon the half sheet of note-paper.

"By rights I ought to stay until you come back, whenever you have the cheek to, and tell you what I think of you-- I saw B. E. this evening and he told me all about it--but I want never to see you again--the rent's paid up till next Wednesday--then you can stick or get out--I don't care which--and I wish you joy of your bargain!--H. M."

"You've been scrapping with Hattie, eh?" Joan heard Fowey say in an amused voice.

Without answering, she let the sheet of paper fall to the table, and stood with head bowed in thought, suffering acutely the humiliation inspired by Hattie's contemptuous dismissal.

"What was the trouble?" Fowey pursued. "Not that I'm sorry--"

"Oh, nothing much," Joan interrupted. "We just had a difference of opinion, and she had to fly off the handle like this. It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me," Fowey announced significantly.

Now Joan looked up, for the first time appreciating her position.

"Oh ..." she said blankly.

Fowey was advancing, with extended arms. She raised a hand to fend him off.

"Don't!" she begged. "Please don't. I can't.... You must go, now--of course. I'm sorry. Good night."

He paused, and she saw his face pale and working with passion; his small eyes blazing behind their thick lenses; his hands clenched by his sides, but not tightly, the fingers twitching nervously; his whole body trembling and shaken beyond control.

She was conscious of an incongruous, unnatural, inexplicable feeling of pity for him.

"Please be a good boy," she pleaded, "and go away."

"No, I'm damned if I do. You asked me up here--I know now--just to tease me. But that's no good. I won't go!" He advanced another pace, his tone and manner changing. "O Joan, Joan!" he begged--"don't treat me so cruelly! You know I'm mad about you. Doesn't that mean anything to you, more than a chance to torment me? My God! what kind of a woman are you? I can't stand this. Flesh and blood couldn't. I'm only human. All this week I've kept away from you simply because I realized what you were--"

"What am I?" Joan cut in quickly.

Fowey choked again, with a gesture of impotent exasperation.

"You," he almost shouted--"you're the woman I love and who's driving me mad--mad I tell you!"

"Hubert! You mean that? You really love me?"

"You know I do. You know I'm crazy about you. Haven't you seen it from the first?"

Hesitating, Joan experienced a sense of one in deep waters. There was a sound as that of distant surf in her ears. All through her body pulses were throbbing madly.

She struggled still a little, instinctively; but Fowey advantaged himself of that instant of indecision. He held her in his arms, now; her face was stinging beneath his kisses.

Almost unconsciously, she lifted her arms and clasped them round his neck, drawing his face to hers.

"You poor kid!" she murmured fondly, her eyes closed.... "You poor kid...."

XXXVI

Without knowing how she had come there, Joan found herself standing beside the outer doorway, in the narrow hall; one hand hugging about her the kimono she must have snatched up by instinct, while yet not fully wakened, the other hand fumbling with the lock; sleep clouding her brain like a fog, fatigue weighting her eyelids and chaining her limbs, panic hammering in her bosom.

Overhead the doorbell was ringing imperatively, without interruption, even as it must have been ringing for many minutes before she was consciously awake.

Dimly she felt that this alarm by night must portend something strange and terrible.

And still she held her hand, wondering. Who could it be? Not Quard: for she had seen him leave New York. Never Marbridge: that were unthinkable! Hattie Morrison, perhaps.... And that meant....

The bell ground on implacably.

At length she found courage to adjust the chain-bolt and open the door to the limit permitted by that guard.

In the outer hallway a gas-jet burned, turned low, diffusing just enough illumination to show her the figure, somehow indefinitely familiar in spite of its style, of a man in a chauffeur's uniform: a young and wiry man clothed in khaki coat and breeches and leather leggings, and wearing a cap with visor shadowing heavily his narrow, sharp-featured countenance.

As the door opened he removed his finger from the bell-push, and drove home recognition with his voice.

"Miss Thursby live here? I got a message for her."

Joan gasped: "Butch!"

"It's me, all right," her brother admitted crisply in his well-remembered tone of irony. "You certainly are one sincere little sleeper. I been ringing here--"

"How did you get in?"

"Rang up the janitor--if *that* matters. Lis'n: you betta hustle into your clothes quick 's you can if you wanta get home in time to say good-bye to the old woman."

"Mother!" Joan shrilled. "What--what's the matter--?"

"Dyin'," Butch told her briefly and without emotion. "She said she wanted to see you. So get a move on. My car's waitin', and I dassent leave it alone. Hustle--y' understand?"

"Yes, yes!" Joan promised with a sob. "I'll hurry, Butch--"

"See you do, then!"

The boy swung about smartly and disappeared down the well of the stairway.

Joan closed the door, and leaned against it, panting. Suppose he had wanted to come in!...

