

FICTION

Alice Brown

Rose MacLeod

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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ROSE MACLEOD

BY ALICE BROWN

WITH A FRONTISPIECE
BY W. W. CHURCHILL, JR.

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Rose MacLeod

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ROSE MACLEOD

I

Madam Fulton and her granddaughter Electra were sitting at the breakfast-table. It was a warm yet inspiriting day in early spring, and, if the feel and look of it were not enough, the garden under the dining-room windows told the season's hour like a floral clock. The earliest blossoms had been pushed onward by the mounting spirit of the year, and now the firstlings of May were budding. The great Georgian house, set in the heart of this processional bloom, showed the mellow tints of time. It had an abundant acreage, diversified, at first hand, not only by this terraced garden in the rear, but by another gone to wild abandon on the west, and an orchard stretching away into level fields and, beyond them, groves of pine.

These dining-room windows, three of them, side by side, and now unshaded, gave large outlook on a beautiful and busy world where the terrace mounted in green, to be painted later with red peony balls, and where the eye, still traveling, rested in satisfaction on the fringe of locusts at the top.

Inside the house the sense of beauty could be fully fed. Here was a sweet consistency, the sacred past in untouched being, that time when furniture was made in England, and china was the product of long voyages and solemn hoarding in corner cabinets with diamond panes. Life here was reflected dimly from polished surfaces and serenely accentuated by quaint carvings and spindle legs. Here was "atmosphere"--the theatre of simple and austere content.

Madam Fulton outwardly fitted her background as a shepherdess fits a fan. She was a sprite of an old lady, slender and

round, and finished in every movement, with the precision of those who have "learned the steps" in dancing of another period. It was her joy that she had kept her figure, her commonplace that, having it, she knew what to do with it. She had a piquant profile, dark eyes, and curls whiter than white, sifted over with the lustre of a living silver. According to her custom, she wore light gray, and there was lace about her wrists and throat.

"Coffee, Electra?" she suddenly proposed, in a contralto voice that still had warmth in it. She put the question impatiently, as if her hidden self and that of the girl opposite had been too long communing, in spite of them, and she had to break the tacit bondage of that intercourse by one more obvious. The girl looked up from the letter in her hand.

"No, thank you, grandmother," she said. Her voice, even in its lowest notes, had a clear, full resonance. Then she laid the letter down. "I beg your pardon," she added. "I thought you were opening your mail."

"No! no!" Madam Fulton cried, in a new impatience. "Go on. Read your letter. Don't mind me."

But the girl was pushing it aside. She looked across the table with her direct glance, and Madam Fulton thought unwillingly how handsome she was. Electra was young, and she lacked but one thing: a girl's uncertain grace. She had all the freshness of youth with the poise of ripest womanhood. She sat straight and well, and seemed to manage her position at table as if it were a horse. Her profile was slightly aquiline and her complexion faultless in its fairness and its testimony to wholesome living. Her lips were rather thin, but the line of white teeth behind them showed exquisitely. She had a great deal of fine brown hair wound about her head in braids, in an imperial fashion. Perhaps the only fault in her face was that her eyes were of a light and not sympathetic blue.

"Shall I open your mail, grandmother?" she asked with extreme deference.

Madam Fulton's hand was lying on a disordered pile of letters, twenty deep, beside her plate. She pressed the hand a little closer.

"No, thank you," she said. "I will attend to them myself."

Electra laid down her napkin, and pushed her plate to one side, to give space for her own papers. She lifted one sheet, and holding it in her fine hands, began rather elegantly,--

"Grandmother, I have here a most interesting letter from Mrs. Furnivall Williams. She speaks of your book in the highest praise."

"Oh!" said the old lady, with a shade of satire, "does she? That's very good-natured of Fanny Williams."

"Let me read you what she says." Electra bent a frowning brow upon the page. "Ah, this is it. 'It was to be expected that your grandmother would write what we all wanted to read. But her "Recollections" are more than welcome. They are satisfying. They are illuminative.'"

"Fanny Williams is a fool!"

Electra, not glancing up, yet managed to look deeply pained.

"She goes on to say, 'What a power your dear grandmother has been! I never realized it until now.'"

"That's a nasty thing for Fanny Williams to write. You tell her so."

"Then she asks whether you would be willing to meet the Delta Club for an afternoon of it."

"Of what?"

"Your book, grandmother,--your 'Recollections.'"

"Electra, you drive me to drink. I have written the book. I've printed it. I've done with it. What does Fanny Williams want me to do now? Prance?"

Electra was looking at her grandmother at last and in a patient hopefulness, like one awaiting a better mood.

"Grandmother dear," she protested, "it almost seems as if you owe it to the world, having said so much, to say a little more."

"What, for instance, Electra? What?"

Electra considered, one hand smoothing out the page.

"People want to know things about it. The newspapers do. How can you think for a moment of the discussion there

has been, and not expect questions?"

The old lady smiled to herself.

"Well," she said, "they won't find out."

"But why, grandmother, why?"

"I can't tell you why, Electra; but they won't, and there's an end of it." She rose from her chair, and Electra, gathering her mail, followed punctiliously. As they were leaving the room, her grandmother turned upon her. "Did you hear from Peter?" she asked.

"Yes. From New York. He will be here to-morrow." Electra's clear, well-considered look was very unlike that of a girl whose lover had come home, after a five years' absence, for the avowed purpose of marriage.

Madam Fulton regarded her for a moment with a softened glance. It seemed wistfully to include other dreams, other hopes than the girl's own, a little dancing circle of shadowy memories outside the actual, as might well happen when one has lived many years and seen the growth and passing of such ties.

"Well, Electra," she said then, "I suppose you'll marry him. You'll be famous by brevet. That's what you'll like."

Electra laughed a little, in a tolerant way.

"You are always thinking I want to become a celebrity, grandmother," she said. "That's very funny of you."

"Think!" emphasized the old lady. "I know it. I know your kind. They're thick as spatter now. Everybody wants to do something, or say he's done it. You want to 'express' yourselves. That's what you say--'express' yourselves. I never saw such a race."

She went grumbling into the library to answer her letters, or at least look them through, and paused there for a moment, her hand on the table. She knew approximately what was in the letters. They were all undoubtedly about her book, the "Recollections" of her life, some of them questioning her view of the public events therein narrated, but others palpitating with an eager interest. She had written that history as a woman of letters in a small way, and a woman who had known the local celebrities, and she had done it so vividly, with such incredible originality, that the book was not only having a rapid sale, but it piqued the curiosity of gossip-lovers and even local historians. No names were mentioned; but when she wrote, "A poet said to me in Cambridge one day," everybody knew what poet was meant. When she obscurely alluded to the letters preceding some smooth running of the underground railway, historians of the war itched to see the letters, and invited her to produce them. The book was three months old now, and the wonder no less. The letters had been coming, and the old lady had not been answering them. At first she read them with glee, as a later chapter of her life story; but now they tired her a little, because she anticipated their appeal.

A bird was singing outside. She cocked her head a little and listened, not wholly in pleasure, but with a critical curiosity as well. She was always watching for the diminution of sound, the veiling of sight because she was old, and now she wondered whether the round golden notes were what they had been fifty years ago. She stood a moment thoughtfully, her hand now on the letters,--those tedious intruders upon her leisure. Then, with an air of guilty escape, though there was no one to see and judge, she left them lying there and stole softly out on the veranda, where she sank into her friendly wicker chair, and looking upon the world, smilingly felt it to be good. The sky was very bright, yet not too bright for pleasure; clouds not meant for rain were blotting it in feathery spaces. There was a sweet air stirring, and the birds, though they were busy, said something about it from time to time in a satisfactory way. Madam Fulton felt the rhythm and surge of it all, and acquiesced in her own inactive part in it. Sometimes of late she hardly knew how much of life was memory and how much the present brilliant call of things. It was life, the thing she did not understand. Presently she closed her eyes and sank, she thought, into a deeper reverie. These excursions of hers were less like sleep, she always told herself, than a kind of musing dream. At last she was learning what other old people had meant when they explained, with a shamefaced air of knowing youth could never understand, "I just lost myself." To lose one's battered and yet still insistent self was now to be at peace.

When the forenoon was an hour or more along, she opened her eyes, aware of some one looking at her. There he was, an old gentleman of a pleasant aspect, heavy, with a thickness of curling white hair, blue eyes, and that rosiness which is as the bloom upon the flower of good living. His clothes were of the right cut, and he wore them with the ease of a man who has always had the best to eat, to wear, to look at; for whom life has been a well-organized scheme to turn out comfort. The old lady stared at him with unwinking eyes, and the old gentleman smiled at her.

"Billy!" she cried at last, and gave him both her hands. "Billy Stark!"

They shook hands warmly and still looked each other in the eye. They had not met for years, and neither liked to think

what was in the other's mind. But Madam Fulton, after they had sat down, challenged it.

"I'm an old woman, Billy." She wrinkled up her eyes in a delightful way she had. "Don't you think that's funny?"

Billy with difficulty crossed one leg over the other, helping it with a plump hand.

"You're precisely what you always were."

His round, comfortable voice at once put her where she liked to be, in the field of an unconsidered intercourse with man. Electra, she knew, was too much with her, but she had forgotten how invigorating these brisk yet kindly breezes were, from the other planets. "That's what I came over to see about," Billy was saying, with a rakish eye. "I needn't have taken the trouble. You're as little changed as that syringa bush."

Her brilliant face softened into something wistful.

"The bush will come into bloom in a few weeks, Billy," she reminded him. "I shan't ever bloom again."

"Boo to a goose!" said Billy. "You're in bloom now."

The wistfulness was gone. She adjusted her glasses on her nose and eyed him sharply.

"I think too much about old age," she said. "I regard mine as a kind of mildew, and every day and forty times a day I peer at myself to see if the mildew's growing thicker. But you don't seem to have any mildew, Billy. You're just a different kind of person from what you were fifty years ago. You haven't gone bad at all."

Billy set his correct feet together on the floor, rose, and, with his hand on his heart, made her a bow.

"I don't care for it much myself," he said.

"Growing old? It's the devil, Billy. Don't talk about it. Why aren't you in England?"

"I'm junior partner now."

"I know it."

"I'm a great publisher, Florrie."

She nodded.

"Your men run over to arrange with us in London. There was no occasion for my coming here. But I simply wanted to. I got a little curious--homesick, maybe. So I came. Got in last night. I read your book before I sailed."

She looked at him quizzically and almost, it might be said, with a droll uneasiness.

"You brought it out in England," she offered, in rather a small voice. "Naturally you'd read it."

"Not because we brought it out. Because it was yours," he corrected her. "My word, Florrie, what a life you've had of it."

The pink crept into her cheeks. Her eyes menaced him.

"Are you trying to pump me, Billy Stark?" she inquired.

"Not for a moment. But you're guilty, Florrie. What is it?"

She considered, her gaze bent on her lap.

"Well, the fact is, Billy," she temporized, "I've got in pretty deep with that book. I wrote it as a sort of a--well, I wrote it, you know, and I thought I might get a few hundred dollars out of it, same as I have out of those novels I used to write to keep lace on my petticoats. Well! the public has made a fool of itself over the book. Every day I get piles of letters asking what I meant by this and that, and won't I give my documentary evidence for saying this or that great gun did so and so at such a time."

"Well, why don't you?"

"Give my evidence? Why, I can't!" She was half whimpering, with a laugh on her old face. "I haven't got it."

"You mean you haven't the actual letters now. Those extraordinary ones of the abolitionist group, for example,--can't you produce them?"

"Why no, Billy, of course I can't. I"--she held his glance with a mixture of deprecation and a gay delight--"I made them up."

William Stark, the publisher, looked at her with round blue eyes growing rounder and a deeper red surging into his sea-tanned face. He seemed on the point of bursting into an explosion, whether of horror or mirth Madam Fulton could not tell. She continued to gaze at him in the same mingling of deprecating and amused inquiry. In spite of her years she looked like a little animal which, having done wrong, seeks out means of propitiation, and as yet knows nothing better than the lifted eyebrow of inquiry.

"Well," she said again defiantly, "I made them up."

"In God's name, Florrie, what for?"

"I wanted to."

"To pad out your book?"

"To make a nice book, the kind of one I wanted. I'll tell you what, Billy,"--she bowed caution into the farthest distance,--"I'm going to make a clean breast of it. Now you won't peach?"

He shook his head.

"Go on," he bade her.

She lifted her head, sat straighter in her chair, and spoke with firmness:--

"Now, Billy, if I'm going to talk to you at all, you must know precisely where I stand. Maybe you do, but I don't believe it. You see, all these years I've been writing what I called novels, and they've paid me a little, and I've got up a sort of local fame. I'm as poor--well, I can't tell you how poor. Only I live here in the summer with Electra in her house--"

"It's the old Fulton house."

"Yes, but it came to her through her father. Remember, I was a second wife. I had no children. My husband gave me the Cambridge place and left this to his son."

"What became of the Cambridge house?"

"Sold, years ago. Eaten up. Seems as if I'd done nothing, all these years, but eat. It makes me sick to think of it. Well, here was I, credit low, my little knack at writing all but gone--why, Billy, styles have changed since my day. Folks would hoot at my novels now. They don't read them. They just remember I wrote them when they want a celebrity at a tea. I'm a back number. Don't you know it?"

He nodded, gravely pondering. The one thing about him never to be affected by his whimsical humor was the integrity of a business verdict. Madam Fulton now was warming to the value of her own position. She began to see how picturesque it was.

"Well, then up rises one of your precious publishers and says to me, 'Mrs. Fulton, you have known all the celebrated people. Why not write your recollections?' 'Why not?' says I. Well, I went home and sat down and wrote. And when I looked back at my life, I found it dull. So I gave myself a free hand. I described the miserable thing as it ought to have been, not as it was."

William Stark was leaning forward, looking her in the face, his hands on his knees, as if to steady him through an amazing crisis.

"Florrie," he began, "do you mean to say you made up most of the letters in that book?"

"Most of them? Every one! I hadn't any letters from celebrities. Days when I might have had, I didn't care a button about the eggs they were cackling over, and I didn't know they were going to be celebrities, then, did I?"

"Do you mean the recollections of Brook Farm, taken down from the lips of the old poet as he had it from a member of the fraternity there--"

"Faked, dear boy, faked, every one of them." She was gathering cheerfulness by the way.

"The story of Hawthorne and the first edition--"

"Hypothetical. Grouse in the gun-room."

"Do you mean that the story of the old slave who came to your mother's door in Waltham, and the three abolitionists on their way to the meeting--"

"Now what's the use, Billy Stark?" cried the old lady. "I told you it was a fake from beginning to end. So it is. So is every page of it. If I'd written my recollections as they were, the book would have been a pamphlet of twenty odd pages. It would have said I married a learned professor because I thought if I got into Cambridge society I should see life, and life was what I wanted. It would have gone on to say I found it death and nothing else, and when my husband died I spent all the money I could get trying to see life and I never saw it then. Who'd have printed that? Pretty recollections, I should say!"

Mr. Stark was still musing, his eyes interrogating her.

"It's really incredible, Florrie," he said at last. "Poor dear! you needed the money."

"That wasn't it."

"Then what was?"

"I don't know." But immediately her face folded up into its smiling creases and she said, "I wanted some fun."

William Stark fell back in his chair and began to laugh, round upon wheezy round. When his glasses had fallen off and his cheeks were wet and his face flamed painfully, Madam Fulton spoke, without a gleam.

"You're a nice man, Billy Stark."

"You wanted your little joke!" he repeated, subsiding and trumpeting into his handkerchief. "Well, you've had it, Florrie; you've had it."

"I don't know that I have," she returned. "I had to enjoy it alone, and that kind of palled on me. When the first notices came, I used to lie awake from three o'clock on, to laugh. I used to go to the window when Electra was in the room, and make up faces, to let off steam and keep her from knowing. Then the letters kept coming, and clubs and things kept hounding me, and Electra was always at me. There she is now, with my grog. See me take it and pour it into the syringa."

II

Electra was crossing the veranda with her springing step, bearing a glass of beaten egg and milk on a little tray. Madam Fulton signed to her to place the tray on a table, evidently ready for such ministrations, and then presented her friend. Electra greeted him with a smile of bright acceptance. She knew his standing, and his air of worldly ease quite satisfied her.

"May I bring you--?" she began, with a pretty grace.

"I should like a glass of water," said Billy, "if you will be so good."

When she had gone, Madam Fulton spoke in impressive haste:--

"How long can you stay, Billy? All day? All night?"

"I've got to run back to New York for a bit, but I shall be in America all summer, one place or another. I'll stay to luncheon, if you'll let me."

"We must avoid Electra! If she comes back and settles on us, I shall simply take you to walk. We can go over to Bessie Grant's. You remember her. She married the doctor."

"I remember."

Electra had returned with a glass and pitcher, and ice clinking pleasantly. She took occasion to explain to Madam Fulton, with some civil hesitation,--

"I have a committee meeting, grandmother. I had planned to go in town."

The old lady responded briskly.

"Go, my dear, go. Mr. Stark will stay to luncheon. We'll look out for each other."

When Electra had rustled away, after the pleasantest of farewell recognitions between her and the guest, Madam Fulton heaved a sigh.

"Billy," said she, "that's a dreadful girl."

"She's a very handsome girl. What's the matter with her?"

"She's so equipped. First, she's well born. Her grandmother was a Grace and her mother was a Vanderdecken. See her teeth. See her hair, and her profile. Dreadful!"

"They're very beautiful, in a correct way. She's as well made as a grand piano."

"That's it, Billy. And she has done nothing but polish herself, and now you can see your face in her. Fancy, Billy, what these modern creatures do. They go to gymnasium. They can take a five-barred gate, I believe, in their knickerbockers and what they call sneakers. They understand all about foods and what's good for them and what's good for the aged, and if you're over seventy they buy condensed foods in cans and make you take it twice a day."

"You haven't tasted your grog."

"I shan't. Want it?"

He accepted the glass, and sniffed at it critically.

"That's good," he commented. "That's very good. There's a familiar creature in that." He tasted, and then drank with gusto.

"Well," said the old lady disparagingly, "you wouldn't have said so if it had been one of the foods. I have them before I go to bed."

He spoke persuasively: "Florrie, let's talk a little more about the book."

"There's nothing more to say. I've told you the whole story, and I know you won't tell anybody else."

"Don't you think you'd better make a clean breast of it to Gilbert and Wall?"

"What for?"

"Well, I don't know exactly: only it seems to me publishers and authors are in a more or less confidential relation. Being a publisher myself, I naturally feel rather strongly about it."

"I don't see it in the least," said the old lady decisively. "All this talk about the paternal relation is mere poppycock. They print me a book. If it takes a start, they back it. They're as glad as I am. But as to telling them my glorious little joke, why, I can't and I won't."

"But, dear woman, they're printing away with full confidence in having got a valuable book out of you."

"So they have. It's selling, isn't it?"

"Madly. Specialists want it for honest data. The general reader has got an idea from the reviews that there's personal gossip in it, more or less racy. So it goes."

"Well, let it go," said the old lady recklessly. "I shan't stop it."

"No, but I can't help thinking Gilbert and Wall ought to be in the secret."

"Do you imagine they'd stop printing?"

"I don't imagine anything. I believe, to speak temperately, they'd drop dead. I only say it's a fearful and wonderful situation, and they ought to know it. You see, dear woman, you've not only played a joke on the public; you've played a joke on them."

"Well, for goodness' sake, why not? What's a publisher, anyway? Has he got to be treated like a Hindu god? Billy Stark, I wish you'd stayed in London where you belong."

Again Billy felt himself wheezing, and gave up to it as before. She watched him unwinkingly, and by and by she chuckled a little and then joined him, in an ecstasy.

"Florrie," said he, "you're simply a glorious portent, and you've no more moral sense than the cat."

"No, Billy, no!" She was answering in a happy acquiescence. "I never had any. I've always wanted some fun, and I want it to this day." Her old face changed surprisingly under a shade of gravity. "And see where it's led me." It was natural to conclude that her verdict embraced wider evidence than that of the erring book. Billy, quite serious in his turn, looked at her in candid invitation. She answered him earnestly and humbly: "Billy, I always took the wrong road. I took it in the beginning and I never got out of it."

"There's a frightful number of wrong turnings," Billy offered, in rather inadequate sympathy, "and a great deficiency of guideposts."

"You see, Billy, the first thing I did was to give up Charlie Grant and marry Mark Fulton. I was only a country girl. Charlie was a country boy. I thought Mark must be a remarkable person because he was a professor in Cambridge. I thought Charlie was going to be a poor little country doctor, because he was studying medicine with another country doctor, and he couldn't go to college to save his skin. There were eight children, you know, younger than he. He had to work on the farm. Well, Billy, I made a mistake."

Stark marveled at the crude simplicity of all this. He forgot, for the moment, that she was an old woman, and that for a long time she had been conning over the past like a secret record, full of blemishes, perhaps, but not now to be remedied.

"You did like Charlie," he ventured. "I knew that."

"I liked him very much. And I've never quite escaped from his line of life, if that's what they call it. Since Electra was alone and I came here to stay with her, I've been thrown with his widow. Bessie's an old woman, too, you know, like me. But she's a different kind."

"She was a pretty girl. Rather sedate, I remember, for a girl."

"Billy, she's a miracle. She lives alone, all but old Mary to do the work. She's stiffened from rheumatism so that she sits in her chair nearly all day, and stumps round a little, in agony, with two canes. But she's had her life."

"How has she had it, Florrie? In having Grant?"

"Because all her choices were good choices. She took him when he was poor, and she helped him work. They had one son. He married a singer, a woman--well, like me. Maybe it was in the blood to want a woman like me. Then this boy and the singer had two sons--one of them clever. Peter Grant, you know. I suppose he's a genius, if there are such. The other has--a deformity."

"I know," he nodded. "You wrote me."

"I didn't write you all. He wasn't born with it. He was a splendid boy, but when he had the accident the mother turned against him. She couldn't help it. I see how it was, Billy. The pride of life, that's what it is--the pride of life."

"Is he dwarfed?"

"Heavens! he was meant for a giant, rather. He has great strength. Somehow he impresses you. But it's the grandmother that built him up, body and brain. Now he's a man grown, and she's made him. Don't you see, Billy? she's struck home every time."

"Is she religious?"

"Yes, she is. She prays." Her voice fell, with the word. She looked at him searchingly, as if he might understand better than she did the potency of that communion.

"She's a Churchwoman, I suppose."

"No, no. She only believes things--and prays. She told me one day Osmond--he's the deformed one--he couldn't have lived if she hadn't prayed."

"That he would be better?"

"No, she was quite explicit about that. Only that they would be taught how to deal with it--his trouble. To do it, she said, as God wished they should. Billy, it's marvelous."

"Well, dear child," said Billy, "you can pray, too."

Her old face grew pinched in its denial.

"No," she answered sadly, "no. It wouldn't rise above the ceiling. What I mean is, Billy, that all our lives we're opening gates into different roads. Bessie Grant opened the right gate. She's got into a level field and she's at home there. But I shouldn't be. I only go and climb up and look over the bars. And I go stumbling along, hit or miss, and I never get anywhere."

He was perplexed. He frowned a little.

"Where do you want to get, Florrie?" he asked at length.

She smiled into his face engagingly.

"I don't know, Billy. Only where things don't bore me; where they are worth while."

"But they always get to bore us--" he paused and she took him up.

"You mean I'm bored because I am an old woman. I should say so, too, but then I look at that other woman and I know it isn't so. No, Billy, I took the wrong road."

Billy looked at her a long time searchingly.

"Well," he said at last, "what can we do about it? I mean, besides writing fake memoirs and then going ag'in our best friends when they beg us to own up?"

She put the question by, as if it could not possibly be considered, and yet as if it made another merry chapter to her jest. Billy had gathered his consolatory forces for another leap.

"Florrie," said he, "come back to London with me."

"My dear child!"

"You marry me, Florrie. I asked you fifty odd years ago. I could give you a good sober sort of establishment, a salon of a sort. I know everybody in arts and letters. Come on, Florrie."

Fire was in the old lady's eye. She rose and made him a pretty courtesy.

"Billy," said she, "you're splendid. I won't hold you to it, but it will please me to my dying day to think I've had another offer. No, Billy, no. You wouldn't like it. But you're splendid."

Billy, too, had risen. They took hands and stood like boy and girl looking into each other's eyes. There was a little suffusion, a tear perhaps, the memory of other times when coin did not have to be counted so carefully, when they could open the windows without inevitable dread of the night, its dark and chill. The old lady broke the moment.

"Come over and see Bessie Grant. What do you say?"

"Delighted. Get your hat."

But she appeared with a gay parasol, one of Electra's, appropriated from the stand with the guilty consideration that the owner would hardly be back before three o'clock. The old lady liked warm colors. She loved the bright earth in all its phases, and of these a parasol was one. They went down the broad walk and out into the road shaded by summer green, that quivering roof-work of drooping branches and many leaves.

"Billy," said she, "I'm glad you've come."

"So am I, Florrie; so am I."

It was not far to the old Grant house, rich in the amplitude of its size, and of the grounds, where all conceivable trees that make for profit and delight were colonized according to a wise judgment. The house was large, of a light yellow with white trimmings and green blinds, and the green of the shrubbery relieved it and endowed it with an austere dignity. There was a curving driveway to the door, and following it, they came to the wide veranda, where an old lady sat by herself, dozing and reflecting as Madam Fulton had done that morning. The two canes by her chair told the story of a sad inaction. She was of heroic stature and breadth. Her small, beautifully poised head had thick white hair rolled back and wound about in a soft coil. Her face, pink with a persistent bloom, soft with a contour never to break or grow old, was simply a mother's face. It had the mother look,--the sweet serious eyes, the low brow, for beauty not for thought, the tranquil mouth. She was dressed in a fine cambric simply made, with little white ruffles about her neck and above her motherly hands. Madam Fulton saw her debating as they came, frowning a little, wondering evidently about

the stranger. She called to her.

"Who is this, Bessie Grant?"

The other woman laid a hand upon her canes, and then, as if this were an instinctive movement, yet not to be undertaken hurriedly, smiled and sat still, awaiting them. When they were at the steps, she spoke in an exceedingly pleasant voice. It deepened the effect of her great gentleness.

"I'm sure I don't know. Come right up and tell me."

They mounted the steps together, and Stark put out his hand. Mrs. Grant studied him for a moment. Light broke over her sweet old face.

"It's Billy Stark," she said.

"Of course it is," triumphed the other old lady. "Billy Stark come back from foreign parts as good as new. Now let's sit down and talk it over."

They drew their chairs together, and, smiles and glances mingling, went back over the course of the years, first with a leap to the keen, bright time when they were in school together. The type of that page was clear-cut and vivid. There were years they skipped then, and finally they came to the present, and Billy said,--

"You have two grandsons?"

"Yes. One lives with me. The other is coming home to-morrow. He's the painter."

"Engaged to Electra," added Madam Fulton. "Did you know that? They are to be married this summer. Then I suppose he'll go back to Paris and she'll go with him."

Mrs. Grant was looking at her with a grave attention.

"We hope not," she said, "Osmond and I. Osmond hopes Peter will settle here and do some work. He thinks it will be best for him."

"There's no difficulty about his getting it," said Billy. "I saw his portrait of Mrs. Rhys. That was amazing."

The grandmother nodded, in a quiet pleasure.

"They said so," she returned.

"It will do everything for him."

"It has done everything. Osmond says he has only to sit down now and paint. But he thinks it will be best for him to do it here--at least for a time."

"How in the world can Osmond tell before he sees him?" objected Madam Fulton. "You haven't set eyes on Peter for five years. He may be Parisian to the backbone. You wouldn't want to tie him by the leg over here."

"So Osmond says. But he hopes he won't want to go back."

"I can tell him one thing," said the other old lady; "he'd better make up his mind to some big centre, Paris or New York, or he won't get Electra. Electra knows what she wants, and it isn't seclusion. She is going to be the wife of a celebrated painter, and she'll insist on the perquisites. I know Electra."

Mrs. Grant smiled in deprecation; but Stark had a habit of intuitive leaps, and he judged that she also knew Electra. His mind wandered a little, as his eyes ran over the nearer features of the place. It hardly suggested wealth: only comfort and beauty, the grace that comes of long devotion, the loving eye, the practiced hand. Somebody's heart had been put into it. This was the labor that was not hired. He had a strong curiosity to see Osmond, and yet he could not ask for him because Madam Fulton had once written him some queer tale of the man's sleeping in the woods, in a house of his own building, and living the wild life his body needed. One thing he learned now: Osmond's name was never out of his grandmother's mouth. She quoted his decisions as if they stood for ultimate wisdom. His ways were good and lovely to her.

The forenoon hour went by, and finally Madam Fulton remembered.

"Bless me!" she said. "It's luncheon time. Come, Billy."

The road was brighter now under the mounting sun. Madam Fulton was a little tired, and they walked silently.

Presently, at her own gate, she suggested, not grudgingly, but as if the charm of goodness was, unhappily, assured,—

"I suppose she's lovely!"

"Great! She's one of those creatures that have good mother-stuff in them. It doesn't matter much what they mother. It's there. It's a kind of force. It helps—I don't know exactly how."

"Now can't you see what I mean? That woman has had big things. She had one of the great loves. She built it up, piece by piece, with Charlie. He kept a devotion for her that wasn't to be compared with the tempest he felt about me. I'm sure of that."

Stark looked at her as they walked, his eyes perplexedly denying the evidence of his ears.

"Do you know, Florrie," he said, "it's incredible to hear you talk so."

"Why?"

"You have a zest for life, a curiosity about it. Why, it's simply tremendous."

"No, Billy, no. It's not tremendous. It's only that I am quite convinced I haven't got my money's worth. Late as it is, I want it yet. I'll have it—if it's only playing jokes on publishers!"

They ate together in the shaded room, and Madam Fulton, looking out through the windows at the terrace, realized, with an almost humble gratitude, that the world itself and the simple joys of it were quite different tasted in comradeship. She forgot Electra and the irritated sense that her well-equipped granddaughter was wooing her to the ideals of a higher life.

"Billy," she said again, "I'm uncommon glad you came."

Billy's heart warmed with responsive satisfaction. He had expected a more or less colorless meeting with his old love, a philosophic reference here and there to vanished youth, a twilight atmosphere of waning days; but here she was, living as hard as ever. And he had brightened her; he had given her pleasure. The complacency of it reacted upon him, and he sought about in his clever mind for another drop to fill the beaker. By the time they had finished their coffee, he knew.

"Florrie," said he, "what if you should put on your hat and take the train with me?"

"My stars, Billy! Run away?"

"Come up to town. We'd scare up some kind of a theatre this evening, and in the morning you could see Gilbert and Wall."

"And 'fess? Not by a great sight! But I'd like to go, Billy. Leave out Gilbert and Wall, make it you and me, and I'm your man."

"Come along."

"Worry Electra to death!" she proffered brightly. "I'll do it, Billy. Here's the key of my little flat, right here on the writing-desk. I never stayed there alone, but there's no reason why I shouldn't. You can come round in the morning, to see if I've had a fit, and if I haven't we'll go to breakfast. But we must take the three o'clock. She'll be back by four."

She got her bonnet and her handbag, and when Electra did come back at four, her grandmother had flown, leaving a note behind.

III

The next morning Electra, dressed in white and rather pale at the lips, walked about the garden with a pretense of trimming a shrub here and there and steadying a flower. But she was waiting for her lover. She had expected him before. The ten o'clock would bring him, and he would come straight to her without stopping to see his grandmother and Osmond. But time went by, and she was nervously alert to the fact that he might not have come. Even Electra, who talked of poise and strove for it almost in her sleep, felt a little shaken at the deferred prospect of seeing him. It was after those five years, and his letters, voluminous as they were, had not told all. Especially had they omitted to say of late whether he meant to return to France when he should be able to take her with him. To see a lover after such a lapse was an experience not unconnected with a possibility of surprise in herself as well as in him. She had hardly, even at

the first, explicitly stated that she loved him. She had only recognized his privilege of loving her. But now she had put on a white dress, to meet him, and the garden was, in a sense, a protection to her. The diversity of its flowery paths seemed like a shade out of the glare of a defined relation. At last there was a step and he was coming. She forced herself to look at him and judge him as he came. He had scarcely changed, except, perhaps from his hurrying gait and forward bend, that he was more eager. There was the tall figure, the loose tie floating back, the low collar and straight black hair--the face with its aquiline curve and the wide sweet mouth, the eager dark eyes--he looked exactly like the man who had painted the great portrait of the year. Then he was close to her, and both her hands were in his. He lifted them quickly to his lips, one and then the other.

"Electra!" he said. It was the same voice, the slight eager hesitancy in it like the beginning of a stammer.

Electra, to her surprise, said an inconsequent thing. It betrayed how she was moved.

"Grandmother is away. She has gone to town."

"We will go into the summer-house," said the eager voice. "That is where I always think of you. You remember, don't you?"

He had kept her hand, and, like two children, they went along the broad walk and into the summer-house, where there was a green flicker of light from the vines. There was one chair, a rustic one, and Peter drew it forward for her. When she had seated herself, he sat down on the bench of the arbor close by, and, lifting her hand, kissed it again.

"Do you remember the knock-kneed poem I wrote you, Electra?" he asked her. "I called it 'My Imperial Lady.' I thought of it the minute I saw you standing there. My imperial lady!"

The current was too fast for her. She could not manage large, impetuous things like flaming words that hurtled at her and seemed to ask a like exchange--something strong and steady in her to meet them in mid-air and keep them from too swift an impact. His praise had always been like the warriors' shields clanging over poor Tarpeia,--precious, but too crushing. They disconcerted her. If she could not manage to escape after the first blow, she guessed how they might bruise.

"When did you come?" she asked.

Peter did not answer. He was still looking at her with those wonderful eyes that always seemed to her too compelling for happy intercourse.

"Electra," he said, and stopped. She had to answer him. There must be some heavy thing to break to her, which he felt unequal to the task of telling unless she helped him. "Electra," he said again, "I didn't come alone. Some one came with me. I wrote you about Tom."

Electra drew her hand away, and sat up straight and chilled. There had been few moments of her grown-up life, it seemed to her, unspoiled by Tom, her recreant brother. In the tumultuous steeple chase of his existence he had brought her nothing but mortification. In his death, he was at least marring this first moment of her lover's advent.

"You wrote me everything," she said. The tone should have discouraged him. "You were with him at the last. He knew you. I gather he didn't send any messages to us, or you would have given them."

"He did, Electra."

"He sent a message?"

"I simply couldn't write it, because I knew I should be home so soon. It was about his wife. He begged you to be kind to her."

"His wife! Tom was not married."

"He was married, Electra, to a very beautiful girl. I have brought her home with me."

Electra was upon her feet. Her face had lost its cold sweet pallor. The scarlet of hot blood was upon it, a swift response to what seemed outrage at his hands.

"I have never--" she gasped. "It is not true."

Peter, too, had risen. He was looking at her rather wistfully. His imperial lady had, in that instant, lost her untouched calm. She was breathing ire.

"Ah, don't say that," he pleaded. "You never saw her."

"I can't help it. I feel it. She is an adventuress."

"Electra!"

"What did he say to you? What did Tom say?"