For the moment, this was her sole coherent thought.

Then, rousing, she crept stealthily back to the darkened bedroom, gathered up her clothing with infinite precautions against noise, and returned to the sitting-room to dress in feverish haste...

There was an open taxicab waiting in front of the door. As she came out, Butch bent over and cranked the motor. Straightening up, he waved her curtly into the body of the car.

"Jump in and shut the door," he ordered briefly, climbing into the driver's seat.

"But--Butch--"

"Doncha hear me? Get in and shut that door. We got no time to waste chinnin' here."

Abashed and frightened, the girl obeyed.

Immediately Butch had the cab in motion, tearing eastward at lawless speed through streets whose long ranks of yawning windows, seen fugitively in the formless dusk of early morning, seemed to look down leering, as if informed with terrible intelligence.

She shut out the sight of them with hands that covered her face until the swift rush of cool air steadied and sobered her, so that she grew calmer in the knowledge that, in veritable fact (and this was all that really mattered) "nobody knew"....

Then, sitting up, she composed herself, and with deft fingers completed the adjustment of her garments. By the time she had finished her toilet, aided by a small mirror inset between the forward windows, Butch was stopping the cab before the East Seventy-sixth Street tenement.

Bending back, he unlatched the door and swung it open.

"You go on up," he ordered. "I'll be around before long--gotta run this machine back to the garage."

Joan stepped quickly to the sidewalk, and shut the door.

"All right," she responded, and added, almost timidly, avoiding her brother's eyes: "Thank you, Butch."

He grunted unintelligibly and, as Joan moved up the stoop, threw in the power again and drew swiftly away down the

street.

For an instant Joan held back in the vestibule, sickened to recognize anew the home of dirt and squalor she had fled, a long lifetime since, it seemed, and struggling with almost invincible repugnance for the ordeal awaiting her at the head of those five weary flights.

Then, more through instinct than of her will, her finger pressed the call-button beneath the Thursby letter box.

The latch clicked. She pushed the door open, moved reluctantly into the shadows and addressed herself wearily to the stairs, inhaling with a keen physical disgust the heavy and malodorous atmosphere in which her youth had been shaped toward womanhood.

As the dining-room door admitted her, she checked again, almost tempted to question the soundness of those faculties which insisted that more than a year had passed, rather than an hour or two, since she had left that mean and sordid place.

Above the dining-table blazed and wheezed a single gas-jet, whose ragged bluish flame was yet sufficiently strong to turn to the colour of night the dull dawnlight outside the air-shaft windows. It revealed to her not a single article of furniture other than as memory placed it, and showed her, seated on the far side of the table, her father lifting a heavy and sullen face from the note-book between his soiled fat fingers, that inevitable sheaf of dope lying at his elbow.

There was no sort of greeting, in proper sense, between these two. For a little neither spoke. Joan hesitated, with shoulders against the panels of the door, in an attitude instinctively defiant and defensive. Thursby looked her up and down, a louring sneer marking his recognition of his daughter's finery.

Suddenly, explosively, she found her tongue: "How's ma?"

Thursby jerked a thumb in the direction of the bedrooms.

"She died an hour ago," he said slowly, "just after Ed went to find you. Edna's in there."

Joan made a gesture of horror.

"My God!" she said throatily, and turned away.

A moment later, loud cries of lamentation ringing through the flat testified that she had found her sister.

XXXVII

With peculiar irony, the passing of that pallid, vague, and ineffectual character, Mrs. Thursby, proved the signal for the dissolution of the family which, denying her both respect and affection during her life, had none the less lost, in losing her, its sole motive or excuse for unity.

The return from the cemetery was accomplished toward noon of a July day whose heavily overcast sky seemed only to act as a blanket over the city, compressing its heated and humid atmosphere until the least exertion was to be indulged in only at the cost of saturated clothing.

The four were crowded in common misery within a shabby, stuffy, undertaker's growler.

Thursby occupied the back seat with his eldest daughter, notwithstanding the fact that, since apprising her of her mother's death, the morning of her return, he had addressed no word to her directly. He sat now with fat and mottled hands resting on his knees, his waistcoat unbuttoned, exposing soiled linen, his dull and heavy gaze steadfastly directed through the window.

Opposite him, on the forward seat, Edna wept silently and incessantly into a black-bordered handkerchief.

Butch, beside her, looked serious and depressed in a suit of black clothing borrowed for the occasion.

Nobody spoke from the time they re-entered the carriage, after the burial, until they left it. Joan huddled herself into her corner, putting all possible space between herself and her father. A sense of lassitude was heavy upon her. She meditated vaguely on the strangeness of life, its inscrutable riddle, the enigma of its brief and feverish transit from black oblivion through light to black oblivion. But the problem only wearied her. She dropped it from time to time and tried to think of other things; as a rule this resulted in her speculations centering about Butch.