"He pointed to her as she stood by the window, her back to us--it was the day before he died--and said, 'Tell them to be good to her.'"

"You see! You don't even know whether he meant it as a message to me or some of his associates. He didn't say she was his wife?"

"No."

He answered calmly and rather gravely, but the green world outside the arbor looked unsteady to him. Electra was one of the fixed ideas of his life; her nobility, her reserve, her strength had seemed to set her far above him. Now she sounded like the devil's advocate. She was gazing at him keenly.

"Her story made a great impression on you," she threw out incidentally.

The effort was apparent, but Peter accepted it.

"Yes," he answered simply. "She makes a great impression on everybody. She will on you."

"What evidence have you brought me? Did you see them married?"

"No," said Peter, with the same unmoved courtesy.

"You see! Have you even found any record of their marriage?"

"No."

"You have the girl's word. She has come over here with you. What for?"

Peter lifted a hand to his forehead. He answered gently as a man sometimes does, of set purpose, to avoid falling into a passion.

"It was the natural thing, Electra. She has no home, poor child!--nor money, except what Tom left in his purse. He'd been losing pretty heavily just before. I say, it seemed the natural thing to come to you. Half this place was his. His wife belongs here." The last argument sounded to him unpardonably crude, as to an imperial lady, but he ventured it. Then he looked at her. With his artist's premonition, he looked to see her brows drawn, her teeth perhaps set angrily upon a quivering lip. But Electra was again pale. Her face was marble to him, to everything.

"I shall fight it," she said inexorably, "to the last penny."

He gazed at her now as if she were a stranger. It was incredible that this was the woman whose hand he had kissed but the moment before. He ventured one more defense.

"Electra, you have not seen her."

"I shall not see her. Where is she--in New York?"

"Here."

"Here!"

"At grandmother's. I left her there. I thought when we had had our little talk you would come over with me and see her, and invite her home."

"Invite her here?"

"I thought so."

"Peter," said Electra, with a quiet certainty, "you must be out of your mind."

There they stood in the arbor, their lovers' arbor, gazing at each other like strangers. Peter recovered first, not to an understanding of the situation, but to the need of breaking its tension.

"I fancied," he said, "you would be eager to know her."

"Is she a grisette?"

His mind ached under the strain of taking her in. He felt dumbly her contrast to the facile, sympathetic natures he had been thrown with in his life abroad. When he had left her, Electra was, as she would have said, unformed; she had not crystallized into the clearness and the hardness of the integrity she worshiped. To him, when in thought he contrasted her with those other types who made for joy and not always for moral beauty, she was immeasurably exalted. In any given crisis where other women did well, he would not have questioned that Electra must have done better. Her austerity was a part of her virgin charm. But as he looked at her now, in her clear outlines, her incisive speech, the side of him that thrilled to beauty trembled with something like distaste or fear. She was like her own New England in its bleakness, without its summer warmth. He longed for atmosphere.

But she had asked her question again: "Is she a grisette?"

He found himself answering:--

"She is the daughter of Markham MacLeod."

"Not the author? Not the chief?"

"Yes," said Peter, with some quiet pride in the assurance, "chief of the Brotherhood, the great Markham MacLeod."

Electra pondered.

"If that is true," she said, "I must call on her."

"True? I tell you it is true. Electra, what are you saying?"

But Electra was looking at him with those clear eyes where dwelt neither guile nor tolerance of the guile of others.

"Did she tell you so," she inquired, "or do you know it for a fact?"

He had himself well in hand now, because it had sprung into his wise artist brain that he must not break the beauty of their interview. It was fractured, but if they turned the hurt side away from the light, possibly no one would know, and the outer crystalline sheen of the thing would be deceptively the same.

"I know Markham MacLeod," he said. "I have seen them together. She calls him father."

A wave of interest swept over her face.

"Do you mean you really know him, Peter?"

"Assuredly."

"As the leader of the Brotherhood?"

"Yes, the founder."

"He is proscribed in Russia and watched in France. Is that true?"

"All true."

"He gave up writing for this--to go about organizing and speaking? That's true, isn't it?"

"Quite true."

"How much do you know about the Brotherhood, Peter?"

"I belong to it."

He straightened as he spoke. An impulse of pride passed over him, and she read the betrayal in his kindling eyes and their widened pupils.

"Is there work for you?" she asked, "for men who don't speak and proselytize?"

"I do speak, Electra."

"You do?"

"I have spoken a little. I can't do it yet in the way he wants. What he wants is money."

"We have sent him money," she agreed. "The Delta Club gave a series of plays last winter and voted him the proceeds. The first was for labor in America. The second for free Russia."

"Yes, it pours in on him. It's his enormous magnetism."

"It's his cause."

She seemed to have reached something now that warmed her into life, and he took advantage of that kindling.

"Rose is his daughter," he reminded her. "She is very beautiful, very sad. She is worthy of such a father."

"Rose? Is that her actual name?"

"Yes. They are Americans, though since her childhood she has lived in France."

"What did she do before Tom--got acquainted with her? Live there in Paris with her father?"

"She sang. She has a moving voice. She always hoped she was going to sing better, but there never was money enough to give her the right training. Then she began going about with her father. She spoke, too."

"In public? For the Brotherhood?"

"Yes. She has great magnetism. But she stopped doing that."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I have heard her father ask her to do it, but she refused. She is beautiful, Electra."

Electra was looking at him thoughtfully.

"Did she persuade you to join the Brotherhood?" she asked.

"No," said Peter, unmoved, "the chief himself persuaded me. I went to a great meeting one Sunday night. I heard him. That was the end of me. I knew where I belonged."

Electra, her mind hidden from him as completely as if a veil had fallen between them, was, he could see, considering him. As for her, he hardly dared dwell upon her as she ruthlessly seemed. She was again like the bright American air, too determinate, too sharp. She almost hurt the eyes. He wondered vaguely over several things he was unwilling to ask her, since he could not bear to bring their difference to a finished issue: why she cherished a boundless belief in the father and only reprobation for the daughter, when she had seen neither the one nor the other; why she had this vivid enthusiasm for the charity that embraces the world and none for a friendless child at her door. Their interview seemed to have dropped flat in inconceivable collapse; what was to have been the beginning of their dual life was only the encounter of a hand-to-hand discussion. He tried to summon back the vividness to his fagged emotions, and gave it up. Then he ventured to think of his imperial lady, and found a satirical note beating into his mind. He took refuge in the practical.

"I have not seen Osmond yet."

"Wasn't he there to meet you?"

"No. Grannie said I should have to go down to the plantation, to find him. Does he keep up his old ways, Electra?"

"Yes. Sleeping practically out of doors summer and winter, or in the shack, as he calls it,--that log hut he put up years ago. Haven't you known about him? Hasn't he written?"

"Oh, he writes, but not about himself. Osmond wouldn't do that. Somehow grandmother never wrote any details about him either. I fancied he didn't want her to. So I never asked. She only said he was 'well.' You know Osmond always says that himself."

"I believe he is well," said Electra absently. She was thinking of the alien presence at the other house. "He looks it--strong, tanned. Osmond is very impressive somehow. It's fortunate he wasn't a little man."

Peter made one of the quick gestures he had learned since he had been away from her. They told the tale of give and take with a more mobile people. He could not ask her to ignore Osmond's deformity, yet he could not bear to hear her speak of it. Osmond was, he thought, a colossal figure, to be accepted, whatever his state, like the roughened rock that builds the wall. He rose, terminating, without his conscious will, an interview that was to have lasted, if she had gone to the other house with him and he had returned again with her, the day long.

"I must see Osmond," he hesitated.

Electra, too, had risen.

"Yes," she said conformably, though the table, she knew, would be laid for them both in what had promised to be their lovers' seclusion.

"I will come back. This afternoon, Electra?"

That morning, the afternoon had been his and hers only. She had expected to listen to the recital of his triumphs in Paris, and to scan eagerly the map of his prospects which was to show her way also. And she too opened her lips and spoke without preconsidered intent.

"This afternoon I shall be busy. I have to go in town."

"You won't--" he hesitated again. "Electra, you won't call at the house on the way, and see her, at least?"

"Your Rose?" She smiled at him brilliantly. "Not to-day, Peter."

Then, bruised, bewildered, he went back over the path he had come, leaving his imperial lady to go in and order the luncheon table prepared for one.

"Madam Fulton will not be home," she said to the maid, with a proud unconsciousness; and for the moment it sounded as if Madam Fulton had been the expected guest.

IV

When Peter went up the steps of his grandmother's house, he found Mrs. Grant still on the veranda, and Rose beside her. The girl looked at him eagerly, as if she besought him for whatever message he had, and he answered the glance with one warmed by implied sympathy. Until he saw her, he had not realized that anger made any part in the emotion roused in him by his imperial lady. Now he remembered how this gracious young creature seemed to him, so innocent, so sad. He felt a rising in his throat, as he thought of subjecting her to unfriendly judgment. Rose, in spite of the serious cast of her face and the repose of her figure, wore an ineffable air of youth. She had splendid shoulders and a yielding waist, and her fine hands lay like a separate beauty in the lap of her black dress. She had the profile of a coin touched with finer human graces, a fullness of the upper lip, a slight waving of the soft chestnut hair over the low forehead, and lashes too dark for harmony with the gray eyes. There were defects in her flawlessness. Her mouth was large, in spite of its pout, and on her nose were a few beguiling freckles. At that moment, in her wayward beauty, lighted by the kindled eye of expectation, she seemed to Peter to be made up of every creature's best. His grandmother smiled at him out of her warm placidity, and though Rose still drew his eyes to her, he was aware that she did not mean to question him.

"Electra has to go in town," he volunteered. "She won't be back. Perhaps not to-night."

"You must stay here with us, my dear," said Mrs. Grant. "Peter, have her trunks moved into the west chamber."

Still the girl's eyes seemed to interrogate him, and Peter sat down in a chair and twined his long fingers in and out. He felt the drop in temperature ready to chill the voyager who, after the lonely splendor of the sea, returns to the earth as civil life has made it.

"We must remember she hadn't heard of you," he assured Rose blunderingly, out of his depression.

"No. He had not written." She made the statement rather as that of a fact they shared together, and he nodded. "I am afraid it is unwelcome to her, the idea of me."

"She doesn't know you," he assured her, in the same bungling apology. He expected her to betray some wound to her pride, but she only looked humble and a little crushed.

Grannie had apparently not heard, and she said now, with her lovely gentleness,--

"Don't you want to go upstairs, my dear, and be by yourself a little while? You have been traveling so far. We have noon dinner, you know. That will seem funny to you. Mary is getting it, but Peter will show you a room."

Peter found her bag in the wide hall, darkened from the sun, and went with her up the stairs. At the head she paused

and beckoned him to the window-seat over the front door.

"Set it down there," she said rapidly, touching the bag with a finger. "Tell me--how did she receive it?"

"What?"

"You know. The news of me."

"She was surprised."

"Naturally. But what else? She was shocked!"

"It was a shock, of course. In its suddenness, you know. You'd expect that."

She sank down in the window-seat and clasped her hands upon her knees, looking at them thoughtfully. Her brows were drawn together.

"Yes," she said, "yes. It was a shock. I see that. Well!" She looked up at him in a challenging directness before which he winced, conscious of the little he had to meet it with. "When am I to see her?"

"I am not sure when she is to be back."

"Ah! She won't come to me. Very well. I shall go to her." She laid her hand upon the bag, and rose, as if the interview were ended. Peter carried the bag in at the open door of her room, and after he had set it down, looked vaguely about him, as if arrangements might be bettered in the still, sweet place. She was smiling at him with an irradiating warmth.

"You're sorry, aren't you?" she said, from a comprehension that seemed a proffer of vague sympathy. "It makes you feel inhospitable. You needn't. You're a dear. Your grandmother is lovely--lovely."

Her praise seemed to Peter such a precious fruitage that the only thing, in delicacy, was to turn away and take it with him to enjoy. But she was calling him.

"Peter!"

He found her flushed and eagerly expectant, it seemed to him, as if his news had been uplifting to her. She looked at him, at the room, and rapidly from the window where the treetops trembled, all in one comprehensive sweep.

"Peter," she said, with conviction, "it's simply lovely here."

"It's a nice old place," responded Peter. He loved it from long use, but he was aware of its comfortable plainness.

"I never saw anything so dear. Those square worn tiles down by the front door, the fireplace, the curtains,--look, Peter, it's dotted muslin." She touched a moving fold, and Peter laughed outright.

"I like it," he said, "but there's nothing particular about it. If you want style, why, you'll have to look back at what you've left. When it comes to that, what's the matter with a chateau?"

"Yes, yes." She put the chateau aside with one of her light movements of the hands. "But here I feel as if I'd come home to something. You see it's so safe here, Peter. It's so darling, too, so intimate. I can't tell what I mean. If Electra would only like me--O Peter, I could be almost happy, as happy as the day is long!" As she said the old phrase, it seemed to her to fit into the scene. She looked not merely as if happiness awaited her, but as if she could almost put her eager finger on it. And there was Electra, not so many rods away, drawbridge up and portcullis down, inquiring, "Is she a grisette?" Afterwards it seemed to Peter as if his sympathy for the distressed lady went to his head a little, for he lifted her hand and kissed it. But he did not speak, save to himself, going down the stairs:--

"It's a damned shame!"

When he went out on the veranda, grannie made a smiling comment:--

"What a pretty child! Tom Fulton did well. He was a bad boy, wasn't he, Peter?"

"Yes, grannie," said Peter, from the veranda rail where he sat picking rose leaves, "Tom was about the limit."

"Well! well! poor girl. Maybe it's as well he went while she knew only the best of him."

Peter was not sure she did know only the best, but he inquired,--

"Shall I have time to run down and see Osmond before dinner?"

"You'd better. He was here waiting when the carriage came. When he saw her, he slipped away."

"Rose?"

"Rose? Is that her name? Now isn't that pretty! Maybe you'll find him before you get to the plantation. I shouldn't wonder if he'd think it over and come back."

Peter did meet him in the lane lined with locusts on each side, walking doggedly back to the house. Some things the younger brother had forgotten about him, the beauty of the dark face that looked as if it had been cut out of rock, the extraordinary signs of strength, in spite of that which might have appealed to pity. Osmond had grown rugged with every year. His long arms, ending in the brown, supple hands, looked as if they were compact of sinewy potencies. And on his shoulders, heavier than Christian's burden, was that pack he must carry to the end of life. He saw his brother coming, and stopped, and Peter, as if to save him the sense of being looked at from afar, even by his own kin, ran to meet him. They did not take hands, but the older brother gave him a slap on the shoulder.

"Well, boy!" said he.

There were tears in Peter's eyes.

"Look-a-here," he cried, "I'm sniveling. Coming up to the house?"

"No. I've been there once this morning. You come back with me."

They turned about, and walked on through the lane. It led to the plantation; this was the nursery, here were the forcing beds, and all the beneficent growing things that had saved Osmond's life while he tended them, and also earned his bread for him, and Peter's bread and paints.

"Well, boy," said Osmond, "you've brought a girl with you. That was why I cut. Who is she?"

"Tom Fulton's wife--his widow."

Osmond knew Electra very well. Some phases of her were apparent to him in his secluded life that her lover, under the charm of an epistolary devotion, had never seen.

"Does Electra know it?" he asked.

"I told her." Peter's tone added further, "Shut up, now!" and Osmond tacitly agreed.

"Coming down to dinner?" he asked safely.

"No, I must be back. I feel responsible for her--Rose. I brought her over. In fact, I rather urged her coming. Grannie has asked her to stay with us until Electra is--at home."

"Is her name Rose?"

"Yes--one of those creamy yellow ones. You must see her. She's a dear. She's a beauty, too."

"Oh, I've seen her--one ear and a section of cheek and some yellow hair. Then I ran."

"For heaven's sake, man! what for?"

"She's one of those invincible Parisians. I've read about them."

Peter burst out laughing. Osmond's tone betrayed a terrified admiration.

"Do you eat down here with the men?" Peter was asking.

"Sometimes. I go up and eat with grannie once a day while she's alone. I shan't now."

"Why not?"

"You'll be here to keep her company, you and your Parisian. I've got to go on being a wild man, Pete. I shan't save my soul alive if I don't do that."

Peter put out a hand and laid it, for an instant, on his brother's arm.

"I don't know anything about your soul, old man," he said, with a moving roughness. "But if you like this kind of a life, you're going to have it, that's all. Who cooks the dinner?"

"Pierre. He came just after you went to France. There's a *pot-au-feu* to-day. I smelled it when I went by the kitchen. It's a

good life, Pete,—if you don't want to play the game." His eyes grew wistful, something like the eyes of the dog that longs for man.

"If you don't play the game, I don't know who does."

"Well!" Osmond smiled a little, whimsically. "Maybe I do; but I play with counters."

Peter was not especially ready, save with a brush in his hand. He wanted to say something to the effect that Osmond was playing the biggest of all games, with the visible universe against him; but he hardly knew how to put it. It seemed, though, as if he might some time paint it into a picture. But Osmond was recognizing the danger of soft implication, and bluffly turned the talk.

"Well, Pete, you've done it, haven't you?"

There was no possibility of affecting to misunderstand. Peter knew what he had gone to Paris for, five years ago, and why Osmond had been sending him the steady proceeds of the garden farm. He was to prove himself, take his talent in his hand and mould it and turn it about with a constant will, and shape a cup to hold the drink that makes the gods jealous and men delirious with adulation. Peter was to live at his ease in Paris, sparing nothing that would keep him well and strong of heart, so that he could paint the best portraits in the world. Peter knew he had begun to paint the best portraits in the world, because he had done many good ones and one actual marvel, and suddenly, as it sometimes is in art after we have been patient and discouraged, the whole task seemed to him a light and easy one. In his extraordinary youth he had the freshness of his brain, his quick eye and obedient hand, and he felt, lightly and gayly, that he was rich,—but rich in a world where there was plenty more of whatever he might lose.

"I guess so," he said, returning to the speech of his youth. "And I can do it twice, old man. I can do it a hundred times."

Osmond stopped and laid a hand on a boulder at the termination of their way, where the lane opened into plowed fields. He looked off through the distance as if he saw the courts of the world and all the roads that run to fame. His eyes were burning. The hand trembled upon the rock.

"By George!" he said, "it's amazing."

"What is, Osmond?"

"It's amazing that the world can hold so much for one man. You wouldn't think there would be water enough in all the rivers for one man to drink so deep. What does Electra say?"

"About the painting? Nothing yet."

"Didn't you speak of it? Why, you're covered with laurel, boy, like Jack-in-the-Green. She couldn't help seeing it."

Peter, brought back to that luckless interview with the imperial lady, felt shamefaced in his knowledge of it.

"We didn't get to that," he said. "We were talking about Rose. Who do you think she is, Osmond?"

"Tom's widow. So you said."

"Yes, but what more? She's the daughter of Markham MacLeod."

He was watching Osmond narrowly, to weigh the effect of the name. But Osmond's face kept its impressive interest.

"You know who he is," Peter suggested.

"Yes, oh, yes! But that doesn't mean anything to me. Nothing does until I see the man. He works with too big a brush. He is an agitator. He may be Christ or Anti-Christ, but he's an agitator. That's all I know. I can't give a snap judgment of a man that gets whole governments into a huff and knows how to lead a rabble a million strong. So he's her father?"

Peter, unreasonably irritated, pitched upon one word for a cause of war.

"Rabble? What do you mean by that? Labor?"

Osmond smiled broadly and showed his white teeth.

"I'm labor myself," he said. "You know that, boy."

"Then what do you want to talk so for? Rabble!"

"I only meant it in relation to numbers," said Osmond, again irritatingly, in his indifference to all interests outside his

dear boy's home-coming. "I'll make it a rabble of kings, if you say so. Folks, Peter, that's what I mean, folks. He deals with them in the mass. That makes me nervous. I can't like it."

"He believes in the equality of man," Peter announced, as he was conscious, rather swellingly. "The downfall of kings, the freedom of the individual."

"There's the *pot-au-feu* smoking inside that shack," said Osmond, indicating a shanty across the field. "Come and have dinner with labor."

But Peter turned. He shook his head.

"I can't, Osmond," he said. "I've brought this girl into the house, and I've got to see her through. Won't you come up to-night?"

"Not till your Parisian has gone over to Electra's. You come down here. Come down about dusk and we'll have another go."

As Peter hurried back, conscious of being a little late, he could have beaten his head against the locust trees for the stupidity of his home-coming. He had the shattered moment with Electra to remember, and now he had turned the other great meeting of the day into a fractious colloquy. Unformed yet vivid in his mind, for the last year, had been strong, determining anticipations of what would happen when he at last came home. He had known certainly what would happen when he saw Electra. She would still be the loveliest and best, and his would be the privilege of telling her so. And to Osmond, who had dug in the ground that Peter might work under the eye of men, he would return as one who has an account to give, and say, in effect, "You did it." But, laughably, neither of these things had happened. He forgot that he had in him the beginnings of a great painter in remembering that he had shown the obtuseness of an ass.

He did not see Electra that night. After the noon dinner he left Rose and grannie intimately together,—the girl, with a gentle deprecation, as if she brought gifts not in themselves worth much, talking about Paris, the air young Peter had been breathing,—and betook himself again to Electra's house. It was all open to the day, but no one answered his knock. He went in and wandered from parlor to library, the dignified rooms that had once seemed to him so typical of her estate as compared to his own: for in those days he had been only a young man of genius with scarcely enough money to live and study on, save as his brother earned it for him. He sauntered in and out for an hour—it seemed as if even the two servants had gone—and then played snatches at the piano, to waken drowsy ears. But the house kept its quiet, and in the late afternoon he wandered home again. That evening he returned, and then there was some one to answer his knock. The maid told him Miss Electra had gone out; but though he waited in a fevered and almost an angry impatience, she did not return. Knowing her austere and literal truth, he could not believe that the denial was the conventional expedient, and in a wave of regret over the day, he longed for her inexpressibly. It seemed to him that no distance would be too great to bring him to her. He felt in events, and in himself also, the rushing of some force to separate them, and swung back, after his blame of her, into the necessity of a more passionate partisanship. When he went home, still without seeing her, he found his grandmother's house deserted. But the minute his foot sounded, there was a soft rush down the stairs. Rose stood beside him in the hall.

"Did you see her?" she asked breathlessly.

He strove to make his laugh an evidence of the reasonableness of what he had to answer.

"No. She was obliged to be away."

"Isn't she at home now?" asked the girl insistently. "She is there, and you refuse to hurt me. She won't see me!"

"She is not there," said Peter, in relief at some small truth to tell. "I haven't seen her since morning."

The girl stood there in the faint radiance of the hall lamp, her eyes downcast, thinking. She had dressed for dinner, though there was only high tea in the old-fashioned house, and delighted grannie beyond words. The old lady said it was as good as a play to her, who never went out, to see a lovely dress trailing about the rooms. Peter, looking at the girl, felt his heart admonish him that here was beauty demanding large return of kindly treatment from the world. Not only must justice be done her, but it must be done lavishly. This was for all their sakes. Electra could not be allowed to lose anything so precious, nor could he lose it either, his small share of tribute. She was speaking, still with that air of pondering:—

"I must do it myself. I mustn't let you risk anything." Then she turned her full glance on him, and frankly smiled. "Good-night," she said, giving him her hand. "Don't speak of me to her. Don't think of me. I must do it all myself."

V

Next morning it was a different Rose he saw, quite cosy and cheerful at the breakfast-table, with no sign of tragedy on her brow. The day was fair, and the mood of the world seemed to him, for no reason, to have lightened. It was not credible that Electra, of all gracious beings, should sulk outside the general harmony. After breakfast, when Rose had, with a sweet air of service, given grannie her arm to the veranda chair, she returned to Peter, waiting, perhaps for a word with her, in the hall. His hat swung from his hand, and seeing that, she spoke in a low, quick tone.

"You are going over there. Don't do it."

"I must. I want to see her."

"I know. But not yet. Let me see her first. If you talk about me, it will make trouble between you,—not real trouble, perhaps, but something unfortunate, something wrong. I am going myself, now." She pointed out her hat and gloves where she had them ready, and without waiting for him to speak, began pinning on the hat. While she drew on the gloves she looked at him again with her charming smile. "Don't you see," she said, "we can get along better alone—two women? Which house is it?"

He followed her out and down the steps.

"I'll go part of the way with you."

She waved a gay farewell to grannie, busy already at her knitting, and they went down the path. But at the gate she paused.

"Now," she said, "which way? Which house?"

"The next one."

"I see. Among the trees. Now don't come. Whatever happens, don't come. If I am not here to dinner,—if I am never here. You simply must not appear in this. Good-by." She gave her parasol a little reassuring fling, as if it were a weapon that proved her amply armed, and took her swift way along the shaded road.

Peter stood for a moment watching her. She went straight on, and the resolution of her gait bore sufficient witness to her purpose. He turned about then and went rather disconsolately the other way, which would bring him out at the path to Osmond's plantation.

Rose, going up the garden path, came upon Electra herself, again dressed in white and among the flower-beds. Whether she hoped her lover would come, and was awaiting him, her face did not tell; but she met Rose with the same calm expectancy. There was ample time for her to walk away, to avoid the interview; but Electra was not the woman to do that. False things, paltering things, were as abhorrent to her in her own conduct as in that of another. So she stood there, her hands at her sides in what she would have called perfect poise, as Rose, very graceful yet flushed and apparently conscious of her task, came on. A pace or two away, she stopped and regarded the other woman with a charming and deprecatory grace.

"Do guess who I am!" she said, in a delightful appeal. "Peter Grant told you."

"Won't you come in?" returned Electra, with composure. "Mr. Grant did speak of you."

Rose felt unreasonably chilled. However little she expected, this was less, in the just civility that was yet a repudiation. They went into the library, where the sun was bright on rows of books, and Electra indicated a seat.

"Mr. Grant told me a very interesting thing about you," she volunteered, with the same air of establishing a desirable atmosphere.

"Yes," said Rose rather eagerly. She leaned forward a little, her hands clasped on her parasol top. "Yes. I forbade him to say any more. I wanted to tell you myself."

Electra's brows quivered perceptibly at the hint of familiar consultation with Peter, but she answered with a responsive grace,—

"He told me the interesting fact. It is very interesting indeed. We have all followed your father's career with such attention. There is nothing like it."

"My father!" There was unconsidered wonder in her gaze.

Electra smiled agreeingly.

"He means just as much to us over here as he does to you in France--or England. Hasn't he been there speaking within the month?"

"He is in England now," said Rose still wonderingly, still seeking to finish that phase and escape to her own requirements.

"Mr. Grant said you speak, at times."

"I am sorry he said that," Rose declared, recovering herself to an unshaded candor. "I shall never do it again."

Electra was smiling very winningly.

"Not over here?" she suggested. "Not before one or two clubs, all women, you know, all thoughtful, all earnest?"

Rose answered coldly,--

"I am not in sympathy with the ideas my father talks about."

"Not with the Brotherhood!"

"Not as my father talks about it." She grew restive. Under Electra's impenetrable courtesy she was committing herself to declarations that had been, heretofore, sealed in her secret thought. "I want to talk to you," she said desperately, with the winning pathos of a child denied, "not about my father,--about other things."

"This is always the way," said Electra pleasantly, with her immutable determination behind the words. "He is your father, and your familiarity makes you indifferent to him. There are a million things I should like to know about Markham MacLeod,--what he eats and wears, almost. Couldn't you tell me what induced him--what sudden, vital thing, I mean--to stop his essay-writing and found the Brotherhood?"

Rose answered coldly, and as if from irresistible impulse,--

"My father's books never paid."

Electra gazed at her, with wide-eyed reproach.

"You don't give that as a reason!"

Rose had recovered herself and remembered again the things she meant to leave untouched.

"No," she said, "I don't give it as a reason. I only give it."

Electra was looking at her, rebuffed and puzzled; then a ray shot through her fog.

"Ah," she said, "wouldn't it be one of the inconceivable things if we who have followed his work and studied him at a distance knew him better than you who have had the privilege of knowing him at first hand?"

In spite of herself, Rose answered dryly,--

"It would be strange."

But Electra had not heard. There was the sound of wheels on the drive, and she looked out, to see Madam Fulton alighting.

"Excuse me, one moment," she said. "My grandmother has come home from town."

When Rose was alone in the room, she put her hand to her throat to soothe its aching. There were tears in her eyes. She seemed to have attempted an impossible task. But presently Electra was entering again, half supporting by the arm a fragile-looking old lady who walked inflexibly, as if she resented that aid. Madam Fulton was always scrupulous in the appointments of her person; but this morning, with the slightly fagged look about her eyes and her careful bonnet a trifle awry, she disclosed the fact that she had dressed in haste for a train. But she seemed very much alive, with the alert responsiveness of those to whom interesting things have happened.

"I want my grandmother to be as surprised as I am," Electra was saying, with her air of social ease. "Grandmother, who do you think this is? The daughter of Markham MacLeod!" She announced it as if it were great news from a quarter unexplored and wonderful. Rose was on her feet, her pathetic eyes fixed upon the old lady's face. Madam Fulton was regarding her with a frank interest it consoled her to see. It was not, at least, so disproportioned.

"Dear me!" said the old lady. "Well, your father is a remarkable man. Electra here has all his theories by heart."

"I wish I had," breathed Electra with a fervency calculated perhaps to distract the talk from other issues.

"How long have you been in America?" asked the old lady civilly, though not sitting down. She had to realize that she was tired, that it would be the part of prudence to escape to her own room.

"I have just come," said Rose, in a low, eloquent voice, its tones vibrating with her sense of the unfriendliness that had awaited her.

"And where are you staying? How did you drift down here?"

"At Mrs. Grant's--for the present." What might have been indignation warmed the words.

"Grandmother, you must be tired," said Electra affectionately. "Let me go to your room with you, and see you settled."

"Nonsense!" said the old lady briskly. "Nonsense! I'm going, but I don't need any help. Good-by, Miss MacLeod. I shall want to see you again when I have a head on my shoulders."

She had gone, and still Electra made no sign of bidding her guest sit down again. Instead, she turned to Rose with an engaging courtesy.

"You will excuse me, won't you? I ought to go to grandmother. She is far from strong."

Rose answered quickly,--

"Forgive me! I will go. But"--she had reached the door, and paused there entreatingly--"when may I see you again?"

"Grandmother's coming will keep me rather busy," said Electra, in her brilliant manner. "But I shall take great pleasure in returning your visit. Good-by."

Rose, walking fast, was out upon the road again, blind to everything save anger, against herself, against the world. She had come to America upon an impulse, a daring one, sure that here were friendliness and safety such as she had never known. She had found a hostile camp, and every fibre in her thrilled in savage misery. Half way along the distance home Peter came eagerly forward to her from the roadside where he had been kicking his heels and fuming. The visit to Osmond had not been made. At the plantation gate he had turned back, unable to curb his desire to know what had gone on between these two. At once he read the signs of her distress, the angry red in her cheeks, the dilated eye. Even her nostrils seemed to breathe defiance or hurt pride. She spoke with unconsidered bitterness.

"I ought never to have come."

"What was it? Tell me."

"It was nothing. I was received as an ordinary caller. That was all."

"Who received you?"

"She. Electra."

"What then?"

"I was presented to her grandmother as my father's daughter, not as her brother's--wife." She was breathless upon the word. All the color went out of her face. She looked faint and wan.

"But it couldn't be," he was repeating. "Didn't you speak of Tom at all?"

"No."

"Didn't she?"

"No."

He essayed a bald and unreasonable comfort.

"There, you see! You didn't mention him, and Electra hardly brings herself to do it to any one. He never ceased being a trial to her. You must let me say that."

"Ah, that wasn't it! Every time I might have spoken, a hand, a clever, skillful hand and cold as ice pushed me away. I can never speak of it. She won't let me."

He was with her, every impulse of his eager heart; but a tardy conscience pulled him up, bidding him remember that other loyalty.

"Give her time," he pleaded. "It's a shock to her. Perhaps it ought not to be; but it is. Everything about Tom has always been a shock."

She, as well as he, remembered now that they spoke of Electra, whose high-bred virtues he had extolled to her in those still evenings on their voyage, when her courage failed her and he had opened to her the book of Electra's truth and justice.

"Do you think," she said wistfully, "I might stay at your grandmother's a few days more?"

"You are to stay forever. Grannie dotes upon you."

"No! no! But I shall have to think. I shall have to make my plans."

Again Peter felt yesterday's brand of anger against his imperial lady, or, he told himself immediately, the unfortunate circumstances of this misunderstanding. "You run on," he said. "Grannie's where you left her. If you don't feel like talking you can skip in at that little gate and the side door up to your room. I'm going back to see Electra."

"You mustn't talk about me!"

"No!" He smiled at her in a specious reassurance, and went striding on over the path by which she had come.

Electra, in the fulfillment of her intention, had gone scrupulously to her grandmother's door, to ask if she needed anything, and then, when she had been denied, returned to the library, where she stood when Peter appeared on the threshold, as if she had been expecting him. He did not allow his good impulse to cool, but hurried forward to her with an abounding interest and a certainty of finding it fulfilled. As at first, when he had come to her in the garden the day before, he uttered her name eloquently, and broke out upon the heels of it,--

"I didn't see you all yesterday, after that first minute."

Electra looked at him seriously, and his heart sank. Peter had been thinking straight thoughts and swearing by crude values in these five years when he had lived with men and women who said what they meant, things often foolish and outrageous, but usually honest, and his mind had got a trick of asserting itself. None of the judgments it had been called upon to make seemed to matter vitally; but this one disconcertingly did, and to his horror he found himself wondering if Electra could possibly mean to be so hateful. Electra meant nothing of the kind. She had a pure desire toward the truth, and she assumed that Peter's desire tallied with her own. She felt very strongly on the point in question, and she saw no reason why he should not offer the greatest hospitality toward her convictions.

"Peter," she said at once, "you must not talk to me about that woman."

"So she said," Peter was on the point of irresistibly retorting, but he contented himself with the weak make-shift that at least gains time,--

"What woman?"

"Markham MacLeod's daughter."

"Tom's wife? Tom's widow?"

Electra looked at him in definite reproof.

"You must not do that, Peter," she warned him. "You must not speak of her in that way."

"For God's sake, why not, Electra?"

"That is not her title. You must not give it to her."

He stared at her for a number of seconds, while she met his gaze inflexibly. Then his face broke up, as if a hand had struck it. Light and color came into it, and his mouth trembled.

"Electra," he said, "what do you want me to understand?"

"You do understand it, Peter," she said quietly. "I can hardly think you will force me to state it explicitly."

"You can't mean it! no, you can't. You mustn't imply things, Electra. You imply she was not married to him."

Still Electra was looking at him with that high demeanor which, he felt with exasperation, seemed to make great demands

upon him of a sort that implied assumptions he must despise.

"This is very difficult for me," she was saying, and Peter at once possessed himself of one passive hand.

"Of course it is difficult," he cried warmly. "I told her so. I told her everything connected with Tom always was difficult. She knows that as well as we do."

"Have you talked him over with her?" The tone was neutral, yet it chilled him.

"Good Lord, yes! We've done nothing but talk him over from an outside point of view. When she was deciding whether to come here, whether to write you or just present herself as she has--of course Tom's name came into it. She was Tom's wife, wasn't she? Tom's widow?"