The boy mystified her, awed her a little with a suggestion of spirit and strength, character and intelligence, conveyed by a forceful yet unassuming manner. It was a new manner, strangely developed in the year that spaced her knowledge of him, only to be explained by his sudden determination to go seriously to work and make something of himself; and the motive for that remained inexplicable, and would ever as far as concerned Joan. For the personal reticence that had always sealed his cynical mouth was more than ever characteristic of the boy today; and the sympathy which once had existed between himself and Joan was become a thing of yesterday and as if it had never been. His attitude toward her was touched with just a colour of contempt, almost too faint to be resented; she shrank from it, feeling that he saw through her shallowness, that he knew her, not as Marbridge knew her, perhaps, or as Billy Salute, but thoroughly and intimately, and far better than she would ever know herself.

She knew now--through Edna--that within the last twelve-month Butch had learned his trade of chauffeur and pursued it with such diligence that, aside from being the main support of the family which she had deserted, he was half-owner of his taxicab and in a way to acquire an interest in a small garage....

When the carriage stopped, the father was the first to alight. With no word or look for either of his daughters, and only a semi-articulate growl for Butch, to the effect that they'd see one another again at dinner, he pulled his rusty derby well forward over his haggard, haunted eyes, thrust his hands deep into trouser-pockets, and slouched ponderously away in the direction of his news-stand. Before he turned the avenue corner, Joan, looking after him while she waited for Butch to settle with the driver, saw Thursby produce his packet of dope and, moistening a thumb, begin to con it as he plodded on.

So, pursuing his passion to the end, he passed forever from her life, yet never altogether from her memory; in which, as time matured the girl, his inscrutable personality assumed the character of a symbol of aborted destiny. What he had been, whence he had sprung, what he might have become, she never learned....

Then, preceded by Edna, followed by Butch, she climbed for the last time those weary stairs.

Arrived in the flat, Butch shut himself into his room to change to working clothes. He could not afford to waste an afternoon, he said. Joan and Edna sat down in the dark and dismal dining-room, conferring in hushed voices until he rejoined them. He came forth presently, the inevitable cigarette drooping from his thin, hard lips, and sat down, his spare, wiry body looking uncommonly well set-up and capable in the chauffeur's livery.

After a little hesitation, Joan mustered up courage to say her say, if with something nearly approaching appeal in the way that she addressed this taciturn and self-sufficient man who had replaced her loaferish brother.

"I've been telling Edna," she said, "that I'm going to take care of her from now on."

"That so?" Butch exhaled twin jets of smoke from his nostrils. "How?" he enquired without prejudice.

"Well ... she's coming to live with me--"

"Where?"

"I don't know. I'm leaving where you found me. By the way, how did you know where to look for me, Butch?"

"Seen you one day when you was livin' in the Astoria Inn. There's a dairy lunch on the ground floor where I gen'ly eat. After that I kept an eye on you."

"Oh!" said Joan thoughtfully, wondering how much that eye had seen of the brief but lurid existence she had led before coming partially to her senses and moving to share Hattie Morrison's lodgings. "Well, I'll find a good place, and Edna can stay with me and act as my maid until she's old enough to find something to do for herself."

"On the stage, eh?"

"I guess so. I'm getting on, you know. Chances are I could give her a boost."

Butch shook his head: "Nothin' doin'."

"Why?"

He was unmoved by the flash of hostility in Joan's manner.

"I guess," he said after a deliberate pause, "we don't have to go into that. Anyway, I got other plans for Edna. She's goin' to the country, up-State, to spend the summer on a farm--family of a fellow I know. After that, if she's strong enough, she can come back and keep house for me, if she wants to, or go to work any way she chooses--that's not my business. Only--understand me--she isn't going to go into the chorus until she's old enough to know what she's doin',

and strong enough to stand the racket. That's settled."

Rising, he jerked the stub of his cigarette through the air-shaft window, and slowly drew on his gauntlets.

"You do what packin' you wanta, kid," he advised Edna, "before three o'clock thisaft'noon. I'll be back for you then. Your train leaves at four. You'll travel along with the mother of this friend of mine--Mrs. Simmons, her name is."

As he had said, the matter was settled. Joan conceded the point without bickering, with indeed a feeling of mean relief. Moreover, she was afraid of Butch....

The flat in Fiftieth Street had gained associations insufferably hateful. She returned to it only long enough to pack up and move out. Incidentally she found, read, and destroyed without answering, a note from Fowey suggesting an assignation. Her paradoxical dislike for the man had deepened into detestation. She both hoped and intended never to see him again.

She moved before nightfall, leaving no address, and established herself in an inexpensive but reputable boarding establishment, little frequented by the class of theatrical people with which she was acquainted, and where a repetition of her escapade was impossible. On the third day following she began rehearsing privately with Gloucester, and threw into the work all she could muster of strength, patience, and intelligence, leaving herself, at the end of each day's work, too exhausted in mind and body to indulge in any of the pleasures to which her tastes inclined.

Fowey, unable to trace her and seeing nothing of the girl in those restaurants and places of amusement she had been wont to frequent, in time gave up the chase; and before the first presentation of "Mrs. Mixer" the newspapers supplied Joan with the news of his clandestine marriage and subsequent flight to Europe with a widow whose fortune doubtless promised compensation for the fact that she had a son nearly as old as her latest husband.

XXXVIII

The rehearsals of "Tomorrow's People" were arranged to begin on the twenty-third day of September; and since all the important roles had been filled before he left Town, and Wilbrow, whom he could trust, had charge of all other details, Matthias delayed his home-coming until the twenty-second.

Not until the twentieth did he emerge from the wilderness up back of the Allagash country into the comparative civilization of Moosehead Lake. In eight weeks he had not written a line, received a letter, or read a newspaper. But, as he telegraphed Helena from the Mt. Kineo House, he was so healthy that he was ashamed of it.

The day-letter telegram she sent in reply was delivered on the train. Its news, though condensed, was reassuring: Venetia was well and her boy developing into a famous ruffian; the two were making a visit at Tanglewood, and on the return of Marbridge from his summer in Europe would move back to New York, where Venetia was to reassume charge of his town-house.

Thus satisfied as to the welfare of the woman he loved, Matthias gave himself up completely to the production of his play; and through the following four weeks lived in the theatre by day, dreamed of it by night, thought, talked, and wrote only in its singular terminology.

Few facts unconnected with his own play penetrated his understanding, in all that period. But, dining with Wilbrow one night at the general table in the Players, he overheard Gloucester railing bitterly at the ill-fortune which had induced him to pledge himself to stage a modern satirical comedy for Arlington and to train for the leading part a raw and almost inexperienced stage-struck girl.

He detailed his trials in vivid phrases:

"As far as I know, she's never played in anything except a bum vaudeville sketch, and I had hell's own time making her fit to play *that*. And yet she's got the ineffable nerve to keep picking at my way of doing things on the general ground that it ain't Tom Wilbrow's. Seems he had the privilege of rehearsing her for a five-side part in that punk show of Jack Matthias', that went to pieces out on the Coast last Summer. If Wilbrow wasn't listening with all his ears, over there, I'd tell you what I said to the young woman the last time she threw him in my face.... What?... Oh, nobody you ever heard of. Calls herself Thursday--Joan Thursday.... Of course I rowed with Arlington about her, but he only shrugged and grinned and said she had to play it and I'd got to make her play it--offered to bet me a thousand over and above my fees I couldn't do it.... Sure, I took him up. Why not? I'll make her act it yet. I could make a Casino chorus boy act human if I wasn't so squeamish.... Oh, Marbridge--one of his discoveries. I saw him handing her gently into that big,

brazen touring-car of his, in front of Rector's, night before last. Fragile's the word--'handle with care!'"

Wilbrow, interrogated, supplied the context. Arlington had bought up, through a third party, Mrs. Cardrow's interest in "Mrs. Mixer," advising her to sell out because the play had already scored one failure and promising her another play in which she would stand better chance to win New York audiences. This was an old comedy from the French, revamped, and was even then being rehearsed with a scrub company and a scratch outfit of scenery, the production to be made on the same night that "Mrs. Mixer" was to tempt fate with Joan Thursday; the designated date being the twenty-fifth of October, a Wednesday.

Matthias promptly dismissed the matter from his mind: he speculated a little, hazily about Marbridge, in his constitutional inability to understand that gentleman, felt more than ever sorry for Vénétia and wondered how much longer she would stand it all--and plunged again into his preoccupation.

"Tomorrow's People" was announced for production on Monday, October the twenty-third. But after the dress-rehearsal on Sunday certain changes recommended themselves as advisable to the judgment of the author, who persuaded the management to postpone the opening night until Wednesday. At ten minutes to twelve on that night the final curtain fell upon a successful representation; an audience in its wraps blocked the aisles until after midnight, applauding and demanding the author; who, however, was not in the theatre.

He had, in fact, not been near it since the curtain, falling on the first act, had persuaded him of the general friendliness of an audience and the competency of the company. This culmination of a nerve-racking strain which had endured without respite for over a month found him without courage to await the verdict. He took to the streets and walked himself weary in vain effort to refrain from circling back toward the building whose walls housed his fate.