"No! no!" said Electra, in a low and vehement denial. "She was not." Peter blazed so that he seemed to tower like a long thin guidepost showing the way to anger. "I said the same thing yesterday."

"That was before you saw her. It means more now, infinitely more."

"I hope it does."

"Think what you're saying, Electra," he said violently, so that she lifted her hand slightly, as if to reprove him. "You refuse to receive her--"

"I have received her,--as her father's daughter. I may even do so again."

"But not as your sister?"

"That would be impossible. You must see it is impossible, feeling as I do."

"But how, how? You imply things that dizzy me, and then, when it comes to the pinch, I can't get a sane word out of you." That seemed to him, as to her, an astonishing form of address to an imperial lady, and he added at once, "Forgive me!" But he continued irrepressibly, "Electra, you can't mean you doubt her integrity."

She had her counter question:--

"Did you see them married?"

"No, no, heavens, no! Why, I didn't come on Tom in Paris until his illness. Tom never had any use for me. You know that. Meantime he'd been there a couple of years, into the mire and out again, and he'd had time to be married to Rose, and she'd had time to leave him."

"Ah, she left him! Why?"

"Why did you leave him, Electra, before he went over there? Why did you give up living in town, and simply retreat down here? You couldn't stand it. Nobody could. Tom was a bad egg, Electra. I don't need to tell you that."

"It is certainly painful for me to hear it."

"But why, why, Electra? I can't stultify myself to prove this poor girl an adventuress. I can't canonize Tom Fulton, not even if you ask me."

"There are things we need not recur to. My brother is dead," said Electra, with dignity.

"Yes. That's precisely why I am asking you to provide for his widow."

"Suppose, then, this were true. Suppose she is what you say,--don't you feel she forfeited anything by leaving him?"

"Ah, but she went back, poor girl! She went back to him when he was pretty well spent with sickness and sheer fright. Tom didn't die like a hero, Electra. Get that out of your mind."

She put up both hands in an unconsidered protest.

"Oh, what is the use!" she cried; and his heart smote him.

"None at all," he answered. "But I mean to show you that this girl didn't walk back to any dead easy job when she undertook Tom."

"Why did she do it?"

"Why? From humanity, justice, honor, I suppose, the things that influence women when they stick to their bad

bargains."

"Where had she been meantime?"

"With her father, in lodgings. That was where I met her."

"Was she known by my brother's name?"

"No," he hesitated, "not then. I knew her as Miss MacLeod."

"Ah!"

"I can see why," Peter declared, with an eager emphasis. "I never thought of it before, but can't you see? I should think a woman could, at least. The whole situation was probably so distasteful to her that she threw off even his name."

"And assumed it after his death!"

"No! no! She was called Madame Fulton at his apartment. I distinctly remember that."

They had been immovably facing each other, but now Electra turned away and walked back to the library table, where she stood resting one hand and waiting, pale and tired, yet unchanged. This seemed to her one of the times that try men's souls, but wherein a New England conscience must abide by its traditions.

"How long does she propose remaining?" she asked, out of her desire to put some limit to the distasteful situation, though she had forbidden herself to enter it with even that human interest.

"Why, as long as we ask her to stay,—you, or, if she is not to expect anything from you, I. She has nothing of her own, poor girl."

"Has her father repudiated her? That ought to tell something."

Peter was silent for a moment. Then he said in an engaging honesty, bound as it was to hurt his own cause,—

"I don't know. I don't understand their relation altogether. Rose gives no opinions, but I fancy she is not in sympathy with him."

"Yes, I fancied so."

"But we mustn't fancy so. We mustn't get up an atmosphere and look through it till we see distorted facts."

"Those are what I want, Peter, facts. If Miss MacLeod—"

"Do you mean you won't even give her your brother's name?"

"Even, Peter! What could be more decisive?"

"Do you expect me to introduce her as Miss MacLeod? Do you expect me to call her so?"

"I fancied you called her Rose."

"I did. I do. I began it in those unspeakable days when Tom went out of his head with fright and fever and we held him down in bed. Electra!"

She was listening.

"Was that grandmother calling?" she asked, though grandmother never yet had summoned her for companionship or service. But Electra felt her high decorum failing her. She was tired with the impact of emotion, and it was a part of her creed never to confess to weakness. She had snatched at the slight subterfuge as if it were a sustaining draught. "I am afraid I must go."

"Electra!" He placed himself before her with outstretched hands. Very simple emotions were talking in him. They told him that this was the second day of his return, that he was her lover, and he had not kissed her. And they told him also, to his sheer fright and bewilderment, that he did not want to kiss her. All he could ineffectually do was to reiterate, "We can't go on like this. Nothing in the world is worth it." Yet while he said it, he knew there was one thing at least infinitely worth while: to right the wrongs of a beautiful and misjudged lady. Only it was necessary, apparently, for the present, to keep the lady out of the question.

Electra was listening.

"It is grandmother," she said recklessly. "I must go."

There was a rustle up the staircase, and he was alone in the library, to take himself home as he might.

VI

After a week Electra had made no sign toward acceptance of the unbidden guest. She received Peter sweetly and kindly whenever he went to see her, but he felt they were very far apart. Something had been destroyed; the bubble of pleasure was broken and, as it seemed, for good and all. He strove to find his way back into their lost dream and take her with him; but there was no visible path. Rose spared him questions. She stayed gratefully on, and grannie was delighted with her. Rose had such a way of fitting into circumstance that it seemed an entirely natural thing to have her there, and Peter forgot to wonder even at the pleasure of it. Twice she came in from a walk pale and inexplicably excited, and he knew she had been besieging the scornful lady in the other house. But she kept her counsel. She had never seen Osmond since her coming, though she knew he and Peter had long talks together at the plantation.

One night, a cold, unseasonable one, Osmond was alone in the shack, his room unlighted save by the flaring wood. The cabin had a couch, two chairs, and a big table, this covered with books. There were books on the wall, and the loft above, where he slept when he was not in his neighboring tent, made a balcony, taking half the room. He was in his long chair stretched among the shadows, his face lighted intermittently from the fire. He was thinking deeply, his black brows drawn together, his nervous hands gripped on the elbows of the chair. There was a slight tap at the door. He did not heed it, being used to mice among the logs and birds twittering overhead. Then the door opened, and a lady came in. Osmond half rose from his chair, and leaning forward, looked at her. He knew her, and yet strangely he had no belief that she was real. It was Rose, a long cloak about her, the hood slipped back from her rich hair. Her face was flushed by the buffeting of the wind, and its moist sweetness tingled with health. It was apparent to him at once that, as he was looking at her in the firelight, she also had fixed his face in the gloom. She was smiling at him, and her eyes were kind. Then she spoke.

"I came to see you, Mr. Osmond Grant."

Osmond was now upon his feet. He drew a chair into the circle of light.

"Let me take your cloak," he said. It seemed to him that no such exciting thing had ever happened.

"No, no. It isn't wet." She tossed it on the bench by the door, and having put both hands to her hair with the reassuring touch that is pretty in women, she turned to him, a radiant creature smiling out of her black drapery. "But I'll sit down," she said.

The next moment, he hardly knew how it was, they were there by the fire, and he had accepted her. She was beautiful and wonderful, a thing to be worshiped, and he lost not a minute in telling himself he worshiped her, and that he was going to do it while he was man and she was woman, or after his clay had lost its spirit. Osmond had very little time to think of his soul, because he worked all day in the open and slept hard at night; but it always seemed to him reasonable that he had one. Now it throbbed up, invincible, and he looked at the lady and wondered again at her. The lady was smiling at him.

"I wanted to meet you," she said, in her soft, persuasive voice. "You don't come to the house any more."

He answered her simply and calmly, with no token of his inward turmoil.

"I haven't been there for some days."

"Is it because I am there?"

"Grannie hasn't needed me."

"Is it because I am there?"

Then he smiled at her, with a gleam of white teeth and lighted eyes.

"I've been a little afraid of you," he owned.

"Well, you're not now?"

"No, I'm not now."

"That's what I came here for." She settled more snugly into the chair, and folded her hands on her knee. He looked at them curiously, their slender whiteness, and noted, with interest, that she had no wedding ring. She continued, "I got breathless in the house. Grandmother was tired and went to bed. Peter has gone to see his cruel lady."

"Why do you call her cruel?"

"She won't hold out her hand to me."

That simple and audacious candor overwhelmed him. He had never known anything so facile yet direct. It made life incredibly picturesque and full of color. He laughed from light-heartedness, and it came into his head that, in her company, it would be easy to believe "as many as six impossible things before breakfast." But she was continuing:--

"Don't you find her cruel?"

"Electra? We haven't exchanged a dozen words in a year."

"Why not?"

"I'm not a notability. It's not remarkable to raise seeds for sale."

"But isn't she cruel?"

He thought a moment, and then answered gravely,--

"She is very opinionated. But she has high ideals. She would be unyielding. Has she been unyielding to you?"

"Hasn't Peter told you?"

"Not a word."

"I came here expecting her to accept me as her brother's wife. She won't do it."

"Won't do it? Does she say so?"

"She says nothing. But she ignores me." Her cheek took on a deeper flush. She did not look at him, and he followed her gaze into the coals.

"You are too proud to give her proofs?" he hesitated.

She stirred uneasily in her chair.

"Proud!" she said bitterly. "If I had been proud, I should never have come here at all. But I am here, and she must recognize me." Some dauntless lines had come into the delicate face and made it older. "It is absurd," she continued, "worse. Here am I living in your house--"

"No! no!" he corrected her. "Not that it matters. It would be yours just the same. But it's grannie's house."

"Taking her hospitality,--oh, it's a shame! a shame!"

"Peter must make it right with Electra," he ventured.

"Peter! He has tried. He has tried too much. Things are not right between them any more. I know that."

Osmond, almost with no conscious will, went back to what he had been thinking when she came in.

"Peter belongs to your Brotherhood--"

"Don't say mine. It is my father's." She spoke with an unguarded warmth.

"But you belong to it, too."

"I used to. I used to do everything my father told me to--but not now--not now!" She looked like a beautiful rebel, the color deepened in her cheeks, her eyes darkening.

Osmond could not question her, but he went back to his own puzzle.

"The trouble is--about Peter--his painting has taken a back seat. He talks about the Brotherhood--little else."

She nodded, looking at the fire.

"I know. I know."

"I've no objection to his believing in the brotherhood of man; but can't the brotherhood of man be preserved if we paint our pictures, and mind our own business generally?"

"Not while my father leads the procession. He will have no other gods before him."

"Tell me about your father."

She turned on him a face suddenly irradiated by fun. An unexpected dimple came to light, and Osmond's pulse responded to it.

"Electra," she said, "found time to propose that I should give a little talk on my father. Last night I lay awake rehearsing it. Do you want to hear it? Markham MacLeod is the chief of spoilers. He preaches the brotherhood of man, and he gets large perquisites. He deals with enormous issues. Kingdoms and principalities are under his foot because the masses are his servitors. Money is always flowing through his hands. He does not divert it, but it has, with the cheerful consent of his followers, to take him from place to place, to shed his influence, to pay his hotel bills--and he must live well, mind you. For he has to speak. He has to lead. He is a vessel of the Lord." She had talked on unhesitatingly, straight into the fire. Now, when she paused, Osmond commented involuntarily,--

"How well you speak." Then as quickly, "Does your father know you think these things?"

"No," she answered. "I have not had occasion to tell him. Not yet! But about Peter." She faced round at him. "Peter is hypnotized by my father, as they all are in the beginning. He won't paint any more portraits while the spell lasts."

"Then he won't get Electra."

"He won't get her anyway,--not if he champions me. That's my impression."

"But what does your father want him to do?"

"Nothing, that I know. It isn't that he chokes people off from other channels. It's just that his yoke is heavy, for one thing, and that they can't do too much for him. Peter has taken him literally. He will sell all he has and give to the poor, and live on a crust. He'll think the chief, too, is doing it; but he'll be mistaken. The chief never denied himself so much as an oyster in his life."

They sat staring at each other, in the surprise of such full speech. Osmond had a sense of communion he had never known. Peter and he had talked freely of many things in the last week, but here was a strange yet a familiar being to whom the wells of life were at once unlocked. The girl's face broke up into laughter.

"Isn't it funny?" she interjected, "our talking like this?"

"Yes. Why are we doing it?" He waited, with a curious excitement, for her answer. But she had gone, darting at a tangent on what, he was to find, were her graceful escapes when it was simpler to go that way.

"It's very mysterious here," she said, glancing about the cabin, "very dark and strange."

"Shall I throw on more wood?"

"If you like. I am not cold."

But he did not do it.

"You don't speak like a Frenchwoman," he ventured.

"I am not. You know that. I am an American."

"Yes; but you have lived in France."

"Always, since I was twelve. But I have known plenty of English,--Americans, too. Shall I speak to you in French?"

He deprecated it, with hands outspread.

"No, no. I read it, by myself. I couldn't understand it, spoken."

She was smiling at him radiantly, and with the innocent purpose, even he, in his ecstasy, felt, of making herself more beautiful and more kind.

"Now," she was saying, "since we have met, you'll come to the house? You won't let me stand in the way?"

His tongue was dry in his mouth. He felt the beauty of her, the pang of seeing anything so sweet and having only the

memory of it. Great instincts surged up in him with longings that were only pain. They seemed to embrace all things, the primal founts of life, the loyalties, devotions, hopes, and tragedies. At last he understood, not with his pulses only, but his soul. And all the time he had not answered her. She was still looking at him, smiling kindly now, and, he believed, not cognizant of the terror in his heart, not advertising her beauty as at first he had supposed. She seemed a friend home from long absence. He was speaking, and his voice, in his effort, sounded to him reassuringly gentle.

"We'll see."

"You will come?"

"We'll see."

"Good-night." She wrapped her cloak about her and was gone.

He followed her to the door only, and heard her feet upon the spongy turf. With his impulse to follow farther walked the sane certainty that he ought not to let her find her way alone, even along that friendly road. But he could not do it. The rain had ceased, and there was a moist wind blowing in little temperate gusts, as if it ran over the land and gave it something, and then took brooding interval for another breath. He looked up to heaven, and in the nebulous cloud reaches found a star. So seemed the creature who had dawned in his dark room and lighted it: inaccessible, unchangingly bright, and, if one rashly approached her, armed with a destroying fire.

He went out and sat down upon the bench at his door, turning to lean his forehead against the rough casing. What had happened to him? He did not even own it was the thing that happens to all, the unassuageable longing, the reaching hand for a mate. He had felt safe in his garden ground, where no blossoms opened but innocent velvet ones, temperately, to ripen and then die. But now the portals of the world were wide. He saw beauty, and it roused him to a rage of worship. As the night went on, he grew calmer. Sweet beliefs, a holier certainty stole into that ecstasy of meeting. She seemed again, as she had in one moment of her stay, a dear friend happily returned. The sense of her familiarity was as convincing as if he had known her all his life. It was not recognition alone: it was reunion.

VII

Osmond tried to cease thinking of the beautiful lady until his mind should be more at ease, and to consider Peter, who was acting like a changeling. It seemed possible that he might have to meet his boy bravely, even sharply, with denial and admonition. Peter, he knew, had deliberately put his wonderful gift in his pocket, and under some glamour of new desire was forgetting pictures and playing at the love of man. Playing at it? Osmond did not know; but everything seemed play to him in the divergences of a man who had a gift and stunted using it. If Osmond had had any gift at all, he knew how different it would have made his life. A tragedy of the flesh would have been slighter to a man who felt the surge of fancy in the brain. He had nothing, at the outset, but a faltering will and a deep distaste for any task within his reach. He remembered well the day when he first found Peter had that aptitude for painting, and realized, with the clarity of great revealings, what it meant to them both. All through his boyhood Peter had been drawing, with a facile hand, caricatures, fleeting hints of homely life, but always likenesses. One day he came home from the post-office in a gust of rapture. A series of random sketches had been accepted by a journal. From that time the steps had led always upward, and Osmond climbed them with him. But the day itself--Osmond remembered the June fervor of it when, after a word or two to the boy, surprising to Peter in its coldness, he went away alone and threw himself under an apple tree, his face in the grass, to realize what had come. His own life up to this time had seemed to him so poor that the hint of riches dazzled him. He saw the golden gleam, not of money, but of the wealth of being. Peter had the gift, but they would both foster it. Peter should sleep softly and live well. He should have every luxurious aid, and to that end Osmond would learn to wring out money from the ground. That was his only possibility, since he must have an outdoor life. Then he began his market-gardening. Grandmother was with him always. She even sold a piece of land for present money to put into men and tools, and the boy began. At first there were only vegetables to be carried to the market; then the scheme broadened into plants and seeds. He was working passionately, and so on honor, and his works were wanted. To his grandmother even he made no real confidence, but she still walked with him like a spirit of the earth itself. He knew, as he grew older, how she had drained herself for him, how she had tended him and lived the hardest life with him because he needed it. There were six months of several years when she took him to the deep woods, and they camped, and she did tasks his heart bled to think of, as he grew up, and looked at her work-worn hands; but those things which bound them indissolubly were never spoken of between them. His infirmity was never mentioned save once when, a boy, and then delicate, he came in from the knoll where he had been watching the woodsmen felling trees. His face was terrible to her, but she went on getting their dinner and did not speak.

"Grannie," he said at last, "what am I going to do?"

She paused over her fire, and turned her face to him, flushed with heat and warm with mother love.

"Sonny," she said, "we will do the will of God."

"Did He do this to me?" the boy asked inflexibly.

She looked at the mountain beyond the lake, whence, she knew, her strength came hourly.

"The world is His," she said. "He does everything. We can't find out why. We must help Him. We must ask Him to help us do His will."

Then they sat down to dinner, and the boy, strengthening his own savage will, forced himself to eat.

He did not think so much about the ways of God as shrewdly, when he grew older, of toughening muscles and hardening flesh. Peter's talents, Peter's triumphs, became a kind of possession with him. Osmond had perhaps his first taste of happiness when Peter went abroad, and Osmond knew who had sent him and who, if the market-garden thrived, had sworn to keep him there. The allowance he provided Peter thereafter gave him as much pleasure in the making as it did the boy in the using of it. Peter was like one running an easy race, not climbing the difficult steps that lead to greatness. It looked, at times, as if it were the richness of his gift that made his work seem play,—not Osmond's fostering. But now, coming home to more triumphs, Peter seemed to have forgotten the goal.

He found Osmond one morning resting under the apple tree, his chosen shade. Peter strode up to the spot moodily, angrily even, his picturesque youth well set off by the ease of his clothes. Osmond watched him coming and approved of him without condition, because he saw in him so many kinds of mastery. Peter gave him a nod, and threw himself and his hat on the grass, at wide interval. He quoted some Latin to the effect that Osmond was enjoying the ease of his dignified state.

"I've been up and at it since light," said Osmond, smiling at him. "You don't know when sun-up is."

Peter rolled over and studied the grass.

"Are you coming up to see Rose?" he asked presently.

Osmond could not tell him Rose had been to see him.

"I might," he said, remembering her requisition.

"Come soon. Maybe you could put an oar in. She needs help, poor girl!"

"Help to Electra's favor?"

Peter nodded into the grass.

"You could do it better than I. You can do everything better. You mustn't forget, Pete, that you're the Fortunate Youth."

There was something wistful in his tone. It stirred in Peter old loyalties, old responses, and he immediately wondered what Osmond wanted of him that was not expressed. Osmond had made no emotional demands upon him, as to his profession, but Peter always had a sense that his brother was sitting by, watching the boiling of the pot. This was a cheerful companionship when the pot was active; not now, as it cooled. He threw out a commonplace at random, from his uneasy consciousness.

"Art isn't the biggest thing, old boy."

"What is?"

Now Peter rolled over again, and regarded him with glowing eyes. To Osmond, who was beginning to know his temperament better than he had known it in all the years of the lad's journey upon an upward track, that glance told of remembered phrases and a dominating personality that had made the phrases stick.

"It's to give one man who works with his hands fresher air to breathe, fewer hours' work, a better bed."

"You're an artist, Pete. Don't forget that."

"I don't. But it isn't the biggest thing."

"If you should paint a picture for that workingman to look at while he says his prayers? what then?"

"You don't understand, Osmond," said the boy. "Labor! Labor is the question of the day."

Osmond looked over at a field of seedlings where five men with bent backs were weeding and where he himself had been bending until now. He smiled a little.

"I understand work, boy," he said gently. "Only I can't make hot distinctions. The workingman is as sacred to me as you are, and you are as sacred as the workingman."

Peter was making little nosegays of grass and weeds, and laying them in methodical rows.

"I can't paint, Osmond," he said abruptly. "These things are just crowding me."

"What things?"

"Capital. Labor."

Osmond was silent a long time because he had too many things to say, all of them impossible. He felt hot tears in his eyes from a passion of revolt against the lad's wastefulness. He felt the shame of such squandering. To him, all the steps in the existence by which his own being had been preserved meant thrift and penury. He had conserved every energy. He had lived wholesomely, not only for months, but unremittingly for years. His only indulgences had been the brave temperate ones of air and sleep; and with their aid he had built up in himself the strength of the earth. And here was a creature whose clay was shot through with all the tingling fires of life, whose hand carried witchery, whose brain and eye were spiritual satellites, and he talked about painting by and by.

"What a hold that man has on you!" he breathed involuntarily.

Peter swept his little green nosegays into confusion and sat up. His eyes were brilliant.

"Not the man," he said. "It's not the man. It's the facts behind him."

Osmond's thought flew back to one night, and a girl's reckless picture of her father. It seemed now like a dream, yet it swayed him.

"What can you do for him?" he asked, forcing himself to a healthy ruthlessness. "What have you done?"

"For Markham MacLeod? Nothing. What could I do for him? He has done everything for me."

"What, Pete?"

"Opened my eyes. Made me realize the brotherhood of man. Why, see here, Osmond!"

Osmond watched him, fascinated by the heat of him. He seemed possessed by a passion which could never, one would say, have been inspired save by what was noble.

"You know what kind of a fellow I've been: all right enough, but I like pleasures, big and little. Well, when I began to listen to MacLeod, I moved into a garret the poorest student would have grumbled at. I turned in my money to the Brotherhood. The money I got for the portrait--maybe I shouldn't have asked such a whacking big price if I hadn't wanted that money--I turned that in to the Brotherhood. Would a fellow like me sleep hard and eat crusts for anything but a big thing? Now I ask you?"

Osmond sat looking at him, and thinking, thinking. This, he understood perfectly, was youth in the divinity of its throes over life, life wherever it was bubbling and glowing. Always it was the fount of life, and where the drops glittered, there the eyes of youth had to follow, and the heart of youth had to go. The exact retort was rising to his lips: "That was my money, the money you gave away. I earned it for you. I dug it out of the ground." But the retort stayed there. He offered only what seemed a blundering remonstrance: "I can't help feeling, Pete, that it's your business to paint pictures. If you can paint 'em and give the money to your Brotherhood, that's something. Only paint 'em."

"But you know, I've found out I can speak."

There it was again, the heart of youth on its new track, chasing the glow, whatever it might be, the marsh-lamp or star. Osmond shook his head.

"I don't know, Pete," he owned. "I don't know. I'm out of the world. I read a lot, but that's not the same thing as having it out with men. But I feel a distinct conviction that it's every man's business to mind his own business."

"You wouldn't have us speak? You wouldn't have him, Markham MacLeod?"

The boy's impetuosity made denial seem like warfare. Osmond put it aside with his hand.

"Don't," he said. "You make me feel like Capital. I'm Labor, lad. I always have been."

"Isn't it anything to move a thousand men like one? To say a word and bring on a strike of ten thousand? The big chieftains never did so much as that. Alexander wasn't in it. Napoleon wasn't. It's colossal."

"I don't know whether it seems to me very clever to bring on a strike," said Osmond. "It would seem to me a great triumph to make ten thousand men feel justly. Resistance isn't the greatest thing to me. I should want to know whether it was noble to resist."

"Ah, but it is noble! Resistance--for themselves, their children, their children's children."

Osmond was looking away at the horizon, a whimsical smile coming about the corners of his mouth.

"Yes, Pete," he said. "But you paint your pictures."

"Now you own I'm right! Isn't it anything to move ten thousand men to throw down their tools and go on strike?"

"Well, by thunder!" Osmond had awakened. "Now you put it that way, I don't know whether it is or not. That phrase undid you. Lay down their tools? Show me the man that makes me take up my tools in reverence and sobriety, because good work is good religion. That's what I'd like."

"But it means something,--starvation, maybe, death. You don't recognize it, do you? You won't recognize the war that's on--oh, it is on!--between Capital and Labor, between the high places and the low. It's war, and it's got to be fought out."

"I do recognize it, lad." He spoke gently, thinking of his own lot, and the hard way through which he had come to his almost fevered championship of whatever was maimed or hurt. "Only, Pete, do you know what your opposing forces need? They need grannie."

"To say it's the will of God?"

"To be wheeled out in her chair, and sit at the head of your armies and say, 'Love God. Love one another.' If they love God, they'll listen to Him. If they love one another your strikes will end to-morrow, and your rich man will break bread with your poor one, and your poor one will lose hatred for the rich. You need grandmother."

They sat smiling over it. Peter had amazingly cooled. He rose to his feet.

"Well," he said, "I'll paint some pictures. Of course I'll paint my pictures--sometime. There's the Brotherhood again. Don't I want to turn in shekels? Don't I want to have it known that such weight as my name carries is going in there?"

It was Osmond's turn to rage. He, too, rose, and they confronted each other. Osmond spoke. His voice trembled, it seemed with emotion that was not anger but a fervor for great things.

"I cannot get it through my head. You can do the thing, and it's I that value it. You can paint pictures and you'd prostitute the thing for money,--for reputation. If I had it, if I had that gift"--he paused, and shook his head as if he shook a mane. Peter was looking at him curiously. This was passion such as he had never seen in any man.

"What would you do, old chap?" he asked.

Osmond was ashamed of his display, but he had to answer.

"I would guard it," he said, "as a man would guard--a woman."

They stood silent, their eyes not meeting now, hardly knowing how to get away from each other. As if she had been evolved by his mention of precious womanhood, Electra, in her phaeton, drove swiftly by. They took off their hats, glad of the break in the moment's tension; but she did not turn that way.

"Could she be going to see her?" Peter asked in haste.

"To see her?"

"Rose. She mustn't go now. Rose has gone to the orchard with her book."

He started straightway across the field, and met Electra, returning. As he was standing in the roadway, hat off, smiling most confidently at her, Electra had no resource but to draw up. Before she fairly knew how it had come about, he was beside her, and they were in a proximity for the most intimate converse. Electra felt irritably as if she could not escape.

VIII

Peter made up his mind to display, at last, all the guile he had; he would say nothing about Rose. If Electra had attempted to call on her, she might impart the fact to him or not, as she determined. But Electra did not wait to be asked. She turned to him with a serious air, inquiring,--

"When is Miss MacLeod likely to be back?"

"Rose?" Peter countered obstinately. "At dinnertime, surely."

"I shall try to find her then."

Peter felt such an access of gratitude that, as he looked down at the charmingly gloved hands, holding the reins in the right way, he thought of conveying his emotion by placing his own hand over them. But their masterful ease had a message of its own. It seemed almost as if they might resist. He cast about for something to please her.

"Electra," he began, "I'm going to pitch into work with Osmond."

Electra looked at him over a chin superbly lifted. This was evidently surprise, but whether disdainful of him or not he could not tell. At any rate, he felt whimsically miserable under it.

"Osmond works on the farm," she said merely.

Peter inferred some belittling of Osmond, and immediately he was at one with him and market-gardening.

"I belong to the Brotherhood," he said stiffly. "I don't propose to live like a bondholder while other fellows are hoeing. I'm going to work."

Still Electra said nothing. She had meant to stop at her own gate and let Peter leave her, if he would, but she had driven by, and now they were in a pretty reach of pines, with the needles under the horse's feet. The reins lay loosely, and Electra, who seldom did anything without a painstaking consciousness, even forgot her driving, and let her hands relax into an unlawful ease. They might almost tremble, she was afraid, she felt so undone with some emotion,--disappointment, anger? She did not know. But she kept her eyes fixed on a spot directly ahead, and in spite of herself thought turbulently. She could not help feeling that Peter would be surprised if he knew how he seemed to her after this return, almost a stranger, and one who awoke in her no desire for further acquaintance. He was not ministering to her pride in any way. He was not in the least a person whom she could flaunt at gatherings of the intellectually worshipful, with any chance of his doing her credit. She herself had tried to talk art with him, and Peter grew dumb. She could not guess it was because she did not speak his language, which had become almost a sign language, touched here and there with idiom and the rest understood,--a jargon of technicalities, mostly, it seemed, humorous, he appeared to mean them so lightly. Before he went abroad, she, who had read exhaustively in art, used to impart fact and theory to him in a serious fashion, and Peter had humbly accepted them. But now, when she opened her lips about his darling work which was so intimate a part of him that it was almost like play, he had a queer horror of what she was saying, as if she were beginning a persistent solo on a barbarous instrument; he could think of nothing but putting his hands over his ears and running off. But instead he had only been silent. She could not understand Peter's having read so few books and being in possession of such a meagre treasury of formulated opinion. The truth was that he had so many pleasant things to think about that books were only the dullard's task. His thoughts were not very consecutive or toward any particular end; they were merely a pageant of dancing figures, sometimes fantastic, sometimes dramatically grave, but always absorbing. This Electra could not know. Now it was running through her mind that Peter, though he had won the great prizes of art, was mysteriously dull and not what she considered a distinguished figure at all. His air, his clothes even--she found herself shrinking a little, at the moment, from the slovenly figure he made, his long legs drawn up in the carriage so that he could clasp his hands about his knees, while he went brightly on. For now Peter had found something to talk about. His topic shone before him as he handled it. This was almost like painting a picture with a real brush on real canvas, it grew so fast.

"We might found a community," he was urging as warmly, she thought, as if he meant it. "Osmond can dig. I can. I wonder if you could milk the cow!"

"I have certainly never tried to milk a cow," said Electra, in a tone that bit.

But Peter wasn't listening. He was simply pleasing his own creative self.

"You shouldn't," he offered generously. "You should

'Sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam,

And live on ripe strawberries, sugar, and cream."

Electra pulled the horse up, and though this was the narrowest bit of road for a mile, turned, with a masterly hand.

"How under the sun do you do that?" Peter was asking pleasantly. She interrogated him with a glance, and saw him hunched together in more general abandon. The happier Peter was in his own thoughts and the warmer the sun shone on him, the looser his joints became. To Electra he looked like a vagabond, but she was conscious that if for a moment he would act the part of a great painter, she would bid him sit up, try to get him into a proper cravat, and marry him tomorrow. Careless Peter was quite oblivious to the effect he was creating. He had forgotten Electra, save as some one possessed of two ears to listen.

"Turn," he pursued. "How can you turn? I never could. I remember I took you to drive once, ages ago, and I had to keep on in a thunder-shower, round the five-mile curve, because I didn't dare to let you know I couldn't cramp the wheel."

Electra remembered the day. Peter was timidly worshipful of her then, and she had found that quite appropriate in him. She remembered the lightning, and how satisfied she had been to go round the five-mile curve, if only to show that she was not timid in a storm. Then it seemed as if Peter had been unable to forego the delight of having her with him; but now it appeared that he could absently sit there hugging his knees and guying the occasion.

"I believe I can cramp the wheel," he was saying sunnily, out of an absolute content in his limitations. "Only I never can remember which rein does it. Can you turn either way, Electra, right or left, one just as well as the other?"

Electra could not answer in that vein.

"Don't!" she said involuntarily.

In some moods Peter had a habit of not waiting for answers.

"It's beyond me how they do those things," he was saying, "drive, ride, swim. Shouldn't you like to be a fish? I should be mighty proud."

"Shall I leave you here?" asked Electra, drawing up at his gate.

Peter came out of his childish muse. He saw Rose in the garden, and knew it was better that Electra should find her alone.

"Yes, let me out," he said. "I'll run back and see if Osmond is where I left him."

Electra also had seen Rose, lying in the long chair under the grape arbor, and left her carriage at the gate. Rose was in white. A book lay in her lap, unopened. The idle hands had clasped, and her eyes were closed. Electra, coming upon her, felt a pang, an inexplicable one, at her loveliness. It seemed half lassitude, not alone to challenge pity, but a renewed and poignant interest when she should awake. At Electra's step her eyes came open slowly, as if there were nothing in that garden ground to move her. Then with a rush of color to the face, her eyes grew large. Life, surprised life, poured in on her, and she had gained her feet with a spring. Before Electra could insist upon her own decorous distance, Rose, with a charming gesture and an insistent cordiality, had her by both hands.

"How good of you," she was saying. "How good of you!"

"Not at all," returned Electra, with a stiff dignity she hated, as not in the least the armor she had meant to wear. "I came to see if you would drive over to the house." This she had not meant to ask, but it seemed easier to deal with problematic characters in the course of motion than face to face and standing. Rose was eagerly ready.

"My hat is here," she cried, "and my parasol. I thought I might walk up the road a bit,--but it was so hot. How good of you!"

As they went down the path together, Rose in her slender grace and eager motions the significant note in the garden, Electra felt the irritation of having, for any reason, committed herself to even a short intimacy with her. But presently they were together in the carriage, and Electra spoke.

"My grandmother is at home this morning. We have a guest for a few days, Mr. William Stark, of London. I thought you might be interested in meeting them both."

"I shall be delighted," returned Rose, still in that warmly impulsive tone.

Electra had a strong distaste for unconsidered things. They seemed to her to show lack of poise. Now she was

conscious of the inconsistency of proposing that Rose should meet anybody, even Billy Stark. But in the moment of conceiving it she had remembered that Mr. Stark was a man of the world; he would know an adventuress when he saw one. Afterwards she would ask him frankly how his judgment had been affected by the siren's song.

At the house she led the way into the vine-shaded sitting-room where Madam Fulton and Stark had been engaged for an hour in a battle delightful to them both. Madam Fulton sat beautifully upright in a straight-backed chair, and her old friend, with her permission, lay upon a bamboo couch, where he held his eyeglass by its ribbon in one outstretched hand and gesticulated with it, while he urged torrentially upon her the rights of a publisher to the confidence of his author. Now he came to his feet and stood punctiliously.

"Ah!" said Madam Fulton. She had remembered a little lack in her reception of Rose when, hot and tired from her journey, she had found her in the house. "So here is our young lady again. I have been wondering why we haven't seen you, my dear."

While Rose, in her grateful sweetness, was bowing over her hand, Electra had said to the gentleman, with the air of its being quite the usual thing to say,--

"You know all about Markham MacLeod, Mr. Stark. This is the daughter of Markham MacLeod."

Somehow, save to Rose, it seemed an adequate presentation, and that instant Stark was bowing before her.

"I can't say Mr. MacLeod," Electra added, with the elaborate grace that fitted what seemed to her that skillful preface. "He is quite too great for that, isn't he, Mr. Stark?"

Billy had no extravagant opinion of Markham MacLeod. He had rather the natural dubiousness of the inquiring mind toward a man whom the world delighted to honor and who had, according to dispassionate standards, done nothing, as yet, save telling others what to do.

"We don't say Mr. Browning often," he concurred, "certainly not Mr. Shakespeare. But, my dear young lady, I don't forgive your father."