At length, in desperation hoping to distract his thoughts from the supreme issue, he purchased a ticket of admission to another theatre, above whose entrance blazed the announcement "Mrs. Mixer," and stationed himself at the back of the orchestra to witness the last part of the performance.

He saw the self-confidence of Gloucester supremely justified: the satiric farce marched steadily, scene by scene, to a success that was to keep it on Broadway through the winter and make the name of Joan Thursday a house-hold word throughout the Union. Her personal success was as unquestionable as her beauty; she played with grace, vivacity, charm, and distinction; and only to the initiate of the theatre was it apparent that Gloucester had found in her the perfect medium for the transmission of his art. Matthias could see, in company with a few of the more discriminating and stage-wise, that she employed not a gesture, intonation or bit of business which had not originated with Gloucester; she brought to her role on her part nothing but beauty and an unshakable self-confidence so thoroughly ingrained that it escaped suggesting self-consciousness. The triumph was, rightly, first Gloucester's, then the play's; but the public acclaimed the actress, and the one acidulated critic who hailed her, the following morning, as "at last!--the perfect human kinetophone record!" was listened to by none, least of all by the subject of his sarcasm. Marbridge, in a stage box, led the applause at the conclusion of each act; and at the end of the play Arlington came in person before the curtain, leading by the hand the gracefully reluctant Joan, and in a few suave sentences thanked the audience for its appreciation and a beneficent Providence for granting him this opportunity of fixing a new star in the theatrical firmament: the name of "this little girl," he promised (bowing to Joan) would appear in letters of fire over the theatre, the next night....

Pausing in the lobby to light a cigarette before leaving, Matthias overheard one of Arlington's lieutenants confiding to another the news of the ruinous failure of the third initial production of that night.

Half an hour later he met Wilbrow by appointment in a quiet, non-theatrical club, and received from him confirmation of rumours which had already reached him of his own triumph with "Tomorrow's People."

"You're a made man now," Wilbrow told him with sincere good will and some little honest envy; "by tomorrow morning the pack will be at your heels, yapping for a chance to put on every old 'script in your trunk."

"I suppose so," Matthias nodded soberly.

"But there's one comfort about that," Wilbrow pursued cheerfully: "whatever the temptation, you won't give 'em anything but sound, sane, workmanlike stuff. You've proved yourself one of the two or three, at most, playwrights in this country who are able to think and to make an audience think without losing sight of the fact that, in the last analysis, 'the play's the thing.' We've got plenty of authors nowadays who can turn out first-chop melodrama, and we've got a respectable percentage of 'em who write plays so full of honest and intelligent thought that it gives the average manager a headache to look at the 'script; but the men who can give us the sort of drama that not only makes you think but holds you on the front edge of your seat waiting to see what's coming next.... Well, they're few and far between, and you're one of 'em, and I'm proud to have had a hand in putting you before the public!"

"You've got nothing on me, there," Matthias grinned: "I'm proud you had. And if I can get my own way after this--"

"You don't need to join the I-Should-Worries on account of that!"

"You'll be the only man who will ever produce one of my plays."

Between one o'clock and two they parted. Matthias trudged home, completely fagged in body, but with a buoyant heart to sustain him.

Venetia would be glad for him...

He was ascending the steps of Number 289 when a heavy touring-car, coming from the direction of Longacre Square, swung in to the curb and stopped. Latch-key in hand, Matthias paused and looked back in some little surprise: the lodgers of Madame Duprat were a motley lot, but as far as he knew none of them were of the class that maintains expensive automobiles. But this car, upon inspection, proved to be tenanted by the chauffeur alone; who, leaving the motor purring, jumped smartly from his seat and ran up the steps.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said, touching his cap, "but I'm looking for a gentleman named Matthias--"

"I am Mr. Matthias."

"Thank you, sir. I've been sent to fetch you. It's--er--important, I fancy," the man added, eyeing Matthias curiously.

"You've been sent to fetch me? But who sent you?"

"My employer, sir--Mr. Marbridge."

"Marbridge!" Matthias echoed, startled. Without definite decision, he turned and ran down the steps in company with the chauffeur: Venetia in need of him, perhaps.... "What's happened?" he demanded. "Is Mrs. Marbridge--?"

"If you'll just get in, sir," the man replied, "I'll tell you--as much as I know--on the way. It'll save time."

He opened the door of the tonneau, but Matthias turned from it, walked round the car, and climbed into the seat beside the driver's. With a nod of satisfaction, the chauffeur joined him, threw in the power, and deftly swung the ponderous vehicle about.

"Well?" Matthias asked as the machine shot across-town.

"Beg pardon, sir," the man replied after a moment--"but I'd rather not say anything, if it's all the same to you."