He seated himself, for Electra was now decorously smiling in a chair that became her. It had a high carved top like Madam Fulton's, and in these the older woman and the younger looked like the finest-fibred beings bred out of endurance and strong virtues. Rose was in a low chair near Madam Fulton's knee. She was leaning forward now, listening in her receptive way, and Billy Stark looked at her anew and wondered at her beauty and her grace. But he recalled himself with a sigh, and remembered it was the old commonplace--youth--and it was not for him.

"You don't forgive my father?" she repeated, with a slightly foreign accent that came sometimes upon her tongue, no one knew why, whether to enhance her charm or in unconsciousness. "Why?"

Billy Stark had thrown one of his short legs over the other, and held it with his well-kept hand.

"He is a renegade," he said. "He began to write, and stopped writing. You can't expect a publisher to condone that."

Madam Fulton was having a strange pang of liking and envy as she looked at the girl, one such as she never felt over Electra. Rose for her, too, had youth, beautiful and pathetic also. As the girl only smiled without answering, she said kindly,--

"Your father got very much interested in people, didn't he, my dear? the working classes?"

"Labor," said Electra, as if it were a war-cry.

Madam Fulton glanced at her involuntarily, with a satirical thought. Electra had a maternal attitude toward her servants, shown, her grandmother thought, chiefly by interfering in their private lives. She worked tirelessly at clubs to raise money for labor, and she listened to the most arid talks on the situation of the day. But did Electra love her fellowman? Madam Fulton did not know. She had seen no sign of it. But Rose was returning one of her vague answers that always seemed significant, and, to any partial ear, quite adequate.

"My father founded what he calls the Brotherhood. He speaks for it. He works for it. But you know that already."

Stark nodded.

"I know," he said. "It is tremendous. He says to this man 'Come,' and he cometh, and so on. I should think it would make him lie awake o' nights."

"No," said Rose, smiling brilliantly in a way she had when the smile had no honest mirth in it, "my father never lies awake. Responsibility is the last thing he fears."

Now Electra was smiling upon her so persuasively that Rose bent toward her as if it were a species of sunshine.

"We want you to do something for us," Electra said.

"Oh, I'll do it," Rose was responding eagerly. "Gladly."

"We want you to give us a talk on your father."

Rose, painfully thrown back upon herself, looked her discomfort.

"Do you mean"--she began. "That was what you asked me before."

"For the Club."

"They want me to give a talk on my book," said Madam Fulton, looking at Stark with a direct mirth. Then, still with a meaning for him, she added, to Rose, "You do it, my dear. So will I, if they drive me to it. We'll surprise them."

"That would be very sweet of you, grandmother," said Electra, innocent of hidden meanings. "Then we might count on two afternoons."

"What do you want to know about my father?" asked Rose, and Electra answered with a contrasting enthusiasm--

"His habit of thought, something about his daily life as seen by those nearest him, anything to interpret a great man to us."

"I can't do it." Rose had answered with a touch of harshness strangely contrasted with her facile ways. "I really can't."

Now she saw why she had been summoned, and her gratitude sobered into dull distaste. She felt cold.

"That sort of thing is very difficult," said Stark, in a general desire to quell the emotional tide. "I often think a person next us has to be inarticulate about us. He doesn't know really what he thinks of us till we are gone. You know a big Frenchman says it is like being inside the works of a clock. You can't tell the time there. You have to go outside."

Rose was upon her feet, a lovely figure, wistful and mysteriously sad.

"I must go back," she said. "Thank you for letting me come." She had turned away when Madam Fulton called to her.

"Miss MacLeod!" Rose stood, arrested. Madam Fulton continued, "Why not stay to luncheon with us?"

The girl did not answer. Apparently she could not. Tears were swimming in her eyes. She looked at Electra in what might be reproach or a despair at the futility of the fight she had to make. She returned to Madam Fulton and stood before her.

"You didn't know," she said, in a low tone. "No one has told you!"

"Sit down," said the old lady kindly. "What is it?"

Rose stood before her, proudly now, her back turned upon Electra, as if she repudiated one source of justice and appealed to another court.

"You called me Miss MacLeod," she said, in her full-throated voice. "I was your grandson's wife."

"Tom's wife!" cried the old lady, in a sharp staccato. "Tom's wife! For heaven's sake!"

Rose turned from her to Stark with an eloquent insistence. Electra, outside the circle of the drama, stood ignored. But Madam Fulton called to her--

"Electra, do you hear?"

"I have heard it," answered Electra, with composure.

"You have heard it? Why didn't you tell me?"

But Electra made no reply. Madam Fulton gave way to her excitement. It seemed to put new blood into her veins.

"Sit down here," she said imperiously, pushing forward a chair. Rose sank upon it in a dignified obedience. "Now tell me,--how long were you married?"

"Two years."

"Did Tom"--there were many things the old lady, knowing Tom, wished to ask. But Tom was in his grave, and she contented herself with remarking, "I certainly am petrified."

Stark gave a little smiling nod at them, and began making his way to the door. It seemed to him emphatically that this was a family conclave.

"Billy," called the old lady, "did you ever hear of such a thing in your life? Tom had a wife two years before he died, and not a word. Did you ever dream of such a thing? Electra, I could trounce you for not telling me." Then, as no one spoke, she asked sharply, "Does Peter know?"

"Yes, Madam Fulton," Rose returned. "He brought me here. Not quite that. He assured me I might come."

"Come! of course you had to come. You belong here. Why aren't you staying with us? Electra, haven't you seen to it?"

Electra was immovable, and the other girl turned to her a mute glance. To Billy Stark it said many things. Reproach was in it, and a challenging, almost a hard appeal. Rose looked like a gentle thing that has been forced to fight. But she spoke to Madam Fulton.

"I must go," she said, with her exquisite deference. "I mustn't tire you."

"Tire me! I'm never tired. Well, you must come again. You must come to stay. Electra will see to that."

But Electra only walked to the library door with the departing guest, and presently Billy Stark caught the white shimmer of a gown, as Rose went down the path. Electra was looking eagerly from him to her grandmother.

"Well, Mr. Stark," she said, as if she hurried him, "what do you think of her?"

Stark indicated a chair, with a courteous motion, and then allowed himself to be seated.

"She is a remarkably beautiful young woman," he returned, in his impartial way of shedding optimism. Electra made an impatient gesture.

"I know--I know. It's easy enough to be handsome."

"Oh, is it?" commented Madam Fulton.

"But what do you think of her?"

"What do you mean, Electra?" asked her grandmother testily. She was prepared to hear that Electra thought the stranger lacking in poise.

A deep red had risen to Electra's cheeks. Her hands flew together in a nervous clasp. She had momentarily lost what poise she herself possessed.

"Can't you see," she urged, "that girl is an adventuress?"

Grandmother was leaning forward, enchanted at the prospect. She seemed to have before her an absorbing work of fiction, "concluded in our next."

"Now what makes you think so?" she inquired cosily. "Wouldn't that be grand! Stay here, Billy. If there's any scandal about Queen Elizabeth, you must share it."

Electra was speaking with a high impatience.

"Of course she is an adventuress. You must see it, both of you."

"Is that all the evidence you have?" asked the old lady dryly.

Electra blenched a little. She liked to have irrefutable fact on her side, and allow other people the generalities. Yet her certainty remained untouched.

"Does Peter say she is Tom's wife?" inquired Madam Fulton, in some scorn at herself for putting elementary questions.

"Yes. Peter says she was Tom's wife."

"There, you see!" But at Electra's look, the old lady cried out to Stark, in irrepressible annoyance, "No, she doesn't see! It doesn't mean a thing to her."

"It will be quite easy," said Stark soothingly, "to assure yourself, Miss Electra. She will no doubt tell you where she

was married. That can be confirmed at once."

"She must present her proofs," said Electra. "I shall not ask for them."

"What do you hate the poor girl for?" asked Madam Fulton. "Is it the money? Are you afraid you've got to share with her?"

Billy Stark had been nearing the door, and now he was out of the room.

"Have you told Peter how you feel about it?" asked the old lady keenly.

Electra seemed to herself to be unjustly upon her own defense when she had meant to place the stranger there.

"He knows it, grandmother." She spoke as impatiently as decorum would allow.

The old lady watched her for a moment steadily. Then she inquired,--

"Do you know what's the matter with you, Electra?"

"With me, grandmother?"

"You're jealous, child. You're jealous of Peter, because the girl's so pretty."

Electra stood still, the color surging over her face. She felt out of doors for all the world to jeer at, and without the blameless habit of her life. Nothing, Electra told herself, even at that moment, had the value of the truth. If she believed herself to be jealous, she must not shirk it, degrading as it was. But she would not believe it.

"You must excuse me, grandmother," she said, with dignity. "I can't discuss such things, even with you."

Madam Fulton spoke quite eagerly.

"But, bless you, child, I like you the better for it. It makes you human. Your decorum is the only thing I've ever had to complain of. If I could find a weakness in you now and then, we should agree like two peas in a pod."

Electra stood taller and straighter.

"At least," she said, "the young woman is here, and we have got to do our best about it."

"The young woman! Don't talk as if she were a kitchen wench. What's the use, Electra! What's the sense in being so irreproachable? Come off your stilts while we're alone together."

"But, grandmother," said Electra, with an accession of firmness, and leaving irrelevant strictures to be considered in the silence of her room, "I shall neither acknowledge her nor shall I invite her here."

"You won't acknowledge her?"

"Not until she brings me proof."

"You won't ask for it?"

"I shan't ask for it. It is for her to act, not for me."

"And you won't have her here? Then, by George, Electra, I will!"

Electra raised her eyebrows by the slightest possible space. It was involuntary, but the old lady saw it.

"You're quite right," she said ironically, "the house isn't mine."

"The house is yours to do exactly as you please with it," said Electra, with an instant justice instinct even with a dutiful warmth. "Any guest you invite is welcome. Only, grandmother, I must beg of you not to invite this particular person."

"Person! Electra, you make me mad. Be human; come, unbend a little. Take the poker out of your training. Do the decent thing, and ask her here, and then find out about her, and if she's a baggage, turn her out, neck and crop."

"I must refuse, grandmother," said Electra. "Now aren't you getting tired? I will bring your food."

Madam Fulton spoke with deliberate unction:--

"Perdition take my food!"

IX

Rose came down out of her chamber after supper on a warm still evening. She had stayed in retirement nearly all day. Grandmother had been suffering discomfort from the heat and was better alone. Peter had gone to town, and he had not come back. The girl stopped in the doorway of the silent house and looked out into the night. It was all moonlight, all mysterious shadows and enchanting stillnesses. The glamour of the hour lay over it like a veil, and her heart responded to the calling from mysterious distances, voices that were those of life itself springing within her and echoing back from that delusive world. She stood there smiling a little, trying to keep the wholesome bitterness of her mood, because she thought she knew what a deceiving jade fortune is, and yet with her young heart pathetically craving life and the fullness of it. Rose thought she had quite fathomed the worth of things. She knew the bravest shows are made by the trickiest design, and she had sworn, in desperate defense of herself, to "take the world but as the world,"--a gaming-ground for base passions and self-love. But to-night all the instincts of youth in her were innocently vocal. Here was the beautiful earth, again fecund and full of gifts. She could not help believing in it. She gathered her skirts about her, and stepped out into the dew, and with no avowed purpose, but, straight as inevitable intent could lead her, crossed the orchard and went down across the field to Osmond. She had selected that way, in her unconscious mind, when grandmother had that morning sent her into the attic to look at some precious heirlooms in disuse. Looking out of the attic window she had noted his little shack and fields of growing things, and some impatience then had said to her, That would be the way to get to him. Before the last wall, she came out on a low rise where there was a spreading tree. It was an oak tree, and though there seemed to be no wind that night, the leaves rustled thinly.

"Where are you going?" It was Osmond's voice out of the shadow near the wall.

Rose answered at once,--

"I was going down to see you."

"I thought you would come."

He was sitting there, his back against the wall, and at once she sank down opposite him on a stone that made her a prim little seat. The shadow lay upon her in flecks, but the outline of her white dress was visible to him.

"Did you call me?" she asked. There was no trace of her unrest of the moments before, either in her manner or in her own happy consciousness. She felt instead a delicious ease and security that needed no explaining even to herself.

Osmond answered as if he were deliberating.

"I don't know whether I called you. I hope I didn't. I was thinking about you, of course."

"Why do you hope you didn't?"

"Because I haven't any right to."

"Doesn't my coming prove you had a right to? You see you did call me, and I came."

After a moment he answered irrelevantly,--

"I'm a cowardly sort of chap. When I feel like calling you, I choke it down. I don't want to get the habit of you."

"Why not?"

"One reason--it will be so difficult when you go away."

A sense of freedom and happiness possessed her. Words rose tumultuously to her lips, to be choked there. She wanted to say unreasonably, "I shall never go away. How could you think it?" But instead she asked, with a happy indirection, "Where am I going?"

He, too, answered lightly,--

"How should I know? Back into your cloud, I guess--dear goddess." The last words were very low, and to himself, but she heard them. Instantly and against all reason, she, who had never meant to be happy again, laughed ecstatically.

"Think," she said, "a month ago I didn't know you were in the world."

"Oh, yes, you did. Peter told you he had a kind of a brother, that worked on the farm. But I didn't know you were in the world."

"Of course," she deliberated softly, "I knew Peter had a brother. But I didn't know it was you."

The moonlit air was as beguiling to him as it was to her. Everything was different and everything was possible. He put his hand to his head and tried to recall old prudences. In vain. The still, bright world told him, with a voice so quiet that it was like a hand upon his heart, that it was the only world. The daylight one of doubts and dull expediency had been arranged by man. This was the home of the spirit. For a moment he felt himself drowning in that sea of life. Then, perhaps lifted by his striving will, he seemed to come out again to the free air that had touched him at her coming. Again he was at peace and incredibly exalted. He tried to bring lightness into their talk.

"I suppose," said he, "you are one of the charmers."

"What do you mean by charmers?"

"Don't ask me what I mean, when you know. If you do that, we shall forget our language."

"What do you mean by our language?"

"Yours and mine. Don't you hear it going on, question and answer, question and answer, all the time our tongues are talking? Those are the things we never can speak out loud."

"Yes, I hear them. But I couldn't tell what I hear."

"Of course you couldn't. Only when we really speak with our lips, we must tell each other the truth. If we don't, we shall jar things. Then the other voices will stop."

When she spoke her words had a note of pain, mysteriously disproportioned, he thought, to the warning he had given.

"I don't think I have told you what wasn't true," she faltered. Life had gone out of her.

The tenderest comforting seemed to him too harsh for such pathetic sorrow. But he clung to his lighter, safer mood.

"We've simply got to tell each other the truth. When we don't, it's like the clanging of ten thousand bells. Of course that drowns the other voices. So when I ask you if you are one of the charmers, you mustn't ask what I mean. You must answer."

She began to laugh. His heart rejoiced at it.

"Yes," she owned gleefully. "Yes, I am."

"That's a good lady. You're very beautiful, too, aren't you?"

"Yes," she corroborated. "Oh, I'd swear to anything!"

"If it's true," he corrected her. "What are your accomplishments, missy? Do you play the piano?"

For his life, Osmond could not have told why he addressed her as he did, or how he got the words. Some strange self seemed to have sprung up in him, a self that had a language he had not learned from books nor used to woman. The new self grew rapidly. He felt it wax within him. It was loquacious, too. It seemed to have more to say than there would be time for in a million years; but he gave it head.

"I play a little," said Rose. She was meeting him joyously. "I sing, too."

"Yes, you sing. I guessed that. Let me hear you."

At once she folded her hands on her knees and sang like a child in heaven, with the art that is simplicity. She sang "Nous n'irons plus au bois," and Osmond felt his heart choking with the melancholy of it. His own voice trembled when he said,--

"You must not sing that often. It's too sad."

"Are we never to be sad?" She asked it in a quick tone full of eager confidence, as if whatever he told her was bound to come to pass.

"Not when we are together."

Premonition chilled him there. Why should they ever be together again? Why was it not possible that this was his one night, the first and the last? So if it was to be the last, he would taste every minute of it, and make it his to keep.

"Well," he said consideringly, "so you are a charmer. You can charm a bird off a bush. That would be one of the first tricks."

She answered, in what he saw was real delight,--

"I can try. Want me to?"

"No, no. You can't tell what will become of the bird--in the end."

His voice sounded to her ineffably sad. Eager words rose again to her lips, and again she held them back, even against the glamour of that light and air.

"You broke your promise to me," she ventured presently.

"What promise?"

"You said you would come to the house."

"I said I might." He spoke with an embracing tenderness, as if to a child. She fancied he was smiling at her through the dusk. "Besides," he continued, "I shan't come to see you there, anyway; I have decided that."

"Why not?"

"This is better."

"This?"

"This tree."

It seemed quite just and natural that she should meet him there. Why should she disclaim it?

"But you won't go to the house to see your grandmother?"

"Oh, I see grannie. She wakes before day. We have a little talk every morning while you're asleep. The last time"--he stopped.

"Well!" she urged him.

"The last time I passed your door I heard your step inside. When I went out at the front door, I heard you on the stairs." It had apparently enormous significance to him. "The next morning I came earlier," said Osmond, in a low tone, "but I dropped a handful of rose leaves at your sill."

"I saw them--scattered rose leaves."

"For you to step on."

There was a moment's silence.

"But I didn't," she said. "I didn't step on them."

"What did you do?"

"I gathered them up very carefully in my handkerchief and left them in my bureau drawer."

"Now, why"--he spoke curiously--"why did you do that?"

"I hate to throw away flowers. They are precious to me."

There was silence again, and then he said reprovingly,--

"No, you mustn't do that."

"Do what?"

"You mustn't get up earlier to catch me scattering my rose leaves. That wouldn't be fair."

"That was what I was thinking." She mused a moment. "No, I suppose it wouldn't be fair."

"You see we shall have to play fair every minute. That's the way to be good playmates."

"That's what we are, isn't it--playmates?"

"It's about the size of it." Then he asked her gravely, across the distance between them, "Don't you hear a nightingale?"

She was taken in.

"But there aren't any nightingales in New England!"

"I almost think I hear one. You see if you don't."

She caught the pace then, and listened. Presently she spoke as gravely as he had done.

"I am sure I hear one--over there in the rose garden."

"I knew you would." He breathed quickly, in a gay relief. "Yes, in the rose garden, 'her breast against a thorn.' Well, playmate, it's a wonderful night. I smell the roses, too, don't you?"

"Yes, and lilies. The nightingale sings very loud."

"Let us talk, playmate. Where have you been since I saw you last?"

"Since that other night I came down here?"

"Since that other year, so long ago. We mustn't forget there are other years, though we can't quite recall them. If there hadn't been, we shouldn't be hearing the nightingale to-night and talking without words. You see it's a good while since I saw you. How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"Twenty-five! A quarter of a century. That's a long time. Well, what have you been doing all that twenty-five years?"

She seemed to shrink into herself, as if a hand had struck her.

"Don't!" she breathed. "Don't ask me to remember."

"Why, no! not if it troubles you."

"Troubles me! it kills me. Can't we begin now?"

"We will begin now. There, playmate, don't shiver. I feel you're doing it through the moonlight. Don't let your chin tremble either. It did, that night down in the shack."

"When I was talking about Electra?"

"I guess so. Anyway it trembled a lot, and I made up my mind it mustn't any more. Cheer up, playmate. Be a man."

"I wish I were a man." She spoke bitterly. The beauty of the night seemed to break about her, and this castle of whim that had looked, a moment ago, more solid than certainty, was crumbling.

"Now you're doing what I told you not to," he warned her gravely. "You have stopped telling the truth. You don't wish you were a man. Think how happy you were a minute ago, only because you are a beautiful woman and you heard the nightingale."

She was struggling back into the clear medium that had been between them the moment before.

"I only meant"--she spoke painstakingly, hunting for words and pathetically anxious to have them right--"I only meant--I have been unhappy. No man would have been as unhappy as I have been."

Osmond smiled a little to himself, in grave communing. The uphill road of his life presented itself to him as a thorny way so hard that, if he had foreseen it from the beginning, he would have said it was impossible. But at the same instant he remembered where it had led him: he had come out into clear air; he was resting in this garden of delight. And she, too, was resting. He knew that with a perfect certainty.

"We have begun over," he warned her. "We don't have to remember. See the moon driving along the sky. We are going with her, fast. Look at her, playmate."

She looked up into the sky where the moon seemed to be racing past more stable clouds. It was as if their spiritual gaze met there, to be welded into a mutual compact. This was the ecstasy of silence. Presently a sound broke it, a whistle loud and clear from the other field. Osmond was at once upon his feet.

"Come," he said, "we must go. There's Peter."

"But why must we go?" She was struggling out of her trance of quietude, almost offended at his haste.

"Come with me. We will meet him in the field. It is too--too splendid, here. This is our castle under the tree. Don't you know it is? We can't ask anybody in--not even Peter."

"Not even Peter!" She tried to say it gayly, but a quick sadness fell upon her as she rose and went with him along the path. The moon had gone into a cloud, and a breath sprang up. The night was cooler. That other still languor of too great emotion seemed like something generated by their souls, and dissipated when they had to come out of the world of their own creating. All her daily fears rose up before her in anticipation. She was again alien here in her own land, and Electra was unkind to her. But there was a strange confidence and strength in knowing this silent figure was at her side.

"Courage, playmate," he said, as if he knew her thought. "We shall think this night over, shan't we?"

"Yes. When"--her voice failed her.

"Every night," he said, with an unchanged assurance that amazed her like the night itself. "I shall be there every night. If you don't come--why, never mind. If you come"--his voice stopped, as if something choked it. Then he went on heartily, "The house will be there under the tree, the playhouse. Nobody will see it by day, you know. Nobody'll run up against it by night. But you've got the key. There are only two, you know. You have one. I have the other. And here's Peter."

The whistle had come nearer, clear and pure now like the pipe of Pan. Peter stopped short.

"Rose!" he cried. "Osmond! What is it?"

Some accident seemed to him inevitable. Nothing else could have brought about this meeting. Osmond answered, stopping as he did so, when Peter turned to join him.

"I'll go back, now you've come, Peter. We were taking our walks abroad. So we met. Good-night! good-night!"

It seemed a separate and a different farewell to each of them, and he walked away. Peter stood staring after him, but Rose involuntarily glanced up to heaven to see if the moon, out of her cloud now, would give again the radiant assurance of that other moment. She longed passionately for an instant's meeting even so with the man who had gone. Then an exalted calm possessed her. She and Peter were walking rather fast along the path; he had been talking and she was conscious that she had not heard. Now a name arrested her.

"Had you met him before?" he was asking,--"Osmond?"

Her old habit of elusive courtesy came back to her. She laughed a little.

"We haven't really met now, have we?" she responded pleasantly.

"He said he was afraid of you." Peter put it bluntly, out of his curiosity and something else that was not altogether satisfaction. He was not jealous of Osmond. He could not be, more than of a splendid tree; but there was a something in the air he did not understand. He felt himself pushing angrily against it, as if it were a tangible obstruction. "He was afraid of you," he continued blunderingly, "because you are a Parisian."

Rose laughed again, with that beguiling gentleness.

"But he spoke first, I believe," she explained carelessly. "I was walking along and he asked me where I was going."

"What were you talking about?" Peter's voice amazed him, as it did her. It was rough, remonstrating, he realized immediately, like the mood that engendered it. He was shocked at himself and glad she did not answer. Instead, she gave him her hand that he might help her over the low wall.

"See," she said, "your grandmother has a light in her room. She is lying in bed reading good books."

"Does she read them to you?"

"A little word sometimes when I go in to say good-night."

"Grannie's a saint."

"Yes, and better. She's a beautiful grannie."

When they stepped into the hall, Peter, under the stress of his inexplicable feeling, turned to look at her. Instantly the eyes of the man and of the artist agreed in an amazed affirmation. The artist in Peter got the better, and gave him authority.

"Wait a minute," he bade her. "Stand there."

She obeyed him, and looked inquiringly yet languidly. The angry man in him told him at once that she could obey because she was indifferent to his reasons for commanding her. Out of that indifference she stood and looked at him, kind, friendly, yet as far from him as the remoter stars. He stared at her and thought of brush and canvas. Never had he seen a woman so alive. Her eyes, her wayward hair, her very flesh seemed touched with flame. Her lips had softened into a full curve, strange contrast to their former patient sweetness. The pupils of her eyes, distended, gave her face a tragic power. As he gazed, that wild bright beauty seemed to fade. Her eyes lost their reminiscent look and inquired of him sanely. The lips tightened a little. Her languor gave place to a steady poise. Now she shook her head with a pretty motion, as if she cast off memories.

"Do I look nice to-night?" she said kindly, as if she spoke to an admiring boy. "Do you want to paint me?"

Peter turned aside with an exclamation under his breath. He had never, again he told himself, seen a woman so alive, so radiating beauty as if it bloomed and faded while he looked at her. She was beginning to mount the stairs.

"Good-night," she called back to him, with her perfect kindness. "Good-night, Peter."

X

Madam Fulton and Billy Stark sat in the library, wrangling.

"I say she'll come," said Madam Fulton.

"I say she won't," replied Billy with a hearty zest. "No woman of self-respect would."

"Maybe she hasn't self-respect."

"Oh, you go 'way, Florrie. Of course she has, any girl as pretty as that."

Madam Fulton looked at him smilingly. There were few left, nowadays, to call her Florrie.

"You see Electra never in the world would have invited her," she continued. "I simply did it, and she had to confirm it or appear like a brute. Electra won't do that. She's willing to appear like a long and symmetrical icicle, but not a brute."

That was it. She had boldly asked Rose to luncheon, and then told Electra she had done it. Now it was fifteen minutes to the time, and the hostess had not appeared. Madam Fulton looked up from her work. There was a laughing cherub in each eye. Her work, let it be said, was no work at all, only a shuttle plying in and out mysteriously, and lyingly doing the deed known as tatting. She usually tied knots and had to begin over; still, as she said, she liked the motion.

"There was a reporter here yesterday," she remarked, watching the effect on Billy.

"The mischief there was! What for?"

"To see me. To ask about the book."

"You didn't talk to him?"

"Oh, yes, I did!"

"What did he ask you?"

"Everything, nearly. He wanted to see the Abolitionist letters I had quoted."

"What did you say?"

"I refused. I told him they were sacred."

"Did he suspect them? Was that his idea?"

"Oh, dear, no! he wanted to reproduce some of the signatures. Then he asked me about my novels."

"What about them?"

"How I used to write them--if the characters were taken from life. I said every time."

"Florrie, what a pirate you are!"

"Then his eyes sharpened up like knives, and he wanted to know about the originals. 'Dead,' I said, 'years and years ago.'"

"You didn't use to be a freebooter, Florrie. You were just a bright girl."

"Of course I didn't. I was walking Spanish then. I was on my promotion. I always had faith life would do something for me if I'd speak pretty and hold out my tier. I held my tier a great many years and nothing dropped into it. I'm an awful example, Billy, of what a woman can become when she's had no fun. This may seem to you insanity. It isn't. It's the abnormal and monstrous fruit of a plant that wasn't allowed to mature at the right time. I am a mammoth squash."

"What did you tell him about your novels?"

"I told him they weren't written. They wrote themselves. My characters simply got away from me and did things I never dreamed of. I said they were more alive to me than people of flesh and blood."

"Do you suppose he put in all that?"

"I know he did."

"Have you seen the paper?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I haven't dared to look."

Billy Stark glanced at the floor as if he wanted to get down and roll. Then he lay back in his chair and went gasping off. Madam Fulton watched him seriously, that unquenchable spark still in her eyes.

"I don't know what you can do next," said Billy, getting out his pocket-handkerchief, "unless you become engaged to me."

Madam Fulton laid down her tatting, to look at him in a gentle musing.

"It would plague Electra," she owned.

"Come on, Florrie, come on! Get up early to-morrow morning, and we'll post off and be married."

"No," said Madam Fulton absently, still considering, "I don't want to be married. Harsh measures never did attract me. But I'd like very well to be engaged. Tell you what, Billy, we could be engaged for the summer, and when you go back to England we'll call it off."

Billy rose, and possessed himself of one of her hands. He kissed it ceremoniously, and returned it to its tatting.

"You do me infinite honor," he announced, with more gravity than she liked.

"Don't get too serious, Billy," she said quickly. "It'll remind us of being young, and mercy knows that isn't what we want."

"May I inform your granddaughter?" asked the gentleman gravely.

"No, no, I'll do it. That's half the fun."

At that moment Electra came in. She was dressed in white, as usual, but her ordinary dignified simplicity seemed overlaid, to the old lady's satirical gaze, with an added smoothness of glossy surfaces. Her dress fell in simple folds. She seemed to have clothed herself to meet a moral emergency. Her face was pale in its determination. She was like a New England maiden led to sacrifice and bound, at all hazards, to do her conscience credit. Madam Fulton, seeing her, hardened her heart. There were few pirouettes she would not have essayed at that moment to plague her granddaughter.

"Electra, my dear," she said, in a silken voice, "we have something to tell you, Mr. Stark and I. We have become engaged."

Electra looked from one to the other, not even incredulity in her gaze, all a reproachful horror. Yet Electra did not for a moment admit the possibility of a joke on such a subject. She saw her grandmother, as she often did, peering down paths that led to madness, and even, as in this case, taking one.

"Please do not mention it," grandmother was saying smoothly. "The engagement is not to be announced--not yet."

Electra could not look at Billy Stark, even in reproof. The situation was too intolerable. And at that moment, flushed from her walk, eager, deprecating as she had to be in this unfriendly spot, Rose came in. She went straight to Madam Fulton, as if she were the recognized head of the house.

"It was so good of you," she said. "I am so glad to come." Then she turned to Electra and Billy Stark with her quick, beautiful smile and her inclusive greeting. This was not the same woman who had run away to trysts under the tree, or even the woman Peter had seen when she returned, glowing, lovely, as if from a bath of pleasure. She was the Parisian, as Osmond had perhaps imagined her in his jesting fancy, regnant, subtle, even a little hard. Electra felt for a moment as if it were wise to be afraid of her. But they sat down, and she essayed the safe remark--

"I believe luncheon is late."

"What have you been doing with yourself, my dear?" Madam Fulton asked Rose, who was looking from one to another with an accessible brightness, as if she only wanted a chance to respond to everything beautifully. She bent a little, deferentially, toward Madam Fulton.

"Reading aloud this morning," she said, "to grannie."

"You call her grannie, do you?"

"I begged to. I adore her."

"Does she like it?"

"Oh, yes, she likes it," Rose returned, with her lovely smile. "Don't you think she likes it?"

"I know she does. That's what I can't understand. Every time I hear Electra say 'grandmother' it's like a nail in my coffin."

"Grandmother!" exclaimed Electra, in an instant and quite honest deprecation.

"That's it, my dear," nodded the old lady. "That's precisely it. Nail me down."

Then luncheon was announced, and they went out, Rose with that instant deference toward Madam Fulton which suggested a hundred services while she delicately refrained from doing one.

"I know you," said the old lady dryly, after they had sat down. "I know quite well what you are."

"What, please?" asked Rose, bending on her that warm look which was yet never too flattering, and still promised an incense of personal regard not to be spoiled by deeds.

"I know exactly what you are," said the old lady, with her incisive kindliness. "You're a charmer."

Instantly Rose flushed all over her face, a flooding red. With the word she remembered the other voice out of the moonlit night, telling her the same thing. Now it was almost an accusation. Then it was a caressing loveliness of the night, as if an unseen hand had crowned her with a chaplet, dripping fragrance. In that instant, with a throb of haste and longing, she was away from the circle of these alien souls, back in the night where voice had answered voice. It was immediately as if she were hearing his call to her. "I will come to-night, to-night," she heard her heart repeating. "Did you wait for me last night, dear playmate, alone in the dark and stillness? And the night before? Did you think I was never coming? I will come to-night."

Meantime Billy Stark, seeing the blush and knowing it meant discomfort, was pottering on in his kindly optimism, throwing himself into the breach, and dribbling words like rain. He talked of Paris and continental life in general. Rose had been everywhere. She spoke of traveling with her father on his missions from court to court. When MacLeod's name recurred upon her lips, Electra, who presided, still and pale, roused momentarily into some show of interest. But Rose would not be led along that road. For some reason she refused to speak freely of her father. At a question, her lovely lips would fix themselves in a straight line. Back in the library again, she seated herself persistently by Madam Fulton, like a dog who has at last discovered the person friendliest to him.

"Run away, Billy, if you like," said the old lady indulgently. "You want your cigar on the veranda. I know you."

Billy was going, in humorous deprecation, when there was a running step along the veranda, and Peter came in with a bound. And what a Peter! He looked like a runner--not a spent one, either--with the news of victory. It was in his face, his flushed cheeks and flaming eyes, but chiefly in the air he brought with him--all tension and immoderate joy. Electra held her hands tight together and looked at him. Rose got half out of her chair. In those days when she thought

continually of her own affairs, it seemed to her that nothing could be so important unless it had to do with her. Billy Stark by the door waited, and it was Madam Fulton who spoke, irritated at the vague excitement.

"For heaven's sake, Peter, what's the matter?"

He addressed himself at once to Rose.

"I have heard from him. I have had a letter."

"From him!" She was out of her chair and facing him. For the moment, with that hidden communion with Osmond hot in her heart and sharp in her ears, she had almost cried, "Osmond!" But he went on,--

"I have heard from your father."

Instantly the blood was out of her face. Billy Stark wondered at the aging grayness, and reflected curiously that youth is not only a question of flesh and blood but of the merry soul. Peter could not contain his pleasure. He cried out irrepressibly, like the herald beside himself with news,--

"He is coming here!"

"Here!" Rose made one step to lay her hand upon a little cabinet, and stood supporting herself. Electra, who caught the movement, looked at her curiously. Her own enormous interest in Peter's news seemed to merge itself in watchful comment on the other girl.

"Here!" Peter was answering. "To America! He writes me the most stirring letter. I didn't think I knew him so well. He has so many friends here, he says, friends he never saw. He wants to meet them. The best of it is, he's coming here--to us."

"Here!" repeated Rose again. She seemed to be sinking into herself, but the tense hand upon the cabinet kept her firm.

Peter looked at her with eyes of innocent delight.

"Here, to us. I told him if he ever came over, we should grab him before anybody got a hand on him. I've told grannie. She's delighted."

"You told him that!" Her voice held a reproach so piercing that they were all staring at her in wonder. She looked like a woman suffering some anguish too fierce, for the moment, to be stilled. "You've been writing him!"

"Of course," said Peter. "Why, of course, I wrote him. I sent him word when we first got here, to tell him you were well."

"How could you! Oh, how could you!"

At her tone, the inexplicable reproach of it, he lost his gay assurance. Peter forgot the others. There was nobody in the room, to his eager consciousness, but Rose and his erring self; for somehow, most innocently, he had offended her. He took a step toward her, his boyish face all melted into contrition. There might have been tears in his eyes, they were so soft.

"Sit down," he implored her. "Rose! What have I done?"

It was like a sorry child asking pardon. Electra gave him a quick look, and then went on watching. At the tone Rose also was recalled. She shook herself a little, as if she threw off dreams. Her hand upon the cabinet relaxed. Her face softened, the pose of her body yielded, she seemed almost, by some power of the will, to bring new color into her cheeks. Peter had drawn forward her chair, and she took it smilingly.

"I'm not accustomed to long-lost fathers appearing unannounced," she said whimsically. "Dear me! What if he brings me a Paris gown!"

But Peter was standing before her, still with an air of deep solicitude.

"It was a shock, wasn't it?" he kept repeating. "What a duffer I am!"

"It was a shock," said Electra, with an incisive confirmation. "Mayn't I get you something? A glass of wine?"

Rose looked at her quite pleasantly before Peter had time to begin his persuasive recommendation that she should spare herself.

"Let me take you home," he was urging.

It was as if Rose had been drawing draughts from some deep reservoir, and now she had enough to carry her on to

victory.

"No, no, Peter," she denied him. "I won't go home. Thank you, Electra,"--a delicate frown wrinkled Electra's brows. The girl had never used her familiar name before--"thank you, I won't have any wine. Well, my father is coming. Let's hope he won't turn the country upside down, and keep the trains from running. Get in your supplies, all of you. He may instigate a strike, and if the larder isn't full, you'll starve."

"Stop the trains?" repeated Electra, who was not imaginative. "Why should he stop the trains?"

"Ah, Miss Fulton, you don't know my father," Rose answered gayly. She had seen that tiny frown punctuating her first familiarity, and took warning by it. "Don't you know how, in great gardens, you can take a key and turn on the fountains? Well, my father can turn on strikes in the same manner. He has the key in his pocket."

Electra warmed, in spite of herself.

"I should like"--she hesitated.

"You'd like to see him do it? You may. Perhaps you will. We'll sit in a circle and point our thumbs down and all the bloated capitalists shall go in and be killed." She was talking, at random, out of a tension she might not explain. Billy Stark, the coolest of them, saw that Madam Fulton had some vague inkling of it. Billy, as usual, began talking, but Rose had risen. Having proved her composure, she was going. She listened to Billy with smiling interest, and then when he had finished, humorously and inconsequently, nodded concurrence at him and said good-by. She had a few pretty words for Madam Fulton, a gracious look for Electra, and she was gone, Peter beside her. Billy Stark followed and stayed on the veranda with his cigar. But Electra remained facing her grandmother. She looked at her, not so much in triumph as with a fixed determination. Suddenly Madam Fulton became aware of her glance and answered it irritably.

"For mercy's sake, Electra, what is it?"

Then Electra spoke, turning away, as if the smouldering satisfaction of her tone must not betray itself in her face.

"Do you realize what this means?"

"What what means?"

"She is terrified at his coming--Markham MacLeod's."

"Well, you don't know Markham MacLeod. Perhaps if you did, you'd be terrified yourself."

"But his daughter, grandmother, a girl who calls herself his daughter!"

Madam Fulton stared.

"Don't you believe that either?" she inquired. "Don't you believe she is his daughter?"

"Not for a moment." Electra had turned and was walking toward the door, all her white draperies contributing to the purity of her aspect.

Madam Fulton continued, in the same inadequacy of amaze,--

"But Peter knows it. He knew them together."

"Peter knew her with Tom," said Electra conclusively. "One proof is worth as much as the other."

At the door she turned, almost a beseeching look upon her face, as she remembered another shock that had been dealt her.

"Grandmother!" she said.

"Well!"

"You spoke of Mr. Stark--"

The old lady's thought went traveling back. Then her face lighted.

"Oh," she said. "Yes, I know. I'm engaged to Billy."

"Grandmother--" Electra blushed a little, painfully--"You can't mean--grandmother, are you going to marry him?"

Madam Fulton laid her head back upon the small silk pillow of her chair. She never owned to it, but sometimes the dull

hour after luncheon brought with it a drowsiness she was ceasing to combat. She smiled at Electra, who seemed very far away from her through the veil of that approaching slumber and through the years that separated them.

"We shan't marry at once, Electra," she said, dropping off while the girl looked at her. "Not at once. I expect to have a good many little affairs before I settle down."

XI

On the way back to the house, Peter kept looking solicitously at Rose, breaking now and then into quick regrets.

"What have I done?" he asked her, in his impetuous stammer. "Shouldn't I have written to your father? Rose, what have I done?"

She seemed not to hear him. Her face had a strained expression, the old look he remembered from the days of Tom's illness and her not quite natural grief. Then she had never given way to the irrepressible warmth of sorrow, like a loving wife. She had seemed to harden herself, and that he accounted for by his knowledge of Tom's hideous past. The woman had known him, Peter reflected, from illuminating intercourse, and his death meant chiefly the turning of a blotted page. But now! over her bloom of youth was the same shadowing veil. She was not so much a woman moved by strong emotion as made desperate through hidden causes. Still he besought her to forgive him, finally to look at him. Then she wakened.

"It's all right, Peter," she said absently. "It had to be."

But still he saw no reason for her blight and pain. It was not merely incredible, it was impossible that any one should shrink because Markham MacLeod was coming. At the door she did look at him. He was shocked at the drooping sadness of her face. Yet she was smiling.

"Don't bother, Peter," she said. "You've done nothing wrong, nothing whatever."

Then she went up the stairs, and Peter, after watching the last glimmer of her dress, strode away into the orchard and threw himself on the grass. Thoughts not formulated, emotions one yeast of unrest went surging through him, until he felt himself a riot of forces he could not control. It was youth that moved him, his own ungoverned youth, but it seemed to him life, and that all life was like it. Peter thought he had experienced enormously because he had lived in Paris and painted pictures. Yet he had never governed his course of being. It had been done for him. The greatest impression it had made on him thus far was of the extreme richness of things. There was so much of everything! He was young. There was a great deal of time, and if he did not paint his pictures this year, he could do it next. There were infinite possibilities. He had ease and talent and power. He had, even so far, won laurels enough to be a little careless of them. Since he had by the happy pains of art got so much out of life, he made no doubt that by superlative efforts, which he meant to make in that divine future where the sun was always shining, he should set all the rivers afire. There was money enough, too. He had never lacked it, thanks to old Osmond's thrift, Osmond who did not need it himself in the ordinary ways of man. He found such pure fun in the pleasures money bought that there was a separate luxury in giving it up, turning it in to the sum of things, and living straitly that labor might take some ease.

And here he lay on the grass, youth seething within him and pointing like a drunken guide, a vine-crowned reveler, to a myriad paths, all wonderful. His mind wandered to Rose and settled there in a delighted acquiescence. He had never before given himself wholly up to her spell, but now, whether the summer day beguiled him, or whether her mysterious trouble moved him, he thought of her until they seemed to be alone together on the earth,—and that was happiness. Beauty! that was what she meant to him, he told himself when thought was at last uppermost, and not mere passionate feeling. She was delight and harmony, and allegiance to her was like worship of the world.

When he got out of his dream and went in to dinner with the noon sun upon his burning face, she was on the veranda with grannie, a little pale still, but sweet and responsive in the quiet ways she had for every day. Peter, looking at her, felt the sun go out of his blood, and the mad worship of that hour in the orchard seemed like a past bacchanal rout and triumph when the worshipers go home to feed the flocks. His will, recalled, took him by swift revulsion to Electra, but it could not make the journey welcome. She seemed to be far away on some barren plain at the top of climbing. Rose, too, was far away, but the mountain where she lived was full of springs and blossomy slopes, and at the top the muses and the graces danced and laughed. There were flying feet always, the gleam of draperies, the fall of melody,—always pleasures and the hint of pleasures higher still,—and echoes from old joys tasted by gods and nymphs in the childhood of the world. The way there, too, was hard, but what would the path matter to such blisses of the mind and soul? In his daze he became aware that grannie was looking at him kindly.

"I guess you've been asleep," said she.

"He's been dreaming, too," said Rose, in her intimate kindness, always the same to him as if he were a boy with whom she had a tender and confident relation.

Peter rubbed his eyes.

"I got lost," he said ruefully. "I went up on the mountain and got lost."

"I guess you dreamed it," said grannie. "Come, let's have our dinner;" and they went in together, both the young things helping her.

Peter reflected that Rose had not even heard what he said. She did not care what the mountain was, or whether he was lost. But at the table, while grannie talked about gardening and the things Osmond meant to do another year, and Rose glanced up with involuntary question in her eyes whenever Osmond's name was mentioned, he seemed to have the vision of the mountain again before him and to hear the laughter and the sound of dancing feet. The picture, little by little, faded and would not be recalled, and by afternoon it had quite gone. Sobered, his feet on the earth again, he went away in the early evening, to see Electra.

Rose waited until the dark had really fallen and evening sounds had begun. Then she stole out of the house and, a black cloak about her, this time, went across the fields to the oak tree. At a little distance from it she paused, her heart too imperious to let her speak and find out whether he was there. But when she was about to venture it, a voice came from under the tree.

"Don't stay there, playmate. Come into the house."

Then she went on.

"Where are you?" she asked. There was an eloquent quiver in her voice.

"Never mind. I'm in the house. Stop where you are. There's a little throne. I made it for you."

She had her hand on the back of a rough chair. At once she seated herself.

"I never heard of a throne in a playhouse," she said, with that new merriment he made for her.

"You never saw a playhouse just like this. That's a beautiful throne. It fits together like a chair. It's here in the playhouse by night, but before daylight I draw it up into the tree and hide it."

"What if somebody finds it?"

"They'll think it's a chair."

"What if they break it?"

"That's easy. We'll make another. There's nothing so easy as to make a throne for a playhouse, if you know the way. Well, playmate, how have you been, all this long time?"

When she came across the field she had meant to tell him how sad she was, how perplexed, how incapable of meeting the ills confronting her. But immediately it became unnecessary, and she only laughed and said,--

"It hasn't been a long time at all."

"Hasn't it? Oh, I thought it had!"

"Have you been here every night?"

"Every night."

"But it rained."

"I know it, outside. It doesn't rain in a playhouse."

"Did you truly come?"

"Of course. What did I tell you? I said 'every night.'"

"Did you have an umbrella?"

"An umbrella in a playhouse? You make me laugh."

"You must have got wet through."

"Not always. Sometimes I climbed up in the branches--in the roof, I mean. You're eclipsed to-night, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"That dark cloak. The other night you were a white goddess sitting there in the moonlight. You were terribly beautiful then. It's almost a shame to be so beautiful. This is better. I rather like the cloak. You're nothing but a voice to-night, coming out of the dark."

Immediately she had a curious jealousy of the white dress that made her beautiful to him when he did not really know her face.

"You have never seen me," she said involuntarily.

"Oh yes, I have. In the shack, that night. Then the day you came. I saw you driving by."

"Where were you?"

"In the yard looking at some grafted trees. Peter was late from the train. I got impatient, so I went round fussing over the trees, to keep myself busy. Then you came up the drive, and I saw you and retreated in good order."

"You needn't have hated me so. You hadn't really seen me."

"I saw enough. I saw your cheek and one ear and the color of your hair. Take care, playmate, you mustn't do that."

"What?"

"You mustn't say I hated you. You know it wasn't hate."

Some daring prompted her to ask, "What was it, then?" but she folded her hands and crossed her feet in great contentment and was still.

"Tell me things," she heard him saying.

"What things? About the house up there? About grannie? About Peter?"

"No, no. I know all about grannie and Peter. Tell me things I never could know unless we were here in the playhouse, in the dark."

Her mind went off, at that, to the wonder of it. She was here in strange circumstances, and of all the occurrences of her life, it seemed the most natural. Immediately she had the warmest curiosity, the desire that he should talk inordinately and tell her all the things he had done to-day, yesterday, all the days.

"You tell," she said. "Begin at the beginning, and tell me about your life."

"Why, playmate!" His voice had even a sorrowful reproach. "There's nothing in it. Nothing at all. I have only dug in the ground and made things grow."

"What people have you known?"

"Grannie."

"She isn't people."

"She's my people. She's all there is, except Peter, and he hasn't been here."

Something like jealousy possessed her. She was stung by her own ignorance.

"But there are lots of years when we didn't meet," she said.

"Lots of them. But I don't care anything about them. I told you so the other night."

"Don't you care about mine?"

"Not a bit."

She was lightheaded with the joy of it. There were things she need not tell him.

"Not the years before we met?" Then because she was a woman, she had to spoil the cup. "Nor the years after I go

away?"

"No, not the years when you've gone away. You can't take this night with you, nor the other night."

He had hurt her.

"That's enough, then--a memory."

Osmond laughed a little. It was a tender sound, as if he might scold her, but not meaning it.

"You mustn't be naughty," he said. "There's nothing naughtier in a playhouse than saying what isn't true. You know if you go away you'll come back again. You can't help it. It may be a long time first. You were twenty-five years in coming this time. But you'll have to come. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes," she said gravely, "I know that." Then the memory of her wandering life and the sore straits of it voiced itself in one cry, "I don't want to go. I want to stay."

"Stay, dear playmate," said the other voice. "There never will be a night when I'm not here. Is the playhouse key in your hand, all tight and warm? I wear mine round my neck. We shan't lose them."

Immediately she felt that she must tell him her new trouble.

"My father is coming here," she said, in a low tone.

"Ah!" he answered quickly. "You won't like that."

"How do you know?"

"From what you said the other night. You don't like him."

"Is it dreadful to you, if I don't like my father?"

She put it anxiously, with timidity, and he answered,--

"It's inevitable. He hasn't treated you well."

She was staring at him through the darkness, though she could see nothing.

"You are a wizard," she said, "a wizard. Why do you say he has not treated me well?"

"Because I see how you hate him. You would never hate without reason. You are all gentleness. You know you are. You'd go on your knees to the man that was your father, and beg him to be good enough so you could love him. And if you couldn't--George! that settles him. Why, playmate, you're not crying!"

She was crying softly to herself. But for a little unconsidered sniff he need not have known it.

"I like to cry," she said, in a moment. "I like to cry--like this."

"It's awful," said the other voice, apparently to itself, "to make you cry and not know how to stop you. Don't do it, playmate!"

She laughed then.

"I won't cry," she promised. "But if you knew how pleasant it is when it only means somebody understands and likes you just as well--"

"Better," said the voice. "I always like you better. Whatever you do, that's the effect it has. Now let's talk about your father. We can't stop his coming?"

"No. Nobody ever stopped him yet in anything."

"Then what can we do to him after he gets here?"

"That's what I am trying to think. Sometimes I'm afraid I must run away--before he comes."

"Yes, playmate, if you think so." There was something sharp in the tone: a quick hurt, a premonition of pain, and it was soothing to her.

"But I've so little money." She said that to herself, and his answer shocked her.

"There's money, if that's all. I'll bury it here under a stone, and you shall find it."

"No! no! no! How could you! oh, how could you!"

The voice was hurt indeed now, and willing to be thought so.

"Why, playmate, is that so dreadful? Money's the least important thing there is."

"It is important," said she broodingly. "It seems to me all my miseries, my disgraces have come from that."

"You don't want to tell me about them? You don't think it would make them better?"

"You said you didn't care. You said what we had lived through--what I had--these twenty-five years, made no difference!"

"Not to me. But when it comes to you, why, maybe I could help you."

She thought a while and then answered definitely and coldly,--

"No, I can't do it. I should have to tell--too many things."

"Then we won't think of it," said the voice. "Only you must remember, there's money and there's--Peter to take you off and hide you somewhere. You can trust Peter." Again he seemed ready to break their companionship, and she wondered miserably.

"You seem to think of nothing but my going away."

"I must think of it. Nothing is more likely."

"You don't seem to care!"

"Playmate!" Again the voice reproached her.

"Well!"

"There's but one thing I think of--really. To give you a little bit of happiness while you are here. After that--well, you can make the picture for yourself. I shall come to the playhouse every night--alone."

The one thing perhaps that had been the strongest in guiding her romantic youth had been eternal faithfulness. Her heart beat at the word "forever." Now her gratitude outran his calm.

"Will you do it?" she cried.

"Shall I promise?"

"No! no! I would not have you do it really--only want to do it. Do you think you will remember--to want to come?"

He said the words after her, so slowly that they seemed to come from lips set with some stern emotion.

"I shall remember. I shall want to come."

She rose.

"Good-night," she said. "Shake hands?"

"No," said the voice, "not that. In playhouses you can't shake hands. Good-night--dear lady."

She turned away, and then, because she was silent the voice called after her,--

"Playmate!"

"Yes."

"I shall follow you to the wall and watch you home. You're not afraid?"

"No, I'm not afraid."

"And you're almost happy?"

At the anxiety in his voice, she was unreasonably happy.

"Yes," she called back. "Good-night."

"Got the key safe?"

"All safe. Good-night."

"God bless you, playmate." That was what she thought she heard.

XII

Madam Fulton was at the library table, considering her morning mail, and Billy Stark sat on the veranda just outside the window where she could call to him and be cheerfully answered. Presently Electra came in, a book, a pencil, and some slips of paper in her hand. There was intense consideration on her brow. She had on, her grandmother thought with discouragement, her clubwoman's face. Billy Stark, seeing her, got up and with his cigar and his newspaper wandered away. He had some compassion for Electra and her temperament, though not for that could he abstain from the little observances due his engagement to Madam Fulton. He had a way of bringing in a flower from the garden and presenting it to the old lady with an exaggerated significance. Electra always winced, but Madam Fulton was delighted. He called her "Florrie," prettily, and "Florrie, dear." Again Electra shrank, and then he took the wrinkled hand. One day Madam Fulton looked up at him with a droll mischief in her eyes.

"I suppose it's an awful travesty, isn't it, Billy?"

"Not for me," said Billy loyally. "Can't I be in love with a woman at the end of fifty years? I should smile."

"It's great fun," she owned. Then more than half in earnest, "Billy, do you suppose I shall go to hell?"

This morning Electra had found something to puzzle her.

"I've been working on your book a little, grandmother," she began.

"What book? My soul and body!" The old lady saw the cover and laid down her pen. "That's my 'Recollections.' What are you doing with that?"

"They are extremely interesting," said Electra absorbedly. She sat down and laid her notes aside, to run over a doubtful page. "We are going to have an inquiry meeting on it."

"We? Who?"

"The club. Everybody was deeply disappointed because you've refused to say anything; but it occurred to us we might give an afternoon to classifying data in it, naming people you just refer to, you know. I am doing the Brook Farm section."

Madam Fulton sank back in her chair and looked despairingly from the window for Billy Stark.

"I shall never," she said, "hear the last of that book!"

"Why should you wish to hear the last of it?" asked Electra. "It is a very valuable book. It would be more so if you would only be frank about it. But I can understand that. I told the club it was your extreme delicacy. You simply couldn't mention names."

"No, I couldn't," murmured the old lady. "I couldn't."

"But here is something, grandmother. You must help me out here. Here where you talk about the crazy philanthropist who had the colonization scheme--not Liberia--no, that's farther on--Well, you say he came to grandfather and asked him to give something to the fund." She was regarding Madam Fulton with clear eyes of interrogation.

"No, no, I don't remember," said the old lady impatiently. "Well, go on."

"You don't remember?"

"Yes, yes, of course I remember, in a way. But go on, Electra."

"Well, then the philanthropist asked him to be one of the five men who would guarantee a certain sum at their death, and grandfather was indignant and said, 'Charity begins at home.' Listen." She found her page and read, "I shall assuredly leave every inch of ground and every cent I possess to my wife, and that, not because she is an advanced woman but because she is not."

"Of course!" corroborated the old lady. "Precisely. There's a slap at suffrage. That's what I mean it for, and you can tell 'em so."

Electra did not stop to register her pain at that. She held up one hand to enjoin attention.

"But listen, grandmother. You don't see the bearing of it yet. That was five years after grandfather made his will, leaving this place away from you."

"Well, what of it?"

"Five years after, grandmother! And here, by his expressed intention, he meant to leave it to you--not to his son, but you. Do you see what that implies?"

"I don't know what it implies," said the old lady, "but I know I shall fly all to pieces in about two minutes if you don't stop winding me up and asking me questions."

Electra answered quite solemnly,--

"It means, grandmother, that legally I inherited this place. Ethically it belongs to you. My grandfather meant to make another will. Here is his expressed intention. He neglected doing it, as people are always neglecting things that may be done at any time. It only remains for me to make it over to you."

Madam Fulton lay back in her chair for a moment and stared. She seemed incapable of measuring the irony she felt. But Electra went quietly on,--

"There is simply nothing else for me to do, and I shall do it."

Madam Fulton gasped a little and then gave up speaking. Again she glanced at the window and wished for Billy Stark. Electra was observing her compassionately.

"It excites you, doesn't it?" she was saying. "I don't wonder."

Now the old lady found her tongue, but only to murmur,--

"I can't even laugh. It's too funny; it's too awfully funny."

"Let me get you a little wine." Electra had put her papers together and now she rose.

Then Madam Fulton found her strength.

"Sit down, Electra," she said. "Why, child, you don't realize--I don't know what you'd do if you did--you don't realize I put that in there by the merest impulse."

"Of course," said Electra kindly. "I understand that. You never dreamed of its having any bearing on things as they are now, they have gone on in this way so long. But it would be shocking to me, shocking, to seem to own this house when it is yours--ethically."

"Don't say ethically. I can't stand it. There, Electra! you're a good girl. I know that. But you're conscience gone mad. You've read George Eliot till you're not comfortable unless you're renouncing something. Take things a little more lightly. You can if you give your mind to it. Now this--this is nothing but a joke. You have my word for it."

"It isn't a joke," said Electra firmly, "when grandfather could write that over his own signature and send it to a well-known person. How did it come back into your hands, grandmother?"

But Madam Fulton looked at her, wondering what asylum Electra would put her in, if she knew the truth. She essayed a miserable gayety.

"Very well, Electra," she smiled, "call it so, if you like, but we won't say any more about it. I can't have houses made over to me. I may totter into the grave to-morrow."

Electra's eyes went involuntarily to the garden where Billy Stark was placidly walking up and down, smoking his cigar and stopping now and then to inspect a flower. The old lady interpreted the look.

"I know, I know," she said wickedly; "but that's nothing to do with it. Besides, if I marry Billy Stark, I shall go to London to live. What do I want of houses? Let things be as they are, Electra. You keep the house in your hands and let me visit you, just as I do now. It's all one."

Electra spoke with an unmoved firmness. Her face had the clarity of a great and fixed resolve.

"The house is yours; not legally, I own, but--"

"Don't you say ethically again, Electra," said the old lady. "I told you I couldn't bear it."

She sank back still further into her chair and glared. At last Madam Fulton was afraid of her own emotions. Such amazement possessed her at the foolish irony of things, such desire of laughter, that she dared not yield lest her frail body could not bear the storm. Man's laughter, she realized, shout upon shout of robust roaring, was not too heroic for this folly. Electra was speaking:--

"I insist upon the truth from others," she said, still from a basic resolution that seemed invulnerable. "I must demand it from myself."

"The truth, Electra!" groaned Madam Fulton. "You don't tell the truth."

"I don't tell the truth?"

"You don't know anything about it. You've thought about it so much that now you only tell horrible facts."

This Electra could not fathom, but it was evident that she was putting it away in her consciousness for a thoughtful moment. Madam Fulton was rallying. She felt a little stronger, and she knew she was mentally more vigorous than her young antagonist. It was only in an unchanging will that Electra distanced her.

"Electra," she said, "you've got to be awfully careful of yourself." There was a wistful kindness in her voice. It was as if she spoke to one whom she wished to regard leniently, though she might in reality shower her with that elfin raillery which was the outcome of her own inquietude.

Electra opened her eyes in a candid wonder.

"Careful of myself?" she repeated. "Why, grandmother?"

"You've trained so hard, child. You've trained down to a point where it's dangerous for you to try to live."

"Trained down, grandmother? I am very well."

"I don't mean your body. I mean, you've thought of yourself and your virtues and your tendencies, and tested yourself with tubes and examined yourself under a glass until you're nothing but a bundle of self-conscious virtues. Why, it would be better for you if you were a care-free spontaneous murderess. You'd be less dangerous."

"Suppose we don't talk about it any more," said Electra, in that soothing accent suited to age.

"But I've got to talk about it. I never have done any particular duty by you, but I suppose the duty's there. I've got to tell you when you sail into dangerous latitudes. You mark my words, Electra, assure as you sit there, you've trained so hard that there's got to be a reaction. Some day you'll fly all to pieces and make an idiot of yourself."

Electra had risen.

"Excuse me for a moment, grandmother," she said. "I must get you a glass of wine."

Madam Fulton, too, got up and rested one hand upon the table.

"If you leave the room before I've finished," she cried, "I'll scream it after you." A small red spot had come upon each cheek. She looked like a fairy god-mother, a pinpoint of fury in the eye. "I insist upon your listening. God Almighty meant you for a handsome, well-behaved woman. You're not clever. There's no need of your being. But you've made yourself so intelligent that you're as dull as death. You've cultivated your talents till you've snapped them all in two. You've tried so hard to be a model of conduct that you're a horror, a positive horror. And you mark my words, the reaction will come and you'll do something so idiotic that you won't know yourself. And then when you're disgraced and humble, then will be the time I shall begin to like you."

She was shaking all over, and Electra looked at her in great alarm. She dared not speak lest the paroxysm should come again. A little new gleam sprang into Madam Fulton's eyes. At last she realized that she had, though by ignoble means, quite terrified her granddaughter. That one humorous certainty was enough, for the time, to mitigate her plight. She drew a quick breath, and shrugged her shoulders.

"There!" said she. "It's over. I don't know when I've had such a satisfying time. Run along, Electra. It won't happen again to-day." Then it occurred to her that she was foregoing an advantage, and she added shrewdly, "Though it might at any minute. But if you bring me anything to take, anything quieting or restorative, I'll throw it out of the window."

Electra, relieved slightly at the lulling of the storm, looked delicately away from her and out at the peaceful lawn. She would have been sorry to see again the red of anger in those aged cheeks. Her gaze hung arrested. Inexplicable emotion came into her face. She looked incredulous of what so fired her. Madam Fulton sat down again, breathing relief at the relaxing of her inward tension, and she too looked from the window. A man, very tall and broad, even majestic in his bearing, stood talking with Billy Stark. Billy, with all his air of breeding and general adaptability, looked like comedy in comparison.

"Grandmother!" Electra spoke with a rapid emphasis, "do you know who that is?"

"No, I'm sure I don't."

"It is Markham MacLeod."

"What makes you think that?"

"I know him. I know his picture. I know that bust of him. He is here before Peter expected."

Life and color came into her face. She laid down her book and papers, and went with a sweeping haste to the hall-door. Billy was coming with the stranger up the path, and MacLeod, glancing at the girl's waiting figure, took off his hat and looked at her responsively. Electra's heart was beating as she had never felt it beat before. Greatness was coming to her threshold, and it looked its majesty. MacLeod had a tremendous dignity of bearing added to the gifts nature had endowed him with at the start. He was a giant with the suppleness of the dancer and athlete. His strong profile had beauty, his florid skin was tanned by the sea, his blue eyes were smiling at Electra, and in spite of the whiteness of his thick hair he did not seem to her old. She would have said he had the dower of being perennially young. Meantime Billy Stark, who had known him at once from his portraits, had named him to her, and the great man had taken her hand. He had explained that he was in advance of his time, that he had driven to Peter's and had been told that the young man was probably here. So he had strolled over to find him.

"He is not here," said Electra. "Please come in." She was breathless with the excitement of such notability under her roof. She led the way to the sitting-room, judging hastily that grandmother was too shaken by her mysterious attack to see a stranger, and also even tremblingly anxious to speak with him before any one could share the charm. MacLeod followed her, offering commonplaces in a rich voice that made them memorable, and Billy stayed behind to throw away his cigar, and debate for an instant whether he need go in. Then he heard a voice from the library softly calling him.

"Billy, I want you."

He stepped in through the long window, and there was Madam Fulton, half laughing, half crying, and shaking all over. He ran to her in affectionate alarm.

"Billy," said she, "I've had a temper fit."

Billy put his arm about her and took her to the sofa. There he sat down beside her, and she dropped her head on his shoulder.

"Shoulders are still very strengthening, Billy," said she, laughing more than she cried, "even at our age."

"They're something to lean on," said Billy. "There! there, dear! there!"

Presently she laughed altogether, with no admixture of tears, and Billy got out his handkerchief and wiped her face. But she still shook, from time to time, and he was troubled for her.

"Now," she said presently, withdrawing from him and patting her white hair, "Now I think we've weathered it."

"What was it?" ventured Billy.

"I can't tell you now. I might die a-laughing. But I will." She rested her hand on his shoulder a moment before she went away. "I'll tell you what it is, Billy," she said, "the beauty of you is you're so human. You're neither good nor bad. You're just human."

XIII

Markham Macleod's great advantage, after that of his wonderful physique, was his humility. A carping humorist, who saw him dispassionately, the more so that women were devoted to "the chief," said that humility was his long suit.

There was his splendid body, instinct with a magnetic charm. He was born, charlatans told him, to be a healer. But he deprecated his own gifts. With a robust humor he disclaimed whatever he had done, and listened to other voices, in specious courtesy. Now, face to face with Electra, he had convinced her in five seconds that it was an illuminating thing to come to America and find her there. This was more than the pliancy of the man of the world. It seemed to her the spontaneous tribute of a sincere and lofty mind. As for her, she was abounding in a tremulous satisfaction.

"You have not been in America for a long time," she was saying.

"Not for years. I have been too busy to come."

"You are needed over there."

She glowed the more, and he looked upon her kindly as a handsome young woman whose enthusiasm became her.

He smiled and shook his head.

"I don't know whether they wanted me so much. I needed them."

"Your brothers, you mean. The units that make your brotherhood."

She was quoting from his last reported speech, and her spirits rose as she felt how glad she was to have been ready. It seemed to her that there were so many things she had to say at once that they would come tumultuously. MacLeod, when his position was assured, was quite willing to let the disciple talk. It was only over ground not yet tilled that his eloquence fell like rain. And Electra, leaning toward him in a brilliant, even a timid expectation, was saying,--

"Tell me about Russia. What do you foresee?"

A reporter had asked him the same question a few hours before, and the answer would be in the evening paper. He smiled at her, and spread out his hands in a disclaiming gesture.

"You know what I foresee. You know what you foresee yourself. It is the same thing."

"Yes," said Electra, "it is the same thing."

But there were times when MacLeod wanted to escape from posturing, even though it brought him adulation.

"I haven't apologized for breaking in on you like this," he said, with his engaging smile. "They told me at Grant's that I should probably find him over here, in the garden. The next house they said. This is the next house?"

"Oh, yes," returned Electra. "He has not been here, but I will send for him. He shall come to luncheon. You must stay."

"Shall I?" He was all good-nature, all readiness and adaptability. Electra excused herself to give the maid an order, and while she stood in the hall, talking to the woman, temptation came upon her. Yet it was not temptation, she told herself. This was the obvious thing to do.

"Tell Mr. Grant I wish him particularly to come to luncheon," she said, "and to bring"--she hesitated at the name and shirked it, "and to bring the young lady,--the lady who is staying there."

Then she returned to MacLeod. But she was not altogether at ease. Electra was accustomed to examine her motives, and she had the disquieting certainty that, this time, though they would do for the literal eye, they had not been entirely pure. Still, was it her fault if Rose, confronted by the newcomer, proved unprepared and showed what was fragile in her testimony? But she was not to be thrown off the scent of public affairs.

"Talk about Russia," she entreated. She had never felt so spontaneously at ease with any one.

MacLeod was used to making that impression, and he smiled on her the more kindly, seeing how the old charm worked.

"I'd rather talk about America," he said, "about this place of yours. It's a bully place."

Electra was devoted to academic language, and to her certainty that all great souls expressed themselves in it. She winced a little but recovered herself when he asked with a new conversational seriousness, "and how is my friend Grant?"

"Well." She found some difficulty in answering more fully, because it somehow became apparent to her that he had not really placed her. Peter was his only clue in the town. It hardly looked as if he expected to find a daughter here.

"Is he painting?" MacLeod went on.

Electra frowned a little. Peter was doing nothing but idling, she suspected, up to yesterday, and then, driving past, she

had caught a glimpse of him in the garden before a canvas and of Rose lying before him in her long chair. That had given her a keener, a more bitter curiosity than she was prepared for in herself. She had shrunk back a little from it, timid before the suspicion that she might like Peter more tempestuously and unreasonably than was consonant with self-mastery. But while these thoughts ran through her head she gazed at MacLeod with her clear eyes and answered,--

"I fancy he looks upon this as his vacation. He must have worked very hard in Paris."

MacLeod entered into that with fluency. Peter must have worked hard, he owned, but that was in the days before they met. When they met, Peter's talent was at its blossoming point. It was more than talent. It was genius, it was so free, so strong, so unconsidered. He implied that Peter had everything that belonged to a fortunate youth.

Electra's eyes glowed. Here was some one to justify her choice. The newspapers had done it, but she had not yet heard Peter's praises from the mouth of man.

"You have had an enormous influence over him," she ventured.

He deprecated that.

"He has an enormous affection for me, if you like," he owned, "but influence! My dear young lady, I couldn't influence a nature like that. I'm nowhere beside it. All I could hope for is that it would think some of the things I think, feel some of the things I feel. Then we could get on together."

Billy Stark, coming in at the door, thought that sounded like poppycock, but Electra knew it was the wisdom of the chosen. She rose and indicated Billy.

"You know Mr. Stark?"

The two men recurred humorously to their meeting in the garden, and owned their willingness to continue the acquaintance. At the moment there were steps and MacLeod turned to see Rose coming into the room. Electra's heart beat thickly. She felt choked by it. And there was, she could not help owning, a distinct drop of disappointment when MacLeod, with an exclamation of delighted wonder, went forward and kissed Rose on the cheek. Then he kept her hand while he gave the other one to Peter, and regarded them both with expansive kindness. Rose was the one who had blenched under the ordeal. Yet she had herself immediately in hand. She let her fingers stay in MacLeod's grasp. She looked at him, not affectionately nor in pride, but with a sad steadfastness, as if he were one of the monumental difficulties of life, not to be ignored. Peter was ecstasy itself.

"How did you get here?" he was insisting. "How did you know I might be over here? You hadn't met Electra."

Then the stranger dropped the hands he held and turned to her.

"I haven't met her yet," he said, with a humorous consideration that stirred her heart. "Is this Electra?" He put out his hand, and she laid hers in the waiting palm. She felt bound to something by the magnetic grasp. The certainty was not weakened by any knowledge that other men and women felt the same.

Madam Fulton came in then. She had removed the traces of past emotion, but with the red still burning in her cheeks she looked very pretty. MacLeod greeted her with an extreme deference, which presently slipped into the ordinary courtesy of man to woman as he found she had no desire to exact any special consideration. They went out to luncheon with that air of accelerated life which contributes to the success of an occasion, and then MacLeod talked. Rose sat silent, looking on with a sad indifference, as at a scene she had witnessed many times before, to no good end, and Madam Fulton listened rather satirically. But Electra and Peter glowed and could hardly eat, and MacLeod addressed himself chiefly to them. Now he did exactly what was expected of him. The brotherhood of man was his theme, and it was no mere effusion of sympathetic propaganda. His memory was his immense storehouse behind emotion, his armory. He could mobilize facts and statistics until the ordinary mind owned itself cowed by them. When they rose from the table, the millennium was imminent, and it had been brought by the sword. At the library door, Peter, beside Electra for an instant, irrepressibly seized her hand, as it hung by her side, and gave it passionate pressure. Instantly she looked at him, responsive. The sympathy they lacked in their personal relation sprang to life under MacLeod's trumpeting. Electra was in a glow, and Peter, with a surprised delight, felt all his old allegiance to his imperial lady.