"It isn't," Matthias insisted curtly. "I'm not on sufficiently friendly terms with Mr. Marbridge for him to send for me without explanation."

"Yes, sir; but you see, part of my job is to keep my mouth shut."

"I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to forget that duty to some extent, or else stop the car and let me out."

"Very good, sir. I don't suppose I can do any harm telling what little I know. After supper tonight, Mr. Marbridge told me to take the car to the garage and not to expect a call for it until sometime tomorrow morning; but when I got there, he was already wanting me on the telephone. He said there'd been an accident, and told me to find Mr. Arlington first and then you, and ask you to come immediately."

"But why me?" Matthias asked, more of himself than of the driver.

"He didn't say, sir."

"Did he state what sort of an accident?"

"No, sir."

"You found Mr. Arlington?"

"No, sir; he wasn't in when I asked at his hotel. But I left a message before coming on for you."

Matthias sat up with a start. Instead of turning up Broadway the man was steering his car straight across Longacre Square. Before he had time to comment on this fact they were speeding on toward Sixth Avenue.

"Look here," he cried, "you're not taking me to Mr. Marbridge's home!"

"No, sir."

"But--"

"Mr. Marbridge hadn't gone home when he telephoned me, sir."

"Where is he, then?"

"We'll be there in a minute, sir--an apartment house on Madison Avenue."

"Oh!" said Matthias thoughtfully. "Was Mr. Marbridge--ah--alone when you left him tonight?"

"I'd rather not say, sir, if you don't mind."

Troubled by an inkling of the disaster, Matthias composed himself to patience.

Turning south on Fifth Avenue, the car passed Thirty-fourth Street before swinging eastward again. It stopped, eventually, in the side street, just short of the corner of Madison Avenue, before a private entrance to a ground-floor apartment, such as physicians prefer. But Matthias could discern no physician's name-plate upon the door at which his guide knocked, or in either of the flanking windows.

Opening, the door disclosed a panelled entry tenanted by a white-lipped woman in the black and white uniform of a lady's-maid. Her frightened eyes examined Matthias apprehensively as he entered, followed by the chauffeur.

This last demanded briefly: "Doctor been?"

The maid assented with a nervous nod: "Ten minutes ago, about. He's with the lady now--"

"Lady!" the chauffeur echoed. "But I thought it was Mr. Marbridge--"

"I mean the other lady," the maid explained--"the one what done the shooting. When Mr. Marbridge got the gun away from her, he locked her up in the bathroom, and then she had hysterics. The doctor's trying to make her hush, so's she won't disturb the other tenants, but.... You can hear yourself how she's carrying on."

In a pause that followed, Matthias was conscious of the sound of high-pitched and incessant laughter, slightly muffled, emanating from some distant part of the flat.

He asked abruptly: "Where is Mr. Marbridge?"

The maid started and hesitated, looking to the chauffeur.

"This is Mr. Matthias," that one explained. "Mr. Marbridge sent for him."

"Oh, yes--excuse me, sir. This way, if you please."

Opening a door on the right, the woman permitted Matthias to pass through, then closed it.

He found himself in a dining-room of moderate proportions and handsomely furnished. Little of it was visible, however, outside the radius of illumination cast by an electric dome which, depending from the middle of the ceiling, focussed its rays upon a small round dining-table of mahogany. This table was quite bare save for a massive decanter of cut-glass standing at the edge of a puddle of spilt liquor: as if an uncertain hand had attempted to pour a drink. Near it lay a broken goblet.

On the farther side of the table a woman with young and slender figure stood in a pose of arrested action, holding a goblet half-full of brandy and water. Her features were but indistinctly suggested in the penumbra of the dome, but beneath this her bare arms and shoulders, rising out of an elaborate evening gown, shone with a soft warm lustre. Matthias remembered that gown: Joan Thursday had worn it in the last act of "Mrs. Mixer." But she neither moved nor spoke, and for the time being he paid her no further heed, giving his attention entirely to Marbridge.

Sitting low in a deeply upholstered wing-chair--out of place in the dining-room and evidently dragged in for the emergency--Marbridge breathed heavily, chin on his chest, his coarse mouth ajar, his face ghastly with a stricken pallor. His feet sprawled uncouthly. The dress coat and waistcoat he had worn lay in a heap on the floor, near the chair, and both shirt and undershirt had been ripped and cut away from his right shoulder, exposing his swarthy and hairy bosom and a sort of temporary bandage which, like his linen, was darkly stained. Closed when Matthias entered, his eyes opened almost instantly and fixed upon the man a heavy and lacklustre stare which at first failed to indicate recognition.

Matthias heard himself crying out in a voice of horror: "Good God, Marbridge! How did this happen?"

The man stirred, granted with pain, and made a deprecatory gesture with his left hand.