MacLeod would not sit down.

"I must catch my train," he said.

There was outcry at once from two quarters. He was not to return to the city. He was to stay here, Peter declared. It was absurd, it was unthinkable that he should do anything else. MacLeod took it with a friendly smile and the air of

deprecating such undeserved cordiality; but he looked at Electra, who was frankly beseeching him from brilliant eyes. It was settled finally that he should go back to his hotel for a day or two, see some newspaper men and meet a few public engagements, and then return for a little stay.

"Get your hat," he said to Rose, in affectionate suggestion, "and walk with me to the station."

And as it became apparent that father and daughter had had no time for intimate talk, they were allowed to go away together, Peter following them with impetuous stammering adjurations to MacLeod to rattle through his business and come back. When they were out upon the highroad, MacLeod turned to Rose.

"Well," he said, "you don't look very fit."

Rose had one of her frequent impulses to tell him the crude truth: to say now, "I did until you came." But she answered indifferently,--

"I'm very well."

They walked along in silence for a moment, and she felt the return of old aches, old miseries he always summoned for her. In the first moment of seeing him, she always recurred to the other days when to be with him was to be in heaven. Nobody ever had so blest a time as she in the simple charm of his good-will. No matter what she was doing, for him to call her, to hold out a finger, had been enough. She would forsake the world and run, and she never remembered the world again until he loosed the spell. It was broken now, she thought, effectively, but still at these first moments her heart yearned back to the old playgrounds, the old lure.

"What did she call you," he was asking--"Madam Fulton? Mrs. Tom?"

"Yes," said Rose, with a quiet bitterness, "Mrs. Tom."

"Have they accepted you?"

She raised her eyebrows and looked at him.

"You heard," she answered.

"Extraordinary people! Who is Electra? I couldn't call her anything. Everybody was saying Electra."

"She is Madam Fulton's granddaughter. She and Peter are engaged."

"Ah! I'd forgotten that. I rather fancied it was you--with Peter."

She summoned the resolution to meet him bluntly.

"Don't do that, please. Don't assume anything of the sort about me."

He went on with unbroken good humor. She had never seen him angry, but the possibility of it, some hidden force suspected in him, quelled her, of late, when she considered the likelihood of rousing it.

"No, of course not," he said, with his habitual geniality. "Why aren't you staying with them?"

She temporized, only from the general certainty that it was unsafe for him to know too much.

"Peter asked me to stay there. His grandmother is very kind. I like her."

"Ah! Have these people money?"

"What people?"

"Electra. Tom's family in general."

"I don't know."

"They must have. They have the air. Will they do anything for you?"

Her face contracted. The look of youth had fled and left her haggard.

"I have not accepted anything."

"Have they offered it?"

"No."

"There! you see! No doubt they will."

"Why did you come over here?" she cried irrepressibly.

But he ignored the question.

"The prince is much disturbed about you," he volunteered, throwing it into the talk as if it were of no particular validity, but only interesting as one chose to take it.

"Ah! that's why you came!"

"I saw him two weeks ago, in Milan. He was greatly troubled. I had to own that you had left Paris without seeing me, without even telling me your whereabouts."

"Then--" said Rose.

She knew what else had happened. The prince had urged, "Go over to America. Influence her. Bring her back with you." But this she did not say. The unbroken cordiality of his attitude always made his best defense. If she had ever known harshness from him, she might brave it again. But many forces between them were as yet unmeasured. She did not dare.

"You must remember," he said, with the air of talking over reasonably something to which he was not even persuading her, "the prince is exceptionally placed. He could give you a certain position."

"I have a certain position now. Don't forget that, will you?" She seemed to speak from an extremity of distaste.

"He offers a private marriage. He is not likely to set it aside; the elder line is quite assured, so far as anything can be in this world. Besides"--he looked at her winningly--"you believe in love. He loves you."

"I did believe in it," she said haltingly, as if the words were difficult. "I should find it hard now to tell what I believe."

"Well!" He took off his hat to invite the summer breeze. It stirred the hair above his noble forehead, and Rose, in a sickness at old affection dead, knew, without glancing at him, how he looked, and marveled that any one so admirably made could seem to her so persistently ranged with evil forces. Yet, she reflected, it was only because he arrogated power to himself. He put his hands upon the wheels of life and jarred them.

"Well! I believe in it. Isn't that enough for you?"

"Not now, not now!" She had to answer, though it might provoke stern issues. "Once it would have been. There is nothing you could have told me that I would not have believed. But you delivered me over to the snare of the fowler." Grandmother had read those words in her morning chapter, and they had stayed in her ears as meaning precisely this thing. He had known that it was a snare, and he had cast her into it. She turned her moved face upon him. "We mustn't talk about these things. Nobody knows where it will end. And you mustn't talk to me about the prince."

"If it doesn't mean anything to you, wouldn't it move you if I told you it meant something to me?"

"What?"

"It would mean a great deal if you formed an alliance there."

She answered bitterly.

"You are humorous. Alliance! An alliance is for princes. There are other words for these things you propose. I try not to think what they are. I dare say I don't know all of them. But there are words."

"It would make me solid with the prince. He would get several concessions from his brother. They would be slight, but they would mean a great deal to the Brotherhood."

"I see. You would pull a wire or two in Germany. In Russia, too, perhaps? You think you would disarm suspicion, if the prince stood by you. Maybe you'd get into Russia, even. Is that it? It would be dramatic to get into Russia after you'd been warned."

She was following his mind along, as she often did, creeping with doubtful steps where he had taken wing. "But still!" She looked at him, smiling rather wistfully. "Still, you wouldn't throw me to the wolves for that, would you?"

He met her look with one as candid, and little as she believed in the accompanying smile, she felt her heart warmed by it. Now he was gazing about him at the summer prospect.

"I am delighted to find you here," he volunteered. "It's a change. It will do you good--do us both good."

"Are you quite well?" She hesitated slightly in asking that, but he turned upon her as if the words had given him a shock of terror or dismay. In her surprise she even fancied he paled a little.

"What makes you ask that?" he cried. "What do you mean by it?"

"Why, I don't know! You look well, but not quite yourself, perhaps,--somehow different."

MacLeod took off his hat and wiped his forehead beaded with a moisture come on it, he knew, at that moment.

"I should like to ask," he said peevishly, "what in the devil you mean. Have you--heard anything?"

"No," said Rose, entirely amazed. "What is there to hear?"

They had reached the station, and she led him to the bench under a tree where lovers and their lasses assembled at dusk to see the train come in. She sat down, dispirited and still wondering, and he stood before her, all strength, now, and candor, as if he had thrown off his dubious mood and resolved to be himself.

"About the prince," he was saying. "I want you to think of him. He would give you experiences such as I never could. You'd live on velvet. You'd have art, music, a thousand things. He likes your voice. He'd insist on fostering that. You would meet men of rank, men of note--"

She interrupted him.

"Men of rank! I've no doubt of it. How about their wives?"

He shook his head. A look of what seemed noble pain was on his face, impatience at the shallowness of things.

"Rose," he said, "you know how little I respect society as it is. Take out of it what good you can, the play of emotion, the charm, the inspiration. Don't undervalue the structure, my dear. Live, in spite of it."

She looked at him wearily and thought how handsome he was, and that these were platitudes. Then his train came, and he left her with a benedictory grace, standing on the step hat in hand, majestic in his courtesy. But as she watched him, suddenly, an instant before the train was starting she saw him yield and sway. He leaned upon the rail with both hands and then, as if by a quick decision, stepped to the platform again. She hurried to him, and found him with an unfamiliar look on his face. It might have been dread anticipation; it was surely pain.

"What is it?" she asked him. "Tell me."

He did not answer, but involuntarily he stretched out his hand to her.

"Rub it," he said. "Hold it tight. Infernal! oh, infernal!"

As she rubbed the hand he suddenly recovered his old manner. The color came back to his face, and he breathed in a deep relief.

"That's over," he said, almost recklessly, she thought. "Queer how quick it goes!"

"What is it?" She was trembling. It seemed to her that they had each passed through some mysterious crisis.

"Is there another train to town?" he was asking an official, who had kept a curious eye on him. There would be in three minutes, an accommodation crawling after the express he had lost.

"Good-by again," he called to Rose, with a weaker transcript of his usual manner. "I'm to be down in a few days, you know. Good-by."

This time he walked into the car, and she saw him take his seat and lie back against the window-casing. But he recovered himself and smiled, when his eyes met hers. If anything was the matter, she was evidently not to know.

XIV

As the two had walked away, Peter turned to Electra, stammering forth,--

"Isn't he a great old boy?"

He was tremendous, she owned, in language better chosen; and this new community of feeling was restful to her.

"Come out into the garden," he said, and as they went along the path to the grape arbor he took her hand and she left it to him. They seemed restored to close relations, as if MacLeod had wrought some spell upon them. By the time they reached the liquid greenness of the arbor light, Peter was sure he loved her. He could turn to her quite passionately.

"Electra," he said, holding both her hands now, "I've missed you all these days."

She smiled a little and that, with her glowing color, made her splendid.

"You have been here every day," she said, conceding him the grace of having done his utmost.

"Yes, but it hasn't been right. There's been something between us--something unexplained."

She knew, so she reflected, what that was. Rose had been between them. But she listened with an attentive gravity.

"We must go back to Paris," Peter was urging. "I shall work there. We will live simply and turn in everything to the Brotherhood. We must be married--dear." He looked direct and manly, not boyish, now, and she felt a sudden pride in him. "Electra, you'll go with me?"

She withdrew from him and sat down, indicating the other chair.

"Something very queer has happened," she said. "I must tell you about it." It had just come to her again as it had been doing at moments through the absorbing hour at luncheon, that she was in a difficult place with grandmother, and that here was the one creature whom she had the right to count upon. Rapidly she told him the facts of the case, ending with her conclusion,--

"The house belongs to grandmother."

Peter was frowning comically. In his effort to think, he looked as if the sun were in his eyes.

"I don't believe I understand," he said, and again she told him.

"You don't mean you are building all this on a casual sentence in a book?" He frowned the harder.

Electra was breathing pleasure at the beauty of the case.

"It is not a casual sentence," she insisted. "It's an extract from a letter."

Peter had no intimate acquaintance with the business of the world, but he knew its elements. He regarded her with tenderness, as a woman attractively ignorant of harsh details.

"But Electra, dear, that isn't legal. It doesn't have the slightest bearing on what you should give or what she could exact from you--if she were that kind."

"No," she said, "it isn't legal. But it is--ethical." She used the large word with a sense of safety, loving the sound of it and conscious that Peter would not choke her off.

"But it isn't that. You don't know how your grandfather wrote that letter. He may have done it in a fit of temper, or malice, or carelessness, or a dozen things, and forgotten it next day. A letter's the idlest thing on earth. There's no reason for your considering it a minute."

"I am bound to consider it," said Electra. "There it is, in black and white. I shall make over the place to grandmother."

"Well!" Peter felt like whistling, and then unpursed his lips because, according to Electra, whistling was not polite. He had no restrictions relative to her giving away her property; but he felt very seriously that she must not be allowed to indulge herself in any form of insanity, however picturesque. A detail occurred to him, and he said quickly, with a look at her,--

"But Electra, you and Tom inherited this place together."

She knew what was coming and her color deepened. Again Rose had stepped between them, and Electra felt herself back in their old atmosphere of constraint.

"I have inherited it from Tom," she rejoined.

"You ignore his wife?"

Electra was silent for a long time. It was a hard struggle. But she spoke at last and in a tone which made the difficulty of

speech apparent.

"Since Mr. MacLeod has been here--"

"Well?"

"I must recognize her as his daughter."

"Didn't you believe that, Electra? Not even that?"

"I am forced to believe it now. When he comes back, I shall ask him to corroborate her story. If he does--I shall be obliged to--give her what is just."

"Not otherwise, Electra? You believe him."

"I believe him implicitly." Her tone rang out in an astonishing assurance. She might have been pledging fealty to some adored intimate.

"You believe him. You would not believe me?"

She hedged a little here. "You gave me no proof--only the woman's word."

"Would you believe him without proof?"

She was silent, yet she knew she must.

"But," she said, with the haste of finishing an unwelcome subject, "I shall settle the matter as soon as possible after he comes back. If he tells me his daughter was married to my brother, she shall be paid every cent she is entitled to. But she shall not share this house--not an inch of it."

"Why not?"

Electra seemed to be carried on by a wave. Hurt pride found its voice,--all the revulsion she had felt in these days of Peter's divided allegiance.

"The house is ours. It belongs to the family. I shall make it over to grandmother, but not to that girl. She shall never own a timber in it."

Peter spoke involuntarily, with an unpremeditated wonder:--

"What makes you hate her so?"

Tears came slowly into Electra's eyes. They surprised her as much as they did him. She was not used to crying, and she held them from falling, with a proud restraint. Electra felt very lonely at that moment in a world which would not understand. She was upholding truth and justice, and she was accused of mean personal motives. She had proposed a picturesque sacrifice for the sake of abstract right, and she could not be unconscious that the act ought to look rather beautiful. Yet Peter saw no beauty in it, and grandmother had called her a fool. Peter, seeing the tears, was enormously embarrassed by them. He could only kiss her hand in great humility. He, on his part, put justice cheerfully aside.

"How could I?" he murmured, with the contrition of the male who has learned that tears are to be stanchd without delay. "How could I?" But Electra, on her feet, had drawn her hand away from him. She felt only haste, haste to conclude her abnegation, perhaps even to forestall any question of the house by getting the matter out of her hands before MacLeod came back and she had to reckon with his testimony.

"I am not crying," she said proudly. "I must go and talk to grandmother. Promise me this. Don't tell her"--she hesitated.

"Rose?"

"Don't tell her I have spoken of this."

She had gone, and Peter helplessly watched her walking up the path. Then he took his own way home. "My stars!" he muttered from time to time. His chief desire at the moment was to escape from anything so strenuous as Electra's moral life. It made a general and warm-hearted obliquity the only possible condition of conduct in a pretty world. Peter looked round at it admiringly then, as the shadow of Electra's earnestness withdrew into the distance. It was such a darling world, there were such dear shadows and beguiling lights and all things adorable to paint. He cast off the mood that teased him, and walking faster, began to whistle. It seemed to him that there were so many agreeable deeds to do, and so much time to do them in, that he must simply bestir himself to use half the richness of things. But when he got into the garden, the honeysuckle smelled so sweet that he sat down at its foot and breathed it until he went to sleep.

Electra walked into the library, where Madam Fulton sat at her tatting and Billy Stark read aloud to her from an idle book. Electra felt that she could not possibly delay. All her affairs must be settled at once and the ends knit up.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "Grandmother, may I speak to you a moment?"

Madam Fulton laid down her work.

"Is it the same old story?" she inquired.

"Yes, grandmother. I don't feel that I can wait."

"Electra," said the old lady kindly, "I can't listen to you. It's all fudge and nonsense. If we talk about it any more, we shall be insane together. Don't go, Billy."

"I should like to put it before Mr. Stark," said Electra, with her clear gaze upon him, as if she summoned him to some exalted testimony.

Billy stirred uneasily in his chair. He had confided to Florrie the night before that Electra's hypothetical cases made him as nervous as the devil. Madam Fulton cast him a comical look. It had begun to occur to her that a ball, once rolling, is difficult to stop.

"Go ahead, then," she agreed. "I wash my hands of it. Billy, keep a tight grip on yourself. You'll die a-laughing."

Then Electra stated her case; but Billy did not laugh. Like Peter, he looked at her frowningly, and owned he did not understand. Electra stated it again, and this time he repeated the proposition after her. Madam Fulton sat in a composed aloofness and made no comment.

"But, my dear young lady," said Billy Stark, "you quite misunderstand. An extract from a letter has no legal value compared with a document signed and sealed in proper form."

"I know," said Electra, "not legal, but--" She was aware that Madam Fulton's eye was upon her and she dared not finish. "It was at least my grandfather's expressed wish," she concluded firmly. "I shall carry it out."

"But--" Billy sought about for a simile, "my dear child,"--Electra, in the weakness of her lofty reasoning, seemed to him pathetically to be protected,--"don't you see you're putting yourself through all kinds of discomfort for nothing, simply nothing? You've gone and got a big sword--you call it justice--to cut a thread. Why, it's not even that. There's nothing, absolutely nothing there. It's very admirable of you"--Electra's waiting attitude quickened at this--"but it's fantastic."

She spoke decisively.

"It is the thing to do."

Now Madam Fulton entered the field. She looked from one to the other, at Electra with commiseration, at Billy in a community of regret over that young intellect so dethroned.

"Now you see what I told you," she warned them. "Here we are, all crazy together. We've let you say it, and we've added our own brains listening to it for a minute. I'll tell you what, Electra!" She had discovered. "If you're so anxious to get rid of the place, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll buy it."

"Buy it, grandmother? what belongs to you already?"

"Don't say that again. It gives me a ringing in my ears. That's what I'll do. You're going to marry Peter Grant and go abroad. I'll take the place off your hands. I've always wanted it. I've made a shocking sum out of my book, shocking. I can well afford it. There's an offer for you!"

Electra shook her head.

"I couldn't," she said gently. "How could I sell you what is yours already? The letter--"

"The letter!" repeated the old lady, as if it were an imprecation. She looked at Billy. He returned the glance with a despairing immobility. She reflected that the case must be worse even than she had thought, since Billy had not smiled. Electra must be madder than she had imagined, and her own culpability was the greater for weaving such a coil. "Shall I tell her, Billy?" she asked faintly.

He nodded.

"I should," he said commiseratingly, and got up to leave the room. It seemed to Billy this summer that he was constantly trying to escape situations with a delicacy which was more than half cowardice, only to be dragged back

into the arena. The mandate he had expected promptly came.

"Don't go, Billy," cried the old lady. "Sit down." Madam Fulton continued, in a hesitating humility Electra had never seen in her, "Electra, I don't believe you'll quite understand when I tell you there's something queer about the letter. You see there never was any letter. I--made it up."

The boot was on the other foot. All the values of the scene had shifted. Now it was Electra who doubted the general sanity. Electra was smiling at her.

"No, grandmother," she was saying, with a pretty air of chiding, "you mustn't talk that way. You think that convinces me. It's very dear of you, very dear and generous. But I know why you do it."

"Bless my sinful soul!" ejaculated the old lady. "Oh--you tell her, Billy."

Billy shook his head. He was not going to be dragged as far as that. He was sorry for her, but she had had her whistle and she must pay for it. The old lady was beginning again in a weak voice,--

"You see, Electra, that book isn't what you think. It isn't what anybody thinks. I--I made it up."

Electra was about to speak, but her grandmother forestalled her.

"Don't you go and offer me wine. You get it into your head once and for all that I'm telling you a fact and that you've got to believe it. I made up my book of recollections. They're not true, not one of them. As I remember, there isn't one. The letters I wrote myself."

Electra was staring at her in a neutrality which was not even wonder.

Finally she spoke; her awed voice trembled.

"The Brook Farm letters!"

Perhaps it was this reverent hesitation which restored Madam Fulton to something of her wonted state.

"For heaven's sake, Electra," she fulminated, "what is there so sacred about Brook Farm? If anybody is going to make up letters from anywhere, why shouldn't it be from there?"

Electra was looking at Billy Stark as if she bade him save her from these shocks or tell her the whole world was rocking. But Billy twirled his eyeglass, and watched it twirling. Finally he had to meet her eye.

"Yes," he said, with a composure he did not feel, "the book is apparently not quite straight--a kind of joke, in fact."

Electra rose. She looked very thoughtful and also, Madam Fulton thought, with a quaking at her guilty heart, rather terrible. She was pinched at the nostrils and white about the lips.

"What I must do first," she was saying, as if to herself, "is to notify the club we cannot possibly have our inquiry afternoon."

"Notify them!" repeated Madam Fulton, in a spasm of fearful admiration. "Are you going to tell all those women?"

Electra included her in that absent glance. Now that there were things to arrange, dates to cancel, topics to consider, she was on her own ground. She spoke with dignity:--

"I shall most certainly tell nobody. A thing like that had better die as soon as possible. I cannot"--she turned upon her grandmother, a look of passionate interrogation on her face--"I cannot understand you."

Madam Fulton answered humbly, yet with some eagerness, as if Electra might readily be excused from so stiff a task,

"You never would, Electra, not if you lived a hundred years."

Electra was the accuser now, age and kinship quite forgotten.

"Why did you do a thing like that?"

"For fun," said the old lady faintly.

"For fun!" The tree of sin grew and flowered as she thought upon it. "You offered to buy this house with that money, unclean money from the sales of that fraudulent book!"

Madam Fulton turned to Billy Stark with a childlike gesture of real surprise.

"Is it unclean money, Billy?" she asked. "Do you call it that?"

"We mustn't go too far," Billy temporized, with a warning look at Electra.

She was on the way to the door. There she paused.

"I do not fully understand it yet," she was saying. "It is monstrous. I dare say I never shall understand it." Then they heard her rustling up the stairs.

Madam Fulton and her old friend looked at each other. When a door closed overhead, Billy's face relaxed and Madam Fulton put a hand over her lips.

"Billy," said she weakly, "am I so bad?"

"You're a dear, Florrie. Don't you worry."

"But, Billy, is she right?"

"Oh, yes, my dear, she's right."

"I'm a shocking person, then!"

"Yes, you're truly shocking. But you're a dear, Florrie, you're a dear."

XV

And now it was night again and Rose hurried away to the tryst. She made no doubt that she should find him there.

"Playmate!" she called.

"Here," answered the voice. "There's your chair. There's your throne."

She plunged into the thick of the confidence intended for him.

"He has come."

"I know it. Peter told me."

"It's all as bad as I thought. Playmate, I'm afraid I shall have to go away."

"Can't you stand up to it?"

"I don't know. It's pretty bad."

"I guess it will have to come to your telling me about it."

"Yes. You see, the worst of it is, he wants to make me love somebody I can't love."

"Peter?"

"No, no, not Peter. Not nice, like Peter."

"Could you love Peter?"

"Why should you ask me that? Peter belongs to Electra."

"Not so very much. Could you love him if he asked you to?"

"Oh, that's not fair, playmate!"

"Yes, it is, when the night's as dark as this and it's only you and me. Could you love Peter?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I want to know everything about you. Could you love Peter?"

For some reason, she felt constrained to use one of her small obstinacies.

"I couldn't love any man when another woman stood between us."

"That's a good girl. Did you love your husband?"

"My husband!" She choked upon the word. "Tom Fulton! Did you know him?"

"Oh, yes, I knew him."

"Was it likely I loved him?"

He was considering, it seemed.

"Yes," he said then, "it's very likely. Tom was a handsome devil."

"But he was--a devil."

"A woman wouldn't know that, not at first."

"No. I didn't, at first."

"Who is this other man?"

"A prince."

"So you would be a princess."

"No, I should not be a princess." Her voice had a curious sound.

"What has your father to do with it?"

"Everything. The prince can advance him in certain ways. My father plays for high stakes."

"Are you sure you don't want to be a princess?" The voice seemed to coax her. "Even if you do want it very much," it seemed to say, "why not relinquish it and stay here under the tree?"

"No," she said, "I don't want to be a princess, even if I could be. And I don't want anything my father can offer me, or buy for me, or steal for me."

"Then, playmate, when he comes back, you'll have to stand up to him or--cut."

At that moment he saw before him the imagined picture of her face with the tears upon it.

"It isn't easy," she was saying. "If you knew my father, you would see. You can't withstand him, he looks so kind. You can't refuse him, because he seems to want nothing but your good. You can't say you won't have a splendid time with him, because you simply have it."

"Are you sure he is so bad?"

"I am sure," she answered gravely. "He is very bad. And it is not because he wills to be bad. It is because he wills to have power, and as if he were better fitted to have power than almost anybody--except that he is not good. Why, do you know what power he has? He wears a ring, the seal of the Brotherhood. Whatever order is stamped with that seal is carried out, even if it is thousands of miles away. When Ivan Gorof died"--she stopped, shuddering.

"What was that?"

"I can't tell you. It is too dreadful. He withstood my father. And when he was found, they picked up in the chamber a bit of red wax on a shred of paper--there was nothing else--but I know and we all know it was a part of the seal that held the warrant they read to him--the assassins--before he died."

"Did your father sentence him to death?"

"Who else? Sometimes I get thinking about it at night, and then it seems to me as if all the people in the world had been delivered into his hand. That is because I know I have grown to be afraid of him."

"Was he always cruel to you?"

"Oh, never! never in the world! When I was little, I traveled about with him, and I had the best time a child ever had. I was feted, and carried on shoulders, and made much of because I was his daughter. Then I grew up and it all--changed." Her voice fell. She remembered the snare of the fowler, but that she could not tell him.

"Is he unkind to you now?"

"Never! it is unbroken kindness,--a benevolence, shall I call it? But it terrifies me. For under it all is that unbending will. And I keep hardening myself against it, and yet I know the time will come when he will have his way, because he is stronger than I."

"You must not let him be stronger than you. The birch bends, but it can resist."

"You don't know! If he were outwardly cruel, I could defy him. But he is like the sun that nourishes and then burns. He seems to have such life in himself, such great inborn power, no one can resist it. You almost feel as if you were going against natural laws when you go against him; and you know you'll be beaten because the laws are inevitable."

"That wasn't what you said of him that first night down in the shack."

"No! I scoffed at him then a little. He was so far away! Now I have been near him again and I tremble."

"But as you picture him, he's all good, all benevolence. You could convince a man like that."

"Never! He hasn't any soul. He is this great natural force that radiates power."

"Power!" echoed Osmond. "No wonder he's drunk on it. I could go down on my knees and worship it."

"Not such as his!"

"Such as anybody's, so long as it is power."

For the first time she began to comprehend his mortal hunger.

"Don't you go over to him, too," she said jealously. "Peter is under his foot. So is Electra. If you go over, I shall be alone."

"I shall never go anywhere to leave you alone." Then, after a moment, he continued, "So you are not sure whether the prince loves you?"

"He would call it that. It is not that to me."

"Of course he loves you!"

"Don't be too sure, playmate. I know the world. You know your garden."

"Then why does he want you?"

"It's a game. My father wants to buy him. He may want to buy my father. Then maybe he wants the prestige of owning the woman with the most beautiful hair in Europe."

"Is that your hair, playmate?"

"He says so."

"Well, a man might do worse than gamble for a thing like that."

"You amaze me." But he would not continue that, and presently she asked him, "What have you been thinking about lately?"

"About you."

"When?"

"All day long while I was at work, and every night when I sat here and you didn't come."

"Was it a happy thing to do?"

"Very happy."

"Even when I didn't come?"

"Even when you didn't come."

"Then it's just as nice to think about me as to talk to me?"

"Almost!" He said it quite cheerfully, and through her pique she had to laugh.

"What do you think, playmate?"

"I make a world and I put you in it. Then I put myself in, too."

When he spoke like this, simply and even with a gay indifference, she wondered whether the world was a pageant to him, which it cost him no pains to relinquish, and whether, too, though he had great kindness and understanding, deep emotions were forbidden him. At least, since he was impersonal and remote, she could ask him anything.

"What is your world? Is it like this?"

"It isn't my world. It's yours and mine. We go about in it, having a bully time, and nobody looks at us or asks us questions."

"Don't they see us?"

"Oh, yes, I dare say. Only they don't stare after us and say, 'Why do they do thus and so?' They don't even speak of your beautiful hair. I talk about that myself, all the time, and you like to have me. But we should both think it mighty queer if anybody else did."

"Do we speak to the other people?"

"Sometimes. If we want to. If you see a diamond or a sapphire, or I see a new patent weeder, then we say, 'We want to buy that.' But we don't have much time for other folks. We travel a lot. You tell me about pictures and Alps and thrones and principalities, because I don't know much except about grafting trees and sowing seed at the best time. But always we come home here to the plantation because I find that's where I feel most at peace. And you are at peace here, too. I am delighted when I find that out."

"Be delighted now, then. I am at peace here, more than anywhere else."

"And when we are here, we live in our house. At first, I built a large one up there on the hill, and I had you bring over pictures for it from abroad, and I planted trees, and it was very grand. But I wasn't contented there, and you weren't, because of it. You saw at once that my shell had got to fit me, and the plain house did. So I kicked over the big house, and we lived in the old one."

"With grannie?"

"Yes, only I didn't think very much about her. She was always there, I suppose, like the sun through the windows, very kind and warm, and glad we were contented; but it was our house. That's what makes the charm of everything--that it's yours and mine. I couldn't sleep in the house though. It had to be outdoors."

"Did I have my hammock swung in the upper veranda?"

He laughed out delightedly.

"How did you know? Yes, I slept down here or under the fir by the house, but you were afraid of caterpillars and you had to be up there."

"I'm not afraid of anything else," she explained humbly. "Not of bears or anything in the deep woods. But caterpillars crawl so!"

"However, it didn't make any difference where you were, because while we were asleep it was just as it is while we are awake--there is a fine thread that goes from me to you. There might be processions of people between us, chariots and horses and marching armies, but they couldn't break the thread."

"And what do we do all day?"

"Talk. Think. I think to you and you think back to me."

"But we must work. If we don't, you'll get tired of me." She spoke out of sad knowledge.

"Why, playmate!"

The reproach in his voice recalled her, and she was ashamed to find her belief less warm than his.

"Well," he conceded, "maybe we work. I go on grafting and sowing seeds and sending things to market, and you sit on a stone and sing."

"Shall I sing to you now?"

"No, playmate. It makes me sad."

"I could sing happy songs."

"That wouldn't make any difference. When you sing, it wakens something in me, some discontent, some longing bigger than I am, and that's not pleasure. It is pain."

"Are you afraid of pain?"

He waited a long time. Then he asked her,--

"Have you ever known pain?"

"Yes. I thought my mind was going."

"But not pain of your body?"

"Oh, no, not that."

"The pain of the body is something to be afraid of. If we have it once, we cringe when we see it coming. But your singing--can I tell you what it wakens in me? No, for I don't know. Pain, the premonition of pain. Something I must escape."

"Yet I was to sit by and sing to you while you were at work."

"Yes, but that would be when we were quite content." It was the first wistful hint that things were lacking to him. He could not be contented; yet, against reason, his manner told a different, braver story.

"You said," she began, "if armies came between us, they could not break the little thread. Suppose I go away?"

"That wouldn't break it. Don't you suppose my thought can run to London or Rome? It isn't worth much if it can't."

"Suppose I"--she stopped, appalled at herself for the thought, but jealously anxious to be told.

"Suppose you marry the prince? That would be dreadful, because you don't love him. But it wouldn't break the thread. It would muffle it, I guess. We couldn't think back and forth on it. But it would be there."

Immediately it seemed to her that she had something even more precious than she had guessed, something not to be imperiled.

"I must not do anything to muffle it," she said. "Either with the prince--or any one."

"The only thing I'm afraid of," he went on, "is that you won't stand up to your father. Why, you must, playmate, if you feel like that about him."

She answered bitterly.

"I am afraid, I suppose."

Osmond spoke out sharply in the tone of a man who dismisses dreams.

"Don't be afraid. Stand up and fight."

Her pathetic voice recalled him.

"But think! You said you were afraid of pain. You ought to know what fear is."

He answered slowly, and in what seemed almost exaltation,--

"I am afraid of pain; but when the time comes I shan't wait for it. I shall go out to meet it."

"What do you mean?"

He seemed another creature, all steel and fire, not an impersonal thing speaking out of the dark.

"Don't you know we all want something big, something bigger than we are to fight and conquer? Before we leave this earth, we want to make our mark on it, that shall not be washed away."

"Are you ambitious?"

"I don't know. I do know I mean to live--when I am free."

Alarm was quickening in her. He seemed to be withdrawing into dark halls where she could not see to follow. He was building the house of his heart, yet there were apparently other edifices, fortresses or dungeons, it might be, where he walked alone.

"When you are free?" she insisted.

"When Pete has got his gait and I needn't back him. When grannie is dead--dear grannie! Then I shall do my one free act."

She was so shaken that it seemed as if the night itself terrified her, not he alone.

"Not"--she paused, and then whispered it. "Do you mean--to kill yourself?"

He laughed.

"Not on your life! I am going to get all that's coming to me. But I am going to get it in my own particular way."

"I cannot understand you."

"Of course you can't. But remember all of you have something to bring to life. You give as well as take. You have your beauty and your voice. Peter has his brush. Grannie has her mothering gift. That's better than being a queen. There's power in it. Your prince has his inheritance. I have had to look about and choose my gift. I chose it long ago."

"Is it something that makes you happy?"

"It made me wild when I discovered it, because I saw it was mine. Nothing had ever been mine before. As it comes nearer and nearer, it looks pretty grim to me. But it's mine, still. When men used to go out to fight, they must have said a good many times, 'This is a nasty situation, but it's my quarrel.' And this is mine."

She felt her loneliness. At once it seemed that she had not yet known the real man. Their play at friendship, sympathy,--what was it?--had been only play. Like all men, he could bring the woman a flower, a crown even, "a rosy wreath," but the roses must wither while he chose his sword. She could not speak.

"What is it, playmate?" he asked presently. It was the old kindly voice.

"I must go back. I'm cold."

"Cold! It's warm to-night."

"Good-night."

He followed her.

"I did it. I chilled you somehow. Forgive me."

She could not speak, and he was at her side.

"I know. There are things that can't be talked about. They sound like twaddle. These things I've told you--they're well enough to think about. They can't be said. You're disappointed in me!"

But it was not that he had told her too much; he had told her too little. He had put her away from him.

"Good-night," she said again. "It's all right, playmate, truly."

His anxious voice came after her.

"It's not all right. I've muddled it."

XVI

Electra felt very much alone in a world of wrongdoers. To her mind moral trespassing was a definite state of action fully recognized by the persons concerned in it. She made no doubt that everybody was as well able to classify obliquity as she was to do it for them. She had stated times for sitting down and debating upon her own past deeds, though she seldom found any flagrant fault in them. There was now and then an inability to reach her highest standard; but she saw no crude derelictions such as other people fell into. It was almost impossible for her to think about grandmother at

all, the old lady seemed to her so naughty and so mad. Billy Stark, too, though he was a man of the world, admirably equipped, was guilty of extreme bad taste or he could never have asked Madam Fulton to marry him. Why was he calling her Florrie and giving her foolish nosegays every morning? Rose and Peter, when it came to them, seemed pledged to keeping up some wild fiction beneficial to Rose; only Markham MacLeod was entirely right, and so powerful, too, that his return must shake all the warring atoms into a harmonious conformity with Electra and the moral law.

Moreover, she had the entire programme of the club meeting to reconstruct. Nothing, she inexorably knew, would tempt her to allow for a moment any further consideration of her grandmother's pernicious book. Yet the club was to meet with her, the honorable secretary, and it had no topic to whet its teeth upon. In her dilemma, she put on her hat and walked over to inquire of Rose when her father was to return. MacLeod's bubbling kindness seemed to her so generous that she made no doubt he would talk to them for an hour, or even allow her to give him a reception.