"Needn't yell," he said thickly: "I've been shot ... done for..."

His gaze shifted heavily to the woman. With effort he enunciated one word more: "Drink..."

As though by that monosyllable freed from an enchaining spell, Joan started, moved quickly to his side and held the goblet to his lips.

He drank noisily, gulping and slobbering; overflowing at either corner of his mouth, the liquor dripped twin streams upon his naked bosom.

Mechanically Matthias put his hat down on the table.

He experienced an incredulous sensation, as though he were struggling to cast off the terror and oppression of some particularly vivid and coherent nightmare.

From the farther room that noise persisted of monotonous and awful laughter.

Marbridge ceased to swallow and grunted. Joan removed the glass and drew away without looking at Matthias. At a cost of considerable will-power, apparently, the wounded man collected himself and levelled at Matthias his luring, but now less dull, regard.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said ungraciously. "Well, you'll do at a pinch.... I wanted Arlington ... but you if he couldn't be found."

"Well," said Matthias stupidly, "I'm here.... The doctor's seen you, I suppose?"

"Yes--did what he could for me--no use wasting effort--it's my cue to exit."

"Oh, come! It's not as bad as that!"

"The hell it ain't. The doctor knows--I know. Not that it matters. It was coming to me and I got it."

"Where's the doctor?" Matthias insisted. "Why isn't he attending you now?"

"He's in the other room ... trying to silence that crazy woman.... She plugged me and ... went into hysterics...."

"Who?"

"Nella Cardrow.... Had the devil of a time with her before doctor came ... trying to keep her from rushing out and giving herself up ... all this in the papers.... But all right now: we'll hush it up."

"Then that's what you want of me?"

"Wait," Marbridge grunted. "Where's that girl?"

Joan moved back to his side. "What can I do?" she said; and these were all the words Matthias heard her utter from first to last of that business.

Marbridge nodded at her with a curling lip: "You can get out!"

She turned sharply and left the room, banging the door.

"That's the kind *she* is," Marbridge commented. "You were lucky to get rid of her as easy as you did.... Give me more brandy, will you, like a good fellow--and be stingy with the water. I've got to ... hold out a couple of hours more."

Matthias served him.

"I presume Venetia knows nothing about this, yet?"

Having drunk, Marbridge shook his head. "Not yet. Now, listen.... You guessed it: I want you to help hush this up, for Venetia's sake.... Rotten mess--do no good if it gets in the papers--only humiliation for her. Will you--?"

"What is it you want me to do?"

"Help me home and keep your mouth shut.... You see, this is my place; I've had it years; very handy--private entrance--all that.... Nella used to meet me here. That's how she came to have a key. I'd forgotten.... Well, I got tired of her, and she couldn't act, and Arlington was sore about that. So we planned to get rid of her. I guess you must've heard. It was a dirty business, all round.... And tonight, when her play went to pieces, just as we'd planned it should, she saw how she'd been bilked and lost her head.... Came here, let herself in quietly, without the maid's hearing her, and shot me

when I came in with Joan. I managed to get the gun away before she could turn it on herself, and locked her up. Then--hysterics.... Well, I'm finished. I asked for it, and got it.... No: no remorse bunk, no deathbed repentance, nothing like that! But I realize I've been a pretty rotten proposition, first and last. Never mind.... What I'm getting at's this: nobody need suffer but me. That's where *you* come in. For Venetia's sake. You and Arlington and the doctor can cover it all up between you. Arlie can quiet that girl--Joan--and the doctor's all right; he'll want a pretty stiff cheque to fix the undertaker--and that's all right, too. Then you've got to scare Nella Cardrow so's she won't give herself away, and buy my chauffeur and that maid out there, Sara.... But first off, you'll have to help doctor get me home and in bed. I'm the sort that's got to die in the house."

His chin dropped again.

"Well ... I guess it's a good job ... at that...."

He shivered.

The hall-door opened and Arlington entered, followed by a lean man with worried eyes who proved to be the doctor.

XXXIX

Shortly before seven o'clock, that same morning, a limousine car pulled up quietly just short of the corner of Madison Avenue, and its occupant, with a word on alighting to his driver, addressed himself briskly to the door of the ground-floor flat.

He was a handsome, well dressed, well-set-up and well-nourished animal of something more than middle-age: a fact which the pitilessly clear light of early morning betrayed, discovering lines and hollows in his clean-shaven countenance which would ordinarily have escaped notice.

But he had passed that time of life when he could suffer a sleepless night of anxiety without visibly paying for it.

His intention to announce himself by ringing the bell was promptly anticipated, the door opening before his finger could touch the button. He checked momentarily in obvious surprise, then jauntily lifted his hat as he stepped hurriedly inside.