Rose was in the garden, as usual, in the long chair, and Peter was painting. Ostensibly he was painting her, but the mood escaped him and he was blurring in a background. Electra remembered, as she went up the path, that still nothing had been said to her about Peter's painting. He might have been any sort of young 'prentice for all she heard about his work; and here it was beginning incidentally, like an idle task, with no reference to her. She had thought painting was something to be carried on gravely, when one had reached Peter's eminence. There ought to be talk of theories and emotions inspired by pictures in the inception, not merely this prosaic business of sitting down to work and characterizing beauties with a flippant jargon of words misused. "Very nice," "stunning"--that was what she had heard Peter say even of sunsets that ought to have moved him to the skies. He had a delicate-fingered way of touching everything, as if the creative process were a little one, of small simplicities: not as if art were long.

When she appeared that morning, behind the hollyhocks, Rose was about to spring up, and Peter did stand, expectant, with his charming smile. Electra at once made proper disclaimers, and insisted that the sitter's pose should not be broken and that it would be an immense entertainment to see the work go on. Peter brought a chair out of the arbor, and she sat down, erect and handsome, while Rose sank back into her unconstrained reclining. Rose wore the simplest dress, and her slender arms were bare. There were about her the signs of tasks abandoned, even of pleasures dropped and not remembered--the book half closed upon her finger, the rose and fan. Her great hat with its long feather lay beside her on the ground, and Electra, justly appraising its picturesqueness and value, thought, with brief distaste, that it looked as if it might belong to an actress. She asked her question at once and Rose answered. No, her father would not be here in time for the important meeting. She had no doubt he would indeed have said more than a few words, since the entertainment had fallen through. Here Electra interrupted her delicately and challenged the use of that term for so serious an issue. It could hardly be called an entertainment; they had simply been unable to consider the topic fixed upon, and it was necessary to find a substitute.

"Let me do something," said Rose, with her appealing grace. "I'll sing for them."

That accounted for her again, Electra thought, the unconsidered ease, perhaps the boldness. She belonged to public life; yet as such she might well be taken into account.

"What do you sing?" she asked.

Rose forgot all about her picture and sat up, looking quite in earnest. Peter held his brush reproachfully poised.

"I tell you what I can do," she said, after a moment's thinking. "I can give a little talk on contemporary music--what they are doing in France, in Germany. I can give some personal data about living musicians--things they wouldn't mind. And I really sing very well. Peter, boy, tell the lady I sing well."

"She sings adorably," said Peter. "She has a nightingale in her throat:--

"Two larks and a thrush,
All the birds in the bush."

"You never heard anything more sympathetic. I never did."

The "Peter, boy," had spoiled it. Electra grew colder. She wished she were able to be as easy as she liked; but she never could be, with other people perpetually doing and saying things in such bad taste.

"The club is composed of ladies who know the best music," she heard herself saying, and realized that it sounded like a child's copy-book.

Rose was still sitting upright, Peter patiently looking at her, evidently wishing she would return to her pose, and yet quite as evidently enriching his attention with this new aspect of her. She had turned into a vivid and yet humble

creature, intent on offering something and having it accepted. The thought that she had something Electra wanted seemed for the moment the next best thing to knowing that Electra tendered her kinship and recognition.

"Please like me," her look begged for her. "Please tolerate me, at least, and take what I have to give."

The end of it was that Electra did accept it, and that Peter's painting was quite forgotten while Rose ran eagerly over the ground she could cover. One moment of malice she did have. While Electra was hesitating, she looked up at her with a curious little smile.

"You can introduce me," she said, "as you always have, as 'the daughter of Markham MacLeod.' That will give your afternoon an added flavor."

Electra answered seriously, "Thank you," and resolved to do it. Madam Fulton, she thought, would have the decency not to break the situation by her intemperate "Mrs. Tom's." Electra had no experience of contrition in her grandmother, but she could but feel that any woman who had done what that old lady had might be trusted to observe the decencies for at least a week thereafter.

"That was my public name," Rose added hastily, as if she had invalidated her claim. "I sang for eight months or more as Rose MacLeod."

It was a new triumph for her, Electra realized when the day was over. The ladies came down from the city and, in perfect weather, sat about on the veranda and in the two front rooms, while Rose, at the piano, sang to them and then gave them a charming talk. Electra, who could do no creative work, could not take her eyes from the young creature, all eager brilliancy and dressed in a perfect Paris gown. The dress, Electra knew, was no finer than she herself could amply afford to buy in her own country. Only it was worn with a grace, the air of a woman born to be looked at, and used to fervid tributes. The other women, too, were worshipers of notability, and Rose knew she had raised a wave of admiration. To her, unused to the American woman's passion for new things, it was a real tribute, something she could count upon tomorrow after the epoch of to-day; and the afternoon left her exhilarated and warm in momentary triumph. The women crowded about her with intemperate comment and question. They wanted to know as much about her father as they did about her. They were all eager to show their conversance with the Brotherhood, its aims and potencies, and they were more than ready to besiege her father and to entertain her. Some of them even wanted to make dates for the coming autumn, and Rose found herself the recipient of a score of visiting cards, all pointing to new alliances. She slipped away before the afternoon was over, to spare Electra the pains of thanking her, and going home, found Markham MacLeod at the gate. Immediately her hopes died. She had forgotten the issues she had to reckon with in him. From these no ladies' club could save her.

He was affection itself in greeting her.

"I have just come," he explained. "Peter is in town and Mrs. Grant is taking her afternoon rest. Let us walk a little way."

"I haven't my hat," she demurred.

He looked at her sufficient parasol and took her hand, turning her toward the road again.

"Come. We'll walk along to that grove. It is shady there. I want to see you before we meet the others."

She yielded, and presently they stepped in at the bars to the field where the grove invited. Under the trees she furled her parasol, and sat down on a stone. She looked involuntarily toward the plantation, below them to the west. There were the little clumps of nursery trees, the green patches of seedlings, and, dotted through the working area, men with backs bent over the rows. She wondered if Osmond were there, and the thought gave her, if not courage, at least the defiance that answers for it. MacLeod threw himself on the ground, and her eyes came back to him. He looked so strong, so much a part of all living things, that he seemed to her invincible. He spoke quite seriously, as if there were matters between them to be gravely settled.

"I have been wondering about the bearing of these people toward you. What explanation did you make when you came?"

"I made no explanation."

"What attitude did you take?"

"Peter introduced me to her. He went in advance, to tell her I was coming."

"Electra?"

"Yes, Tom's sister."

"What did Peter tell her?"

"He told her I was her brother's wife."

"Ah! and she accepted you?"

"No, she has never accepted me."

"What!"

He glanced sharply up at her, and she met the look coldly. Her cheeks were burning, but there was nothing willingly responsive in her face. She repeated it: "Peter told her Tom had married me. I have reason to think she told him she did not believe it."

"Has Peter said that to you?"

"No, but I think so."

"Did she send for you, to go to see her?"

"No, I went without it."

"Now, how did she receive you?" His voice betrayed an amiable curiosity. He might have been interested merely in the vagaries of human nature, and particularly because Electra, as a handsome, willful creature, had paces to be noted. Rose laughed a little, in a way that jarred on him. He liked mirth to sound like mirth.

"She was civil to me. But she has never once given me Tom's name, nor has she allowed me to introduce myself by it."

"The old lady used it."

"That was because I followed an impulse one day and told her. She followed an impulse and used it. She is a naughty old lady."

"Ah!" He considered for a moment. "If she did believe you, is it your impression she would expect you to--inherit?"

"I wouldn't have it." Her face quivered all over. "I never thought of that for a moment. Can't you see why I came? I was beside myself in Paris. There were you, hurrying back from the East and bringing--him."

"The prince?"

"You had written me he would come with you. When he saw me again, you said, he would not take 'no.' Peter was going home. Kind Peter! He said, 'Why don't you come with me?' He said Electra was beautiful, quite the most beautiful person in the world. I thought she would receive me. I could tell another woman--and so kind!--everything, and I could settle down for a little among simple people and get rested before--" She stopped, and he knew what she had meant to say: "Before you and your prince began pursuing me again."

But he did not answer that. It was a part of his large kindness never to perpetuate harsh conclusions, even by accepting them.

"I shall go to see your Electra at once," he said.

She raised a forbidding hand.

"Do nothing of the kind. I insist on that."

But he was again reflecting.

"That puzzles me," he said at last; "that she should receive you at all if she does not believe you. Why?"

She looked at him steadfastly for a moment, a satirical smile coming on her face. These emotions he was awakening in her made her an older woman.

"I really believe you don't know," she said at length.

"Certainly I don't know."

"Why, it's you!" He stared at her. It was, she saw, an honest wonder. "She adores you. They all do, all her ladies. They meet and talk over things, and you are the biggest thing of all. I am the daughter of Markham MacLeod. That is what she calls me."

"I see." He mused again. "I must go over there to-night."

"No! no! no!" It was an ascending scale of entreaty, but he did not regard it. He got up and offered her his hand.

"Come," he said. "Peter will be back. By the way," he added, as she followed him laggingly, "does Peter know why you came to America?"

"Peter thought it the most natural thing in the world to wish to be with Tom's relations."

"You haven't told him about the prince?"

"I have been entirely loyal to you--with Peter. Don't be afraid. He, too, adores you."

They walked on in silence. At the house they found grannie, now in her afternoon muslin, cheerfully ready for a new guest, and Peter in extreme delight at seeing him.

Markham MacLeod, once in his own room, sat down and stretched his legs before him. As he ruminated, his face fell into lines. Nobody ever saw them,--even he,--because in public, and before his glass, he had a way of plumping himself into cheerfulness. His tortuous thoughts were for his inmost mind. Whatever he planned, no one knew he was planning; only his results came to him in the eye of the world.

XVII

After supper, which had been, grannie thought, a brilliant occasion, MacLeod took his hat and said to Peter, with an air of proposing the simplest possible thing,--

"I am going over to pay my respects to your neighbor."

Peter stared frankly.

"She was so kind as to invite me to luncheon, you know," MacLeod explained from the doorway. "I want to call at once."

"I'll go with you," said Peter.

"No, no! It's a first occasion. She'll want to catechise me, and you've heard all the answers. I rather depend on her putting straight questions."

It was not the custom to wonder at MacLeod. Whatever he did bore the stamp of privilege. He was "the chief." So he walked away through the summer dusk, and Peter and Rose, on the veranda, talked Paris while grannie listened, in a pleasant daze, not always sure, through age's necromancy, whether all the movement and action of their tone and subject belonged to the reality they knew, or to her own dream of a land she never saw.

Electra, the lights turned low, was sitting at the piano, nursing her discontent. She could hear the murmur of Madam Fulton's voice from the next room, broken by pauses when the old lady waited for Billy Stark to laugh. It all made Electra feel very much alone. Perhaps she had gone to the piano in a tacit emulation of the mastery Rose had shown, to see if, by a happy miracle, she also could bring to birth some of those magical things she never knew she felt until she heard others expressing them. But when she struck a chord, it was no richer and no more responsive than she remembered it in her old practicing days. Then she tried singing a little:--

"Drink to me only with thine eyes."

And all the time she was recalling the liquid flow of another voice, its restrained fervor and dying falls. A thing so beautiful as this song, so simple, had its root, she began dimly to feel, not in happy love but in despair, and as it often happened with her, she seemed to be timidly reaching out chilled fingers toward emotions she feared because they were so unrestrained, and yet which had to be reckoned with because the famous people made them of such account; they were like the earth where all creative power has life.

Electra had given carefully apportioned time to music. She knew something of harmony, in a painstaking way; but at this moment she felt more than ever outside the house of song. She was always having these experiences, always finding herself face to face with artists of various sorts, men and women who, without effort, as it seemed, could coax trees out of the ground and make them blossom before your eyes. And sometimes she had this breathless feeling that the incredible might happen and she, too, might do some of these amazing things. Often, it seemed to her, she was very

near it. The turning of a key in the lock, a wind driving through vapor, and she might be on the stage of the world, no longer wondering but making others wonder. These were real hungers. She wanted great acknowledged supremacies, and her own neat ways of action had to end ingloriously.

And at the moment MacLeod came up the steps, without hesitation she went to meet him. Any one that night might have been a messenger from the richer world she coveted. She saw him there smiling at her in the dim hall light, and the old feeling came back that she had known him before and waited for him a long time. They had touched hands and he had gone with her to the sitting-room before she realized that such silent meetings were not the ordinary ones.

"Did Peter come with you?" she asked unnecessarily.

"No. He wanted to."

"I am glad to see you!"

MacLeod spared no time.

"You have been very kind," he said, "to my little girl."

Rose, as any sort of little girl, implied an incredible diminishing; but the phrase served in the interest of conversational ease. Electra's eyes were on him, absorbed and earnest. There was nothing she believed in so much, at that moment, as the clarity of MacLeod's mind and heart. It seemed belittling him even to withdraw into the coverts of ordinary talk, and, if she wanted his testimony, to surprise it out of him by stale devices. She was worshipping the truth very hard, and there was no effort in putting her question crudely:--

"Mr. MacLeod, was your daughter married to my brother?"

He met her gaze with the assurance she had expected. It seemed noble to her. At last, Electra reflected with a throb of pride, she was on the heights in worthy company.

"Yes," he said, not hesitating, "she was his wife."

Electra drew a long breath.

"Then," she answered, "I shall know what to do."

He bent toward her an embracing look. It promised her a great deal: comprehension, sympathy, almost a kind of love.

"What shall you do?" he asked.

Electra choked a little. Her throat hurt her, not at the loss of what she was going to relinquish, but at the greatness of sacrifice with somebody by to take cognizance of the act. He would not, like Madam Fulton, call her a fool. He might even see where the action placed her, on ground he also had a right to, from other deeds as noble.

"I supposed I had inherited my brother's property," she said, in a low and penetrating voice. "I shall make it over to her."

MacLeod put out his hand, and she laid hers within it. When he spoke, it was with a moved restraint.

"That is a good deal to do."

"It is incumbent on me--ethically." At that instant she had a throb of high triumph in remembering that he, at least, would not gird at her choice of terms.

"It is what you would do," he said warmly. "It is exactly what you would do."

"I cannot do otherwise."

They seemed to be engaged in antiphonal praises of abstract right. It gave Electra a solemn satisfaction. She could hardly leave the subject. "I wish to do everything in my power," she announced. "I cannot ask her to live here, because I may not be here long myself."

"You will marry Peter and go away!"

Electra felt her face growing warm in the dusk, and an unreasonable vexation possessed her against any one who should have mapped out her purposes and given him the chart. He might know her. He was evidently destined to, she intemperately thought, better than any one else, but she could herself induct him into the paths of intimacy. There was no pleasure in feeling that he was bound to prejudge her through cognizance of this other tie she had for the moment

forgotten.

"Did Peter tell you that?" she asked.

"I'm afraid I guessed it."

His frankness put her back on their pleasant ground of intimacy; it even brought them nearer.

"Why did you guess it?"

Here was foolish talk, she following upon the heels of his venture, as if there were something in the very dust of his progress too precious to be lost. But MacLeod, who cared nothing about inanities once their purpose was served, whirled her away from further challenge and reply.

"You must come to Paris," he said; "with or without Peter, you must come."

Her heart warmed and her voice trembled as she answered,--

"I should like it. I should like nothing better."

"You have been in Europe?"

"Oh, yes, for a year at a time. Three times in all."

"Lately?"

"No. The last time I was very young."

"You will see things with different eyes."

He seemed to be promising her something, in the fervor of his speech. Some one had said of him once that, in talking to women, he always said "you" as if it meant "you and I." It may not have been to women alone. Young men felt that in the reconstruction of the earth it would not be merely MacLeod who led the van, but MacLeod and each one of them.

"I should like," she dared, "to see the things you are doing. I should like to know--the Brotherhood."

"You shall know it. There are as many women in it as men. When the starving citizens marched up to Paris to ask King Louis for bread, the women's voices were loudest, I fancy. There is no distinction in our membership. Men and women serve alike."

"When could I join it?"

"Not too fast, dear lady." He was smiling at her. That warm tone of personal consideration soothed her through the dusk. "It involves hardship, the laying down of self. Are you ready for that?"

"I am ready," said Electra. Her heart beat high. At last life seemed large enough and rich enough to satisfy her.

"Your entire allegiance and a tenth of your income," he went on. "Do not pledge it unless you can keep the pledge."

"I promise. I pledge it, myself and all I have."

In her uplifted state, it seemed as if some spell had been laid upon her, and she sought to recall her lost composure. The occasion, she knew, was a very large one, and she must not, she earnestly thought, deprive it of dignity. He rose.

"Stand up," he said; and she also was upon her feet, with a swift compliance. "Give me your hand." She laid her hand in his. "Do you believe in the Brotherhood of Man?"

To say "yes" was not enough. She repeated the words,--

"I believe in the Brotherhood of Man."

They stood so for a moment, and then he released her hand.

"That is all," he said.

Electra felt as if she had sworn allegiance not only to some unknown majesty, but to him, and she was ineffably exalted. They two seemed to be together in a world of wrong, pledged to right it, and taking the highest delight in their joint ministrations.

"When do I"--she hesitated--"when do I pay in--money?"

"Twice a year," he answered cheerfully. "Peter will tell you those things, if I am not here."

If he were not there! Her wings of pleasure drooped. It seemed as if he were always to be there. And Peter! he looked like a small and callow personage seen through the diminishing end of a glass, compared with this great presence.

"I must go," he said, and Electra pulled herself out of her maze. "May I tell my daughter you accept her?" He made it all very delicate and yet prosaic, as if he quite understood Rose could hardly expect to be received without difficulty, but as if Electra had made it magnificently possible. Still she felt a little recoil.

"I can't talk about it," she faltered, "to her. I could to you. Let me settle all the details, and my lawyer shall submit them to you. Would that satisfy you?"

She spoke humbly, and Markham MacLeod, the chief of the Brotherhood, bent over her hand and touched it with his lips. Then he was gone, and Electra was left standing with that incredibly precious kiss upon her hand. She was poor in imagination, but at the instant it flashed into her mind that this was actually the touch of the coal red from the altar.

Markham MacLeod, walking with long strides through the summer night, drew in deep breaths, and delighted, for the moment, in the voluptuousness of his own good health and the wonder that he had been able to carry youth on into middle age. He had not been accustomed to think about the past or what might come. It was enough to recognize the harmonious interplay of his muscles and the daily stability of a body which until now, and that briefly, had shown no sign of revolt. What insurrection there was he meant to quell, and meantime to forget its possibility, as a chief may, for the time, ignore rebellion. MacLeod was plagued neither by unsatisfied desires nor by remorse. In his philosophy, to live meant to feed upon the earth as it appeared to the eye and to the other senses. He believed, without argument, that all the hungers in him were good lusty henchmen demanding food. Now, in spite of certain grim warnings he had had of late, he was filled with the old buoyant feeling that his body was a well-to-do republic with his own impartial self at the head of it. Justice should be done to all its members that they might live in harmony. If discomforting forces assailed the republic, they must be crushed. Some of these he might have recognized as regrets, the sort of spectre that was ready to visit Napoleon on a night after the campaign in Egypt. They were, he thought, inseparable from great power and the necessities attending its administration. But they were enemies of the republic, and he killed them. So his voice was always hearty, his eye clear, and his cheek that healthy red.

Peter he found in fits of laughter, and Rose mimicking certain characters known to them in Paris. It was encouraging, he judged, to find Rose out of her dumps. But she was only keeping Peter by her until MacLeod should come and help detain him. Peter had said something in the early evening about going down to find Osmond, who had of late, he averred, been off at night on his deep wood prowls. "No," Rose wanted to say,—and there would have been a choking triumph in her throat,—"he has been in the playhouse waiting for me." And because she could not go that night to the wide liberty of the fields, she would not have Peter wandering off that way and hunting up her playmate, breaking spells and spoiling wordless messages. MacLeod had not seen her so gay, not since the days in Paris before she met Tom Fulton, when she had been one of a changing wave of artist life, made up of students delirious with possibilities and all bent toward the top notch of reputation. He joined her and Peter now in precisely their own mood, his laugh and voice reinforcing theirs. Rose warmed more and more. Not all her dreary memories could keep her from delighting in him. He carried her along on that high wave of splendid spirits, oblivious for the moment to all his faults. Thus, she paused to remember again, it had been in her too-wise childhood when, seeing her mother wan with tears, she had yet put her little hand in his and gone off with him for an hour's pleasuring, though he was the fount of grief as well as gayety. He compelled her, the sheer physical health of him.

Peter rose finally, to give them a moment alone, and wandered off down the garden, singing a light song and then whistling it farther and farther into the dark. Something constricted the girl's throat. She remembered, in the silence fallen between them, that she was alone with the enemy of her peace, and felt again that old passionate regret that he had not allowed her to keep the beauty of her belief in him. He had swept away something she had thought to be indestructible. That, more than any deed, was the wrong he had done—he had set his foot upon the flower of hope. But MacLeod, his forehead bared to the night air, hummed to himself the song Peter was singing, and then spoke with a commonplace assurance:--

"She asked me the question."

"Electra?"

"Yes. She asked me plainly whether he married you."

"She asked you! How could she?"

"She did it without preamble. It was really rather magnificent."

"Did you answer without preamble?"

"I think so. At all events, it contented her. I said, 'yes,'--not much more, if anything."

There was a long silence, and he felt her determination to remain outside the issue, even to the extent of denying herself the further news he brought. When that became apparent, he spoke again, rather lightly:--

"She took my assurance without question. She said she should know what to do."

"What will she do?"

"The simplest thing possible--make over Tom's money to you. She doesn't consider, apparently, whether you are entitled to the whole of it, any more than she had previously guessed that, if your claim were just, you could have pushed it without her concurrence. She is a very intemperate person."

Rose did not intend to comment on the situation, however warmly she might express herself over Electra's personal standpoint.

"Electra did not strike me as intemperate," she said. "She seemed to me very collected, very cold and resolute."

"Yes, but her reactions! they'd be something frightful. I can fancy that pendulum swinging just as far the other way. They are terrifying, those women."

"How are they terrifying?"

Governing the wild forces in herself at that minute, she felt as if all women were terrifying when they are driven too far, and that all men might well beware of them. MacLeod rose, and stretched himself upward in a muscular abandon.

"Good-night, my dear," he said. "I'm going upstairs. I will see her again to-morrow. You need give yourself no uneasiness about the outcome. You needn't even concern yourself with the details. I shall arrange them with her."

Rose was quickly upon her feet. She felt more his equal so than when he towered above her at that height.

"If you see her," she threatened, "I will overturn everything."

"No, no, you wouldn't. Run upstairs now and go to bed. You are overwrought. This whole thing has been a strain on you."

"Yes." She spoke rapidly and in a low tone, fearing grannie's window above. "It has been a strain on me. But who brought it on? I did it myself. I must meet it. But I will not have you meddling with it. I will not."

"Not to-night, at least," said MacLeod, with unblemished kindness. "Don't do anything intemperate. But you won't. I know you too well."

After a good-night she could not answer he went in and up the stairs. She could hear him humming to himself that gay little song. She stood there quite still, as if she were in hiding from him and he might return to find her. When the door closed above, she still stood there, her nails clasped into her palms. And for the instant she was not thinking of herself, but of Electra. It seemed to her that it would be necessary to protect Electra from his charm. Then she heard Peter whistling back again. She stepped down to the end of the veranda and stole across the orchard into the field. The night was still, yet invisible forces seemed to be whispering to one another. In the middle of the field she stopped, tempted to call to Osmond, knowing he was there. But because it was late, and because her thoughts were all a disordered and protesting turmoil, she turned about and fled home.

XVIII

The next night Rose went early to her own room, and when she heard Peter and MacLeod on the veranda, their voices continuing in a steady interchange, she took her cloak, locked the chamber door behind her, and ran downstairs and out by the long window to the garden, the orchard, and the field. The night was dark and hot, and over in the south played fitful lightnings. In spite of the heat, she wrapped her cloak about her for an invisible shield: for now that MacLeod had come, she felt strangely insecure, as if eyes were everywhere. It was apparent to her that these meetings might be few, and as if this even might be the last; so it must not be interrupted. When she was once in the field, the hush of the night, the heat, and her own uneasy thoughts bewildered her. She stopped in doubt. His voice assured her.

"This way, playmate."

"I am coming," she found herself answering, not once but twice, and then, as she reached the seat he had ready for her, it came upon her overwhelmingly that such gladness was of the scope and tumult to bear two creatures to each other's arms, to mingle there, face to face and breast to breast.

But the quick thought neither threw her back in shame upon herself nor forward to his side. The night and the things of life together were too great to admit of fine timidities or crude betrayals. It was not of so much avail to consider what was done as whether the deed was true. She sat down, in deep relief at finding herself near him.

"Playmate," she said, "things are very bad indeed."

"Are they, my dear playmate?"

Her breath came in a sob, his voice sounded so kind, so altogether merciful of her, whatever she might do.

"Dreadful things are happening," she said.

"The prince?"

"Not the prince, this time. Worse things."

"Tell me, child."

She had ceased to be altogether his playmate. Deeper needs had called out keener sympathies, and she found some comfort even in his altered tone. She waited for a time, listening to the summer sounds, and vainly wishing she had been a more fortunate woman, and that these sad steps need not be retraced in retrospect before life could go on again.

"You will have to listen to a long story," she said at last. "And how am I to tell you! Ask me questions."

"How far shall I go back?"

"To the beginning--to the beginning of my growing up. Before I met Tom Fulton."

"When you meant to sing?"

"I did sing. But you mustn't think that was what I wanted. I never wanted anything but love."

"Go on." To him, who, in his solitude, had never expected to find close companionship, it was inconceivable that they should be there speaking the unconsidered truth. She, too, who, in the world, had tasted the likeness of happy intercourse, only to despair of it, had found a goal. Here now was the real to which all the old promises had been leading.

"You must understand me," she said, in a low voice. "I'm going to tell you the plain truth. How awful if you didn't understand!"

"I shall understand. Go on."

"I don't know how it is with other girls, but always I dreamed of love, always after my first childhood. I thought of kings and queens, knights and ladies. They walked in pairs and loved each other."

"What did you mean by love?"

"Each would die for the other. That was my understanding of it. I knew the time would come some day when a beautiful young man would say to me, 'I would die for you,' and I should say to him, 'And I would die for you.' It was a kind of dream. Maybe it would not have been, except that I was never much of a child when I was a child. I had ecstatic times with my father, but I was lonesome. The lover was to change that, when he came."

"When did he come?"

"He came several times, but either he was too rough and he frightened me, or too common and he repelled me, or--"

"And Tom Fulton came!"

"Yes, walking just the right way, neither too fast nor too slow, and all chivalry and honor. Oh, my heart! my heart!" She was sobbing to herself.

There was a long pause.

"So you married him," Osmond reminded her.

"Osmond!" At last she had said his name. She knew it with her mind, but how did her heart have it so ready? To him it seemed natural that she should use it, until he thought of it next day. She continued in that hurried voice that pleaded so, "I must make you see how I had thought of those things always."

"What things, dear child?"

"Loving and being loved. It was like your plants, coming to flower. There was to be one person who would give me a perfect devotion. There would be music and dancing and bright weather, day after day, year after year. That was coming to flower, like your plants."

"A rose in bloom!" he murmured.

"It was a kind of possession with me. I can't tell you what hold it took on me. There were years when I tried not to have a wrong thought or do an ugly act, so that I could be beautiful to him when he came."

"Behold, the bridegroom cometh!" mused the voice, in involuntary comment, as if it responded to the man's own wondering mood.

"He came. He made himself irresistible to me. He knew my father first."

"Were they friends?"

"My father has no friends--not as you would understand it. He touches people at one little point. They think they have everything; but it is nothing. Still, they understood each other. My father sold me to him."

There was silence from the darkness under the tree; only she heard him breathe.

"I was to blame, too," she cried. "But I did not see it then. I truly did not see it. My father told me it was nobler and purer to go with my lover so. Marriage, he said, had been profaned a million, million times. Where was the sacrament, he asked, in a church that was all rotten? He told me so, too--Tom Fulton. I went with him. I never married him." She paused for the answering voice, but it delayed. The silence itself constrained her to go on. "Do you know what Tom Fulton was?"

"He was a handsome beast."

"You never knew the half. But my father knew. He knew men. He knew Tom Fulton. And he delivered me over to the snare of the fowler. I lived a year with him. I left him. He had the accident, and I went back. He died. I thanked God."

Osmond had not often, to his remembrance, formulated gratitude to any great power, but he also said, "Thank God!" In a way he did not understand, she seemed to him austere in her purity and her rebellion against these bitter facts. There was no hesitation and no shame. She had only wrong to remember, not willful sin. One thing he had to know. He asked his question. "Was Fulton--kind to you?"

"At first. Not at the last."

"How was he--not kind?"

That, too, she was apparently thinking out.

"I can hardly tell you," she said at length. "He seemed to hate me."

"You!"

"I have seen the same thing twice, with other men and other women. You see, it was a terrible blow to him--his vanity, his pride--to stop loving me."

"I don't understand."

"You may not, ever. But he had had unworthy things in his life, attachments, those that last a short time. When he cared for me, he thought he cared tremendously. He believed it would last. But it didn't. He had nothing left to give me."

"He had gambled it away!"

"I think it hurt his pride. He could only justify himself unconsciously--it was all unconscious--by finding fault with me. By proving I was not worthy to be loved. Do you see?"

"You are a strange woman to have guessed that. You must be very clever."

"No, oh, no! It was because I thought so hard about it. For a long time, night after night, I thought of nothing else. When it died--what he called love--I thought the world died, too."

"My dear good child!"

"When he was dead, what was I to do? I thought I should sing. But my father was coming from the East with another suitor, the prince. The prince had seen me here and there for a couple of years. I had always been known as Madam Fulton. I called myself so at first, proudly, honestly. Then other people called me so, and even when I had left him, I let them do it. Peter stepped in then, honest Peter in his ignorance. He wondered why I didn't come here to Tom's people. Electra was a kind of goddess. I came. That is all." She paused.

Osmond spoke musingly.

"So you were not his wife! And Electra knew it."

"She did not know it."

"But she suspected it. She refused to own you."

"She suspected me because she knew Tom too well. I believe he had shocked her and frightened her until his world was all evil to her. There was another reason." This was a woman's reason, and she was ashamed to have put her finger on it. Electra's proud possession of her lover and her instant revolt at his new partisanship, what was it but crude jealousy? Yet there were many things she could not even dimly understand in Electra's striving and abortive life--the emulation that reached so far and met the mists and vapors at the end. "But there was one thing I did not want," Rose cried--"their money. I never thought of it. I only thought how I might come here for a little and be at peace, away from my father. Then when Electra hated me, I had to stay, I had to fight it out. Why? I don't know. I had to. But now it's all different."

"How is it different?"

"Because she has accepted me."

"But you wanted her to accept you."

"Ah, yes, on my own word! I believe I had it in my mind to tell her the next minute,--to throw myself on her mercy, the mercy of the goddess, and beg her to see me as I was, all wrong, but innocent. It is innocent to have meant no wrong. But when she met me like an enemy, I had to fight."

"And now she has accepted you."

"Yes." The assent was bitter. "On my father's word."

"His word?"

"Yes. He stands by me. He confirms me. She asked him if I had been married to her brother. 'Yes,' said my father."

"Why?"

"The money. Always that--money, position, a pressure here, a pull there."

"Then"--his tone seemed to demand her actual meaning--"your case is won. Electra owns you."

She was on her feet gripping the back of her chair with both hands. The rough wood hurt her and she held it tighter.

"Range myself with him--my father? Sell myself in his company? No! When I was fighting before, it was from bravado, pride, mean pride, the necessity of the fight. But now, when he confirms me--no! no! no!"

"We must tell the truth," she heard Osmond murmuring to himself.

To her also it looked not only necessary but beautiful. There were many things she wanted to say to him at that moment, and, as she suddenly saw, they were all in condonation of herself. Yet the passionate justice in her flamed higher as she remembered again that it was true that others had marked out her way for her. When she walked in it, it had been with an exalted sense that it was the one way to go.

"I cannot understand about the truth," she said. "I can't, even now."

"What about it?"

"Once it seemed as if there were different kinds. He told me so--my father. He always said there was the higher truth,

and that almost nobody could understand. Then there were facts. What were facts? he asked. Often worse than lies."

"I don't know," said Osmond. Whatever he might say, he was afraid of hurting her. It seemed impossible to express himself without it. "Facts are all I have had to do with."

She seemed like a bewildered creature flying about in a confined space.

"You wouldn't say what my father does," she concluded miserably. "You wouldn't feel we have a right to the higher truth, if we feel great desires, great hungers the world wouldn't understand?"

"I only know about facts," said Osmond again. "You see, I work in my garden all day, nearly every day in the year. I know I must sow good seed. I must nourish it. I know nature can't lie. I didn't suppose things were so incomprehensible out in the world--or so hard."

"Haven't they been hard for you?"

"For me!" He caught his breath, and immediately she knew how the question touched him. It was as monstrous as his fate. But he answered immediately and with a gentleness without reproach,--

"Things are different for me in every way. But I should have thought you would reign over them like a queen."

"A queen! I have been a slave all my life. I see it now. A slave to other people's passions--Tom Fulton's cruelty, my father's greed."

"His greed for money? I don't always understand you when you speak of him."

"For money, power, everything that makes up life. My father is one great hunger. Give him the world and he would eat it up."

Images crowded upon her. It seemed to her that here in the silence, with the spaces of the dark about her and that voice answering, her thought was generated like the lightning.

"Do you see," she asked suddenly, "how I blame those two men, and not myself? I am the sinner. The sinner ought to own his sin. I don't know whether I have sinned or not. I believed in love, and because I believed in it, those two men betrayed me. That was how I was taught not to believe in anything."

"Don't you believe any more?"

"Oh, I don't know! I don't know!" It was a despairing cry. "There is kindness, I know that. Peter is kind. Your grandmother is the kindest person in the world. But that one thing I dreamed about--why, Osmond, that one thing was the most beautiful thing God ever made."

"Tell me more about it."

"You have thought about it, too. We can't be so much alike, you and I, and not have thought the same things."

"Are we alike?"

It was a wistful voice. She laughed, a little sorry laugh.

"Well," she said, "at least we are in our playhouse together."

"Ah!" He seemed to speak in spite of prudence. "That's not because we are alike. It is because we are different." But he went on at once, as if to keep her from interrogating that, or even perhaps remembering it. "I have forbidden myself to think of some things. When they came upon me, I went out and dug them into the ground."

She was filled that night with an imperative sense of life. It made her forget even him and his claim to be heard. The great resolve in her to be for once understood was like a crowning wave drenching the farthest shore.

"I have never had enough of life," she avowed passionately. "I have always had the appearance of it, the promise that the next minute the cup would be given me. But the cup was never there. Or if it was, there was muddy water in it. The lights have never been bright enough, the music has never gone on long enough. Why!" She seemed frightened. "Is that like my father? Do I get that from him?"

"It is because you are young," said Osmond. "And because you are beautiful and the world ought to be yours--to put your foot on it."

The passion of his voice recalled her.