"Why, my dear!" he addressed the woman who held the door--"up so early!"

"I haven't been to bed, of course, Mr. Arlington," Joan informed him.

"Well," he observed, not without envy, "you don't look it."

"I've been packing all night," she returned. "Of course--I can't stay here, after what's happened."

"Of course not," he agreed sympathetically.

Having closed the outside door, she moved before him into a small drawing-room which adjoined the entry-hall on the left, and when he had followed shut its door with particular care.

"Sara's still packing," she explained, turning to Arlington. "Well?"

He hesitated, looking her over with a doubtful eye. But she was, at least outwardly, quite cool and collected, her manner exhibiting no undue amount of anxiety.

Still, a certain amount of make-believe would seem no more than decent....

"Look here," he said almost sharply--"you're feeling all right, eh?"

"Quite--only tired as a dog; and naturally--"

"I understand," he interrupted. "But you'll be fit to go on tonight, you think?"

"Don't worry about that," Joan advised him decidedly. "I'm hoping to get a nap before evening, but even if I don't, I know the first duty of an actress is always to her public."

"Yes," Arlington agreed briefly, avoiding her eyes.... "Still, I must ask you to be prepared."

Joan's figure stiffened slightly, and her dark eyes widened.

"Dead?" she questioned in a low voice.

Arlington nodded. "I'm sorry.... About half an hour after we got him home."

The girl sat down suddenly and buried her face in her hands.

"Oh!" she cried in a stifled voice--"how awful!"

"There!" Arlington moved over and rested a hand familiarly on her shoulder. "Brace up. You'll forget all about this before long."

"O no--never!" she moaned through her fingers.

"But you will," he insisted, looking down at her with an odd expression. "To begin with, I'm going to make it my business to see that you forget. You must. You can't do justice to your--genius, if you keep harping on this accident. It wasn't your fault, you know. Just as soon as I've arranged a few details.... By the way, how's the Cardrow woman?"

"Asleep," Joan answered. "She hasn't made a bit of trouble since the doctor gave her that dope--whatever it was."

"Good. He'll be along presently with a nurse he can trust. And by that time I'll have you out of the way. I know just the place for you, a little flat uptown, on Fifty-ninth Street, overlooking the Park. You'll be very quiet and comfortable there, and near the theatre besides."

"I'm glad of that. I was thinking, of course, I'd have to go to some hotel ... and I didn't want to."

"And quite natural. You want to be alone until you feel yourself again.... I'll find you a good maid, and make everything smooth for you. You're not to fret about anything, and if you're troubled you must come right to me."

"You're awfully kind."

"Don't look at it that way, please."

"How can I ever thank you?"

"Oh, we'll talk that over some other time." Arlington removed his hand from her shoulder and went back to the table, upon which he had deposited a bundle of newspapers. "There's no doubt of your success," he pursued soothingly. "Your notices are the finest I've seen in years. I brought you the lot of them in case you care--"

Joan uncovered her face and looked up quickly. "Oh, do let me see them!"

Arlington placed the papers in her eager hands.

"They're all folded with your reviews uppermost."

"Oh, thank you ever so much!"

But in the act of opening the bundle, Joan hesitated and let it fall into her lap.

"There's nothing about--?" she questioned fearfully.

"No, and won't be," he promised. "Besides, these were already on the presses by the time it happened.... You needn't worry," he resumed, moving to a window and looking abstractedly out, hands clasped behind him; "the affair will be kept perfectly quiet. Everybody's been seen and fixed, except the Cardrow, and the doctor has already given us a certificate of death under the knife--operation for appendicitis, imperatively required at an hour's notice.... By the way, I don't suppose you know, but--Marbridge didn't leave any papers or anything of that sort lying round here, did he?"

There was no answer. He heard a paper rustle, and looking round saw the girl with her attention all absorbed by one of her notices.

"Well," he said after a moment, "I'll go and have a talk with that maid, Sara."

"All right," she returned abstractedly.

"You're all ready to leave when I've fixed things up with her?"

"Yes," she returned, without looking up.

He hesitated a moment by the door, remarking the flush of colour that was deepening in her cheeks; then with a mystified shake of his head, he left the room very quietly.

She remained alone for upwards of half an hour, in the course of which time she read all the reviews once and some of the more enthusiastic twice.

Then carefully folding the papers, she put them aside and sat thinking.

She thought for a long time without moving, her eyes shining as they looked ahead, out of the stupid and sordid turmoil of yesterday into the golden promise of tomorrow.

She thought by no means clearly, with a brain confused by praise and sodden with fatigue; but above the welter of her thoughts, a single tremendous fact stood out, solid and unshakable, like a mountain towering about cloud-wrack:

She was a Success.