"No," she answered humbly. "Not to put my foot on anything. No! no! no! Playmate," she added, "you are the dearest thing in all the world."

The voice laughed out harshly. The man was lying prone at full length where she could not see him, his hands upon the earth he loved, his fostering, yet unheeding mother that had saved his life for her own service. At that moment, it seemed to him, his eye turned inward upon himself, as if there were foolish irony in that friendly comment. He looked to himself rather one of the earth forces, supremely strong, waiting for some power to guide it.

"Elemental things are no good until they are harnessed and made to work," he heard himself saying, as in a trance; and then it was apparent she had not noticed, for she went on,--

"To be able to speak to any one as I speak to you! Playmate, it seems to me men might as well kill a child as kill women's innocent faith in love."

"But men love, too," he heard himself answering her.

"If I thought that! But when anything so beautiful turns into something base, and the creature we worshiped laughs and says it is always so, he kills something in us. And he can't bring it to life again. Neither he nor any other man can make it live. It is a dream, and the thought of it hurts us too much for us even to dream it over again.--What is that?"

Out of his web of pain he could only answer,--

"What, playmate?"

"Something sweet in the air."

That recalled him to his dear garden and the homely sanities that awaited him. He sat up and brushed the wet hair from his forehead.

"It is the lily field," he said. "A wind has risen. The flowers have been coming out to-day, and you get their scent." He laughed a little, tenderly, as at a child. "You said you never had enough of anything. You would have enough of them if you were there."

"Why should I?"

"The fragrance is so strong. You can make yourself drunk with it."

"Come, playmate! Take me there. Let us walk through them in the dark and smell them."

"No!"

"Why not?"

"It isn't good for you." He spoke seriously. "I know all about the preservatives of life, the medicines that keep us sane. I know we mustn't go and smell strong lilies at ten o'clock at night. We must go home and say our prayers and brush our hair and go to bed."

"Do you say your prayers?"

"Not exactly."

"But almost?"

"Well, since I have known you, I say something or other to the heathen gods at night about making you safe and sleepy."

"The heathen gods?"

"Well, not precisely. Grannie's unknown God, I guess it is. Unknown to me!"

"Why do you say we must brush our hair?"

He laughed a little, yet soberly.

"I read it in a novel, the other day. There were two young women talking together while they brushed their hair. Then I thought of yours and how it must hang down your back like a golden fleece."

"That's in Shakespeare."

"It's in me, too. A golden mane, then."

"Do you like novels?" Suddenly she had back her absorbing curiosity over him.

"Not much. I haven't read many."

"Why?"

"It's best not. They make me discontented. Seed catalogues are better."

"But you are reading them now!"

"That's because you have come."

"What's that to do with it?"

"For the manners and customs. I want to know how young women behave."

"You know how Electra behaves."

"Electra behaves like a Puritan's god. If an early colonist had hewn him a deity out of stone, it would be like Electra."

"Poor Electra!"

"Yes. You're far happier, all fire and frost."

"But why do you read novels to find out about me? Why don't you observe me?"

"Because I don't see you in the light."

"But you will."

"Never!"

"Never, playmate? You hurt my feelings. What if we should meet face to face in the lily field at twelve o'clock tomorrow?"

He answered sternly, and she believed him.

"I should never speak to you again. You must keep faith with me, or we shall both be sorry."

"Why, of course!" Rose said it gently, as if she wondered at him. "Of course I shall keep faith with you."

She heard him rising from his place.

"Now," he said, "you must go home."

"Why must I? The little side door is never locked."

"No, but you have been through a good deal. We must take care of you."

"I feel as if I had all the strength in the world. I could waste it and waste it, and then have enough to waste again."

"It isn't altogether strength. It's fire--the fire of youth. Bank it up and let it smoulder, or it will burn you up."

"How are you so wise, playmate? You are as wise as dear grannie."

He stretched up his hands in the darkness. The face he lifted to the shrouded heavens only the unseen citizens of the night could see, the beneficent powers that nurse and foster.

"It has been my study," he said, in a tone of awe, as if he had not before thought how strange it is never to squander. "All these years I have done nothing but think of my body, how to build up here, how to husband there. So much exercise, so much sleep, so much turning away from what burns up and tears. Well, I have done it. I have made myself into something as solid as the ground, as enduring as the rocks."

"Has it been--easy?" she ventured. "Have you liked to do it?"

"No, I have not liked to do it." Afterwards, in her own room, she thought of that question and understood the answer better. "I have never lavished anything," he said. "As soon as I saw what grannie was about, trying to give me a body to live in, I began to help her. We have done it. Sometimes I think she did it sitting there in her chair and praying to her God. I haven't done any spending. It has been all saving. But when the time comes, I shall spend it all at once."

She felt very far away from him.

"How, playmate?" she asked timidly.

He roused himself. "Never mind," he said. "That's not for us to think about to-night. Now run home, child, and go to bed."

"But we haven't decided about me. What must I do?"

He was silent for a moment and then he said,--

"A long time ago, grannie told me what to do. She said, 'Do the thing you think God wishes you to do.'"

"But I don't know anything about God."

"Nor I, playmate. But I think very often about what grannie said."

"Have you tried to do it?"

"I have kept it in my mind."

It was her turn to brood in silence. Then she said to him,--

"It doesn't seem to mean anything to you,--that thing--I told you."

"Everything you tell me means more than anything else in the world."

"But about Tom Fulton. I was not married to him. I lied about it. It isn't possible that I seem--the same--to you."

"You would always seem the same to me," he answered,--and she found herself smiling at the beauty of his voice.

"How could you be different? These things are just things that happen to you. Should I like you less if you were caught in the rain, or got your pretty dress muddy?"

"How do you know it is a pretty dress?" she asked irrepressibly.

"Because it's your dress. Run home, now, and brush your hair."

She went at once, and, in spite of her doubts, light-heartedly. He made her feel, as the night did, that here in this present life, as in the outer universe, are great spaces still unexplored. Everything had possibilities. Sprinkle new pollen on a flower and its fruit would take on other forms. Stretch out a hand and you might be led into unguessed delights, even after you were dulled with pain. Sleeping in the air, even, were forces to nourish and revive, dormant only because we do not call upon them. She smiled into the night, and her heart called believingly.

XIX

Madam Fulton sat on the veranda, in the shade of the vines. It was rather early in the morning, and Electra was about her methodical tasks. Billy Stark sat reading the paper, but nevertheless not failing, from time to time, to look up and give his old friend a smile. Madam Fulton could not answer it. She felt estranged in a world where she had failed to learn the values.

"Billy," she said at length, "do you think she is right?"

"Who?"

"Electra. She says the money I got out of that pesky book is tainted money. Is it?"

Billy folded his paper and hung it over the veranda rail. His face began to pucker into a smile, but, gazing at Madam Fulton, it became apparent to him that she was really troubled. She even looked as if she had not slept. Her faint pinkness was overlaid by a jaded ivory. Her eyes interrogated him with a forlorn pleading. All his chivalry rose in arms.

"Hang the book, Florrie!" he said. "Forget it. You've had your fling with it. You wanted fun and you got it. Stop thinking about it."

"But," she persisted, "is it really true? Have I done a shocking thing, and is it monstrous to use the money?"

"You've been exceedingly naughty," said Billy. He eyed her with anxiety. "You ought to have your hands slapped, of

course. Electra's done it, so far as I can see. So now let's get over crying and go out and jump rope."

"It isn't so much the book nor the money nor Electra. It's because I can't help wondering whether I'm a moral idiot. Do you think I am, Billy?"

"I think you're the gamest old girl that ever was, if you want to know. Let me have the horse put into the phaeton, Florrie, and we'll go out and jog awhile."

But she was musing. Suddenly he saw how old she looked.

"It's always been so, Billy. I never was able to see things as other people saw them. These rules they make such a pother about never seemed so vital to me. It's all a part of life, seems to me. Go ahead and live, that's what we're in for. Growing things just grow, don't they? They don't stop and take photographs of themselves on the twenty-third day of every month. Now, do they?"

"Florrie," said her old friend, still watching her, "I'll tell you what you do. You just run away with me and come to London. We've got fifteen good years before us yet, if we take 'em soberly."

She seemed to be considering. Her face lighted.

"I could almost do it," she owned. "Electra's having me here helps out a lot, but I could almost do it--on my polluted gains."

Billy Stark looked into the distance. In his earlier years he had loved to ride and take his fences well, even when they loomed too high. He could not remember many great challenges in life; but what he had recognized, he had not refused. Everything he had met like an honest gentleman.

"Florrie," he said, "I shan't want to leave you here in Electra's clutches. You come--and marry me."

She laughed a little. It was sadly done, but the pink came back into her cheeks.

"As true as I am a living sinner, Billy," she said, "I'd do it, if I were half sure how we were coming out."

"Coming out?"

"Yes. If I thought I should be pretty vigorous up to the end, and then die in my chair, like a lady. Yes, I'd do it, and thank ye, too. But a million things might happen to me. I might be palsied and helpless on your hands, head nodding, deaf as a post--damn, Billy! I could swear."

"I might give out myself," he said generously. "You might be the one to tote the burden."

The old lady laughed again.

"The amount of it is, Billy, we're afraid. Own up. Now aren't we?"

Billy thought it over.

"I'm not so sure of that," he said contentiously, "I'm not prepared to say I'm afraid. Nor you either, Florrie. Come on, old girl. Chance it."

"I'll think it over," said Madam Fulton. The brightness had come back to her eye. So much was gained, at any rate, Billy told himself. "There's that handsome girl coming, Tom's widow.--Electra!"

Electra's scales were beginning, with a serious emphasis.

"I love to see them together," Madam Fulton said. "She makes Electra mad as hops."

Rose was coming very fast. She had the walk of women well trained, for the stage perhaps, the spring and rhythm of art superadded to nature's willingness. She wore no hat, and the sun made her bright hair brighter and brought out the tragic meaning in her face. She had been thinking in the night, and this morning forbade herself to falter. All through her fluctuating moods there had been a division of joy and dread. The perplexing questions of her past lay heavily upon her; but when she thought of Osmond, she was light as air. He made everything easy, his simplicity, his implied truth. She felt a great loyalty to what seemed good to him. Her conscious life throughout the night and morning became a reaching out of hands to him in the passionate asseveration that she would be true.

Electra came, in answer to Madam Fulton's call. She, too, was grave, but with a hint of expectation on her face. She had been looking for MacLeod. Since their meeting, she had done nothing but wait for him again. Rose was running up the steps. She glanced from one to another of them with a recognizing swiftness, and when Billy Stark rose and placed a

chair for her, she thanked him with a word, and took her place behind it, her hands upon it, so that she faced them all. There was a momentary hush. Madam Fulton put up her eyeglasses and gazed at her curiously, as if she were a species of tableau arranged for notice. Billy Stark felt uneasily as if this were one of the occasions for him to take himself away. Rose spoke rapidly, in her beautifully modulated voice, but without emotion.

"I want to tell you something. I was not his wife."

Electra was the one to show dramatic feeling. She threw her hands up slightly.

"I knew it." Her lips formed the words. Her triumphant glance went from one to another, saying, "I told you so."

Rose stood there with perfect self-possession, very white now and with the chilled look that accompanies difficult resolution. She glanced at Madam Fulton, and the old lady met her gaze eagerly with an unbelieving query.

"For heaven's sake!" she ejaculated, "Electra, why don't you speak?"

"I lived with Tom Fulton as his wife," said Rose, in the same moving voice. She might have been engaged in the rehearsal of a difficult part. No one looking at her could have said whether she duly weighed what she was announcing. "I called myself his wife because I thought I had a right to. Other people would have called me a disgraced woman."

Billy Stark now, without waiting to find the step, walked off the edge of the veranda and was presently to be seen, if any one had had eyes for him, lighting a cigar in the peaceful garden. Madam Fulton had spoken on the heels of these last words. She brightened into the most cordial animation.

"This is the most extraordinary story I ever heard in my life," she commented, with relish. "Sit down, my dear, and tell us all about it."

"There is nothing more to tell," said Rose. Her eyes traveled to Electra's face, and stayed there, though the unfriendly triumph of it shook her resolution. "I had to say this because I must say, too, that I do not want money and I will not take it. I do not want to be known as Tom Fulton's wife. I was not his wife."

"You wanted it a week ago," said Electra involuntarily. She had made up her mind not to speak, not to be severe, not to be anything that would destroy the picture Markham MacLeod must have of her in his own mind; but the words escaped her.

"That was before--" Rose stopped. She had almost said it was before her father came, but it was borne floodingly in upon her that this was not alone the reason. It was before she had felt this great allegiance to Osmond Grant.

"Your father confirms you," said Electra, yielding to her overpowering curiosity. "He says you were my brother's wife."

"My father"--Rose held her head higher--"I have nothing to do with that," she concluded. "It is the truth that I was never married."

Electra turned away and went into the house. They heard her step in the neighboring room. She had paused there by the piano, considering, in her desire to be mistress of herself, whether she should not go on with her music as if nothing had happened. But the thought of Rose and her mastery of the keys forbade that, as display, and she turned away and went upstairs, with great dignity, though there was no one by to consider the fashion of it. There she sat down by the window, to watch for Markham MacLeod. Madam Fulton had been regarding Rose with an exceedingly friendly smile. The girl looked tired, though her muscles had relaxed with Electra's going.

"Come here, my dear, and sit down," said the old lady, indicating a chair. Rose shook her head. Then, as she found herself trembling, she did sit down, and Madam Fulton laid a hand upon her knee. "You are a very interesting child," she said, with an approving emphasis. "Now what in the world made you fall in love with Tom Fulton? Did he seem very nice to you?"

"I can't talk about him," said Rose. It seemed to her as if now his shadow might be lifted from her. "It is over. He is dead."

"Of course he's dead. It was the best thing he could do. Well, well, my dear! What made you come over here and play this little comedy for us?"

The girl's eyes had filled with tears.

"I can't tell you," she answered. It was easy to defend her cause to Osmond; not to this eager creature who wanted to read her like a curious book. But Madam Fulton was almost whispering. She looked as if she had something of the

utmost importance to communicate.

"I ask you, my dear, because I am thoroughly bad myself, and it's beyond me to understand why it's so important whether we are bad or good. And I thought maybe if you could tell me--did you know you were bad before you came and Electra found you out?"

Rose was looking kindly into the vivid face.

"No," she said, "I didn't think I was bad."

"That's it!" cried the old lady, in high triumph. "We don't any of us know it till they find us out. My dear, it's the most awful system--now, isn't it? You go on as innocent as you please, and suddenly they tell you you're a criminal. It's as if you made up your mouth to whistle, walking along the road, and somebody pounces on you and tells you whistling's against the law and claps you into jail."

Rose was smiling at her now, forgetful, for the moment, of her own coil, Madam Fulton seemed to her so pathetically young and innocent of everything save untamed desires.

"What under heavens does it mean?" Madam Fulton was insisting, with the greatest irritation.

"I must go now," said Rose. "I had to tell you."

Madam Fulton kept the detaining hand upon her knee.

"But where are you going?" she insisted. "Back to France?"

"No, I shall stay in America. I shall sing."

"Do you think anybody'll want to hear you?"

"They'll love to hear me!"

Madam Fulton eyed her smilingly.

"You're a brazen hussy," she said. "But of all things, why did you come here with your little comedy in your hand, if you didn't mean to play it out?"

"I did mean to play it," said Rose, laying her head back against the high rail of the chair. She closed her eyes, for again she felt the tears coming. "But I--got sick of it."

Madam Fulton nodded confirmingly.

"That's precisely it," she agreed. "We do get sick of it. We get sick of conduct, good or bad. They don't, the good ones. They go on clambering, one step after another, up that pyramid, and peering over the edge to see us playing in the sand, and occasionally, if they can get a brick, they heave it at us."

"Who are the good ones?" Rose asked languidly. "Electra?"

"Electra? She's neither hot nor cold. But she's of the kind that made the system in the first place."

"Grannie is good," said Rose absently.

"Bessie Grant? Yes, she's God's anointed, if there is a God. My dear, I love to talk with you, almost as much as with Billy Stark. You come and stay with me next winter."

Rose smiled.

"There's Electra," she reminded her.

"Bless you, Electra and I don't live together! I only visit her here half the year, to save my pocketbook. That's another proof of my general unworthiness. I flout her and mad her all the time. She wouldn't do that to me, but she'd drive me to drink trying not to. No, I've got a little apartment in town, like a hollow tree, and I crawl into it in the winter. You come, too, and I'll introduce you to all the people I know, and you can make 'em listen while you sing."

Rose was looking at her in a moved warmth and wonder.

"How kind you are!" she breathed.

"No! no! Only when you said you were a liar, and worse, I suddenly felt the most extraordinary interest in you. I feel as

if you might speak my language. I don't know that I want to do anything bad, but I don't want to be kept so nervous trying to decide whether things are bad or not. You come, my dear--unless I marry Billy Stark. I may do that. I must, if it will plague Electra."

Rose gave her a quick glance, at once withdrawn, and while she allowed the last possibility to sink into the depths of her mind, Madam Fulton was interrogating her again.

"You don't think it is possible," she was urging, with the insistence of one who sees incredible good fortune, "you don't suppose you haven't any moral sense?"

She seemed to hang upon the answer. Rose, in spite of herself and the unhappy moment, laughed.

"I hoped I had," she rejoined, "but I don't believe I ever thought much about it."

Madam Fulton nodded quite gayly.

"That's it!" she cried. "Don't you see you haven't? When they have it, they're always thinking about it. It's like a cinder in the eye. My dear, you're just as bad as I am, and I thank my stars I've met you."

But all this touch and go was a strange, poor sequel to the task of that confession. It had all turned out very small beer indeed, except so far as Electra was concerned. Electra, Rose was convinced, in a moment of sadly mirthful fancy, was upstairs setting her judgments in order and decorously glad to have been proven right.

"I'll go now," she said, rising. She felt very tired with it all. "I've told you."

"But come again, my dear," the old lady insisted. "Be sure you come again. You are so understanding, I shall miss you sadly. Come every day."

Rose went down the garden path and noted, with some irony, that Billy Stark, still smoking, turned away into the grape arbor. It looked like the shyness of decorum. She could hardly know that Billy felt unable to bear any more revelations from womenfolk. And now she said to herself, "I shall have to tell grannie and I shall have to tell Peter."

Opportunity was easy, for Peter was at that moment coming whistling along the road on the way to Electra's. When she saw him, her purpose failed. He looked so boyish, so free and happy-hearted. How could she give him a sordid secret to keep, in place of their admiring comradeship?

"Where is my father?" she asked him, when they met and Peter had pulled off his hat and salaamed before her.

"Gone down to the plantation to see Osmond."

She took fright.

"To see Osmond! How does my father know anything about him? How does he dare--"

"Osmond sent for him," said Peter, turning to walk with her. He was tossing up his stick and catching it, in love of the day. "It's the first human being Osmond has expressed an interest in. But I don't wonder. Everybody wants to see the chief."

"Why should he have sent?" she repeated to herself.

"I'll tell you something," continued Peter. "The chief will tell you when you see him. He has been summoned."

"My father?"

"Yes. He is needed."

"Where?"

"He won't tell me. But it's urgent. It means canceling his engagements here. Of course there's but one supposition."

"Russia?"

He nodded.

"I wish I could go with him," he said impetuously.

She looked at him, and his face was glowing. She had seen that look so many times on other faces, that wistful longing for the unnamed beautiful. It was what Markham MacLeod was always calling out in faces. They might be young, they might be the faces of those who had suffered long experience, but always it was those who were hungry, either with the

hunger of youth or the delay of hope, the cruelty of time. He seemed to be the great necromancer, the great promiser. Could such promises come to naught?

"To leave here?" she suggested. "To leave--" she hesitated.

"I shouldn't leave Electra," said Peter simply. "When I met you, I was going to ask her to go with me."

She stopped and held out her hand to him.

"Go," she said. "Go to her and ask her. I wish you luck, Peter--dear Peter!"

He did not look altogether a happy lover, as he stood holding her hand. He gazed at her, she thought, sadly, as if he dreamed of things that could not be. What was it in youth that made everything into twilight, even with the drum and fife calling to wars and victories? She was impatient with it, with deceiving life itself that promised and then lied. She took her hand away.

"Good-by, Peter," she said, sadly now in her turn, because it occurred to her that after Peter should have seen Electra, he would never again be her own good comrade. He would know. She left him standing there looking after her, and then, when he found she would not loiter, he went on his way. But Peter did not toss his stick up now. He walked slowly, and thought of what he meant to do.

They seemed to be walking with him, one on each side, Rose and Electra. It was chiefly the thought of Electra, as it had moulded him from year to year while he had been absent from her; but it was the delicate presence of the other woman, so wonderful by nature and so equipped with all the arts of life that the pleasure of her was almost pain. They seemed to keep a hand upon him, one through his fealty to her and the other by compelling and many-sided beauty.

XX

Electra, in her excitement, found herself unable to stay upstairs at her accustomed tasks. She had to know what grandmother thought of this ill-bred woman. But speeding down, she saw grandmother in the garden path with Billy Stark. There they walked intimately arm-in-arm, and grandmother talked. There was something eager in the pose of her head. Evidently what she had heard quite pleased her, if only because it was some new thing. And there was Peter at the door. Instantly the light sprang renewed into Electra's eyes. Peter would do still better than grandmother to confirm her triumph, though at the moment even she charged herself to be lofty in her judgments and temperate in expressing them. Peter did not look at all like one who had himself heard unlovely news. His face glowed. There were points of light in his dark eyes. Rose had left them there, and Electra, with the sick certainty of the jealous, knew it. They went silently into the library, Peter holding, as well as he might, the lax hand hanging at her side. In the morning light of the room they faced each other, and she asked her question, the one that, unbidden, came leaping to her lips.

"Did you meet her?"

He knew whom she meant, for his thought, too, was full of her.

"Yes," he said, and then swept even Rose aside as deflecting him from his purpose. "Electra, I have decided to go back to France."

Immediately she thought she saw why. Rose was going and he had to follow.

"What did she tell you?" she cried sharply. The pang that came astonished her, it was so savage. Even in the haste of the moment, she had time for a passing surprise that she could be so moved by Peter. He was looking at her with innocent perplexity.

"Rose?" he said. "Nothing. I told her I was coming here and she--" He paused, for he was on the point of adding, "She sent me." Peter could see how ill-judged that would be.

Electra, her proud glance on him, was considering, balancing probabilities. With his artist's eye he saw how handsome she was, how like, in the outer woman, to his imperial lady. Such spirit in her could only, it seemed, be spent for noble ends.

"Has she told you?" asked Electra, and there was something, he saw, beyond what he suspected. Her voice rang out against her will: "No, she hasn't. She means, for some reason, not to tell you. But she has had to tell me."

Peter was staring at her.

"Has something happened to her?" he asked quickly. "I must know."

That mysterious rage she was so unwilling to recognize got possession of her again.

"It means a great deal to you," she breathed.

"Of course it does," said Peter honestly. "Don't keep me dangling, Electra."

Electra's mouth seemed to harden before his eyes. She looked like some noble and beautiful image of justice or a kindred virtue.

"She thinks I shall not tell you," she declared. "But I shall. It is no more right for you to be deceived than it was right for me. I shall tell you."

"Don't tell me anything she wouldn't wish," said Peter earnestly. He began to see the need of holding down the flaming spirit in her, lest it consume too much. "If there is anything she wants me to know, she will tell me."

"My instinct was right," said Electra, now with equal steadiness. "She was not his wife. Tom never married her."

Peter was tired of that issue. His controlled manner showed it.

"I know what you think about that, Electra," he said. "You see we don't agree. We mustn't talk about it."

Electra answered him with a gracious certainty.

"That was what she told me, Peter. She told grandmother, too. For some reason she has abandoned her deception. She has a reason for ending it. That was what she said. Tom never married her."

Peter's face was blazing, the indignant blood in it, the light darting from his eyes. He straightened. His hands clenched. His voice was thick with anger.

"Tom never married her?"

"That was what she told us."

"The damned scoundrel!"

Electra had been regarding him in serene certainty of her own position and her ability to hold it. But human nature flashed out in her, the loyalty of blood.

"Are you speaking of my brother?" she demanded.

"I am speaking of your precious brother. And I might have known it." Ire, gathering in him, suffused his face anew. "I might have known Tom Fulton would do the dastardly trick in any given situation. Of course he never married her."

"You don't seem to think of her," she reminded him, under her breath.

"Not think of her! What else am I thinking of? Poor child! poor child!"

Electra was always having to feel alone in the world. Art left her desolate when other people sang and painted and she could only praise. Love and the fierce loyalty she coveted were always failing her and lavishing themselves elsewhere. She had one momentary impulse to speak for herself.

"Do you wonder now," she said, "that I wouldn't accept her?"

"Not accept her, when she had been hurt? Good God, Electra! how monstrous it is. You, a delicate woman, fully believed he had wronged another woman as lovely as yourself, and yet the only impression it made on you was that you could not accept her."

Electra resisted the impulse to turn away or put her hands to her face; the tears were coming. She held herself rigid for a moment, choking down the shuddering of her nerves, lest her lips quiver and betray her.

"I suppose,"--the words were almost inaudible, yet he heard them,--"I suppose that is because you have lived so long in France."

"What, Electra?" He spoke absently, his mind with Rose.

"These things have ceased to mean anything to you. It is not a moral question. You see the woman is pretty and you--"

"No, no! She is beautiful, but that's not it. I can't theorize about it, Electra, only the whole thing seems to me monstrous."

That he should wrong her! That he should be able to make her care about him in the first place--a fellow like him--just because he was handsome as the devil and had the tongue of angels--but that he should wrong her, that she should come over here expecting kindness--" It was Peter who put a hand before his eyes, not because there were tears there, but as if to shut her out from a knowledge of his too candid self. But in an instant he was looking at her again, not in anger, but sorrowfully.

"Isn't it strange?" she exclaimed, almost to herself.

"What, Electra?"

"Strange to think what power a woman has--a woman of that stamp."

"Don't, Electra. You mustn't classify her. You can't."

She was considering it with a real curiosity.

"You don't blame her at all," she said. "You know Tom did wrong. You don't think she did."

"Electra," he said gently, "we can't go back to that. It's over and done with. Besides, it is between those two. It isn't our business."

"You could blame Tom!" She clung to that. He saw she would not release her hold.

"Electra!" He put out his hands and took her unwilling ones. Then he gazed at her sweetly and seriously; and when Peter was in gentle earnest, he did look very good. "Electra, can't you see what she is?"

His appealingness had for the instant soothed that angry devil in her. She wrenched her hands free, with the one hoarse cry instinct with mental pain,--

"You are in love with her!"

Peter stepped back a pace. His face paled. He could not answer. Electra felt the rush of an emotion stronger than herself. It swept her on, her poise forgotten, her rules of life snapping all about her.

"I have always known it, from the first day you spoke of her. She has bewitched you. Perhaps this is what she really came for--to separate us. Well, she has done it."

Something seemed demanded of him, and he could only answer in her own words,--

"Has she done it?"

Her heat had cooled. Her soberer self had the upper hand again, and she spoke now like the gracious lady called to some dignified dismissal.

"I find," she said, "I must have intended to say this for days. We must give up--what we meant to do."

"You must give me up, Electra?"

"I give you up."

"I came to-day,"--Peter's voice sounded very honest in his endeavor to show how well he had meant,--"I came to ask you to go back to France. We would live on a little. We would serve the Brotherhood--the chief says you have joined already--" Electra bowed her head slightly, still in a designed remoteness.

"I shall go to France," she said, "later. But I shall never marry you. That is over. As you said of something else, it is over and done with."

She glanced toward the door, but he kept his place. Peter was conscious that of all the things he ought to feel, he could not summon one. It did not seem exactly the woman he had loved who was dismissing him. This was a handsome and unfriendly stranger, and in the bottom of his heart surged a sweet new feeling that was like hope and pain.

"Let us not talk any more," she was saying, with that air of extreme courtesy which still invited him to go.

Peter walked slowly to the door.

"I am wondering"--he hesitated. "Why do you say that, Electra? Why do you tell me I am in love with her?"

He looked as shy as a girl. It struck her full in the mind that even in this interview she had no part. She had refused a lover, and he was going away with his thoughts stirred by another woman.

"I said so," she repeated clearly, "because it is true. You are in love with her. Good-by."

Peter turned to her with one of his quick movements and held out his hand. She did not take it.

"Won't you shake hands, Electra?" he asked. "I should think we might be friends." Honest sorrow moved his voice. Now, at least, he was thinking of her only.

Electra meant to show no resentment, no pain. But she had to be true.

"I can't," she said, in a low tone. "Good-by."

And Peter, seeing the aversion in her face, not for him, perhaps, but for the moment, got himself hastily out of the room and into the summer road. And there, before he had walked three paces, Peter began to sing. He sang softly, not at all because melody was unfitted to the day, but as if what inspired it were too intimate a thing to be revealed. He looked above him, straight ahead, and on every side.

The world was beautiful to him at this moment, and he had a desire to drink it up, to be as young and as rich as Apollo. He did feel very rich, not only in his youth, but in the unnamed possibilities trembling before him; and Peter denied himself no pleasure because it was inappropriate to the moment. It would have seemed to him a refusal of the good gifts of life and an affronting of the God who created plenty if, because he had lost Electra, he renounced the delight of a happiness he really felt. By and by he would remember Electra, how dignified she was, how irreproachable, in the moments when her virtues did not get the bit between their teeth and dash away with her; but now, under this abounding summer sun, with the leaves trembling, she withdrew into a gray seclusion like an almost forgotten task--one that had resolved itself into a beneficent fulfillment quite unlike what it had promised. Noble as it was, he had been excused from it, and he felt blissfully free. Something else that swam before him like the gleam of a vision did not look like another task. It was more like a quest for a hero's arming. It fitted his dreams, it went hand in hand with the visions he had had years ago about his painting, when that was all possibility, not work. This was the worshipful righting of an innocent lady.

She was there in view when he got home, as if she had waited for him, under a tree, trembled about by the summer green, her white dress flickered upon by leaves. She was pale; her mouth looked piteous to him, and his heart beat hard in championship. She half rose from her chair, and let her unread book fall to the grass beside her.

There were two things Rose wanted very much to know: whether Electra had shocked him out of his trust in her, and why her father stayed so long in that visit to Osmond at the plantation. The last question was the great one, and she asked it first.

"What can my father be saying to him?"

"Osmond? I don't know. Equal rights, labor, capital, God knows. Rose, don't sit there. Please get up!"

She obeyed, wondering, brushed out her skirt and put her hair straight, and then glanced at him.

"What for?" she asked. "What do you want me to do?"

Peter looked to her about eighteen, perhaps, nothing but youth and gleam and gay good luck. She felt a thousand years older herself, yet she loved Peter dearly. She would do anything for him. This she told herself in the moment of smoothing down her hair. His face brimmed over with fun, with something else, too. The seriousness that dwells housemate to comedy was behind.

"I couldn't say it with you lying there and looking at me," said Peter. "Nobody ever made a proposal to a lady in a steamer chair unless he was in another and the deck was level."

"Peter," she said gravely, "don't make fun."

Peter shook back the lock of hair he encouraged to tumble into his eyes. It was his small affectation. It kept him at one with his artistic brotherhood.

"I am rejected," he said, and do what he might, he announced it exultingly, and not in the least with the dignity he would have admired in the lady who had refused him. But at that moment Peter had had enough of dignity and the outer form of things. He wanted to be himself, light or sad, bad or good, and speak the truth as the moment revealed it to him. "But I am rejected," he continued, when she looked at him in a quick reproof, "turned down, jilted, smashed into a cocked hat. And I came just as quick as I could. Rose--"

"Don't!" she warned him. "Don't say that, Peter."

"Just as quick as I could get here without running--I couldn't run, there were so many pretty things to look at--to tell you, to beg of you"--Peter's voice broke. He was behaving badly to conceal how much he was moved. "I came to offer it to you," he said seriously, in a low tone. "Not what was given back to me, but something else, so much better you couldn't speak of 'em in the same day. When I think of what might be, it's all light and color--and the leaves of the wood moving. It's a great big dream, Rose, and you fit into it. You fit into the dream." He was intoxicated with youth and life. She was not sure whether it was with her.

"I hope you haven't quarreled," she said soberly. She wished she might recall him. "But if you have and are patient--"

Peter could not let her go on. He put out his quick, clever hands in an eager gesture, as if he pushed something away.

"Ah," he said, "I don't want to be patient! I want to be rash. I don't want anything back. I want something new and beautiful. I want to tell you a million things in a minute--chiefly how much I love you."

His voice had deepened. It swept her on apace, in spite of herself, because it was like Osmond's. For a moment she felt the kinship between them, the same swift blood, the picturesque betrayals. There was something at the heart of each that was dear to her, and Peter, for the moment, speaking in the sunshine with her eyes upon him, was also the voice out of the dark. But she had nevertheless to recall him.

"Have you really given each other up?" she asked.

"Yes," said Peter, in the same glad acquiescence. "And what do you think she told me, the last thing of all?"

She shook her head.

"She told me I loved you. And I do, Rose. Oh, I do! I do!"

"But that mustn't part you. Think what it is to me--to know my coming here has done it."

"Oh, you had to come!" said Peter light-heartedly. "It was preordained. It's destiny. I was a fool not to see it the first minute. She had to tell me."

Rose, in spite of herself, smiled a little. But her thoughts settled gravely back upon her own hard task.

"Did she tell you"--She hesitated, and then asked her question with a simple directness. "Did she tell you how much mistaken you are in me?"

"Please don't," said Peter. His face flushed. He looked his misery.

"You see she is the only one who was not mistaken in me. Those of you who believed in me--well, I must tell all of you. Even grannie, dear grannie! I am afraid--" She stopped because she meant to show no emotion; but it seemed to her that grannie, in her guarded life, must view her harshly. "I was wrong, Peter, ever to let you mix yourself in this miserable coil. If I could lie, well and good. Let me do it and take the consequences. But I should have known better than to bring you into it."

Peter stood thoughtfully regarding her in a very impersonal way, as if he debated how she could be moved.

"I wonder," he said at last, "how it is possible to tell you how lovely you are to everybody, how perfectly splendid, you know, quite different from anybody else! And when you add to that that you've been wronged and--and insulted--oh you've simply no conception how it makes a fellow feel! Why, I adore you, that's all. I just adore you."

He stretched out his hand like a bluff comrade and she put hers into it as frankly.

"You're a dear boy, Peter," she said, and her eyes were wet.

He spoke perversely, when she had taken her hand away:--

"That's all very well, you know, but I'm not a boy--not all the time. I love you awfully, Rose, in the real way, the bang-up old style, Tristan and all that, you know. I'm going to keep on and you'll have to listen."

"Shall I, Peter?" She was still smiling wistfully. Love, sweet, clean, young love looked very beautiful to her. She wished she could see it crowning some head, not hers, some girl quite worthy of him. "Well, not to-day."

"No, maybe not to-day," Peter agreed obstinately, "but other days, all the days. I can't give up the most beautiful thing there is, and you're that. You're simply the most beautiful there is."

"There's grannie coming out on the veranda." Then she added bitterly, "I wonder if she will think I am the most beautiful thing there is!"

XXI

MacLeod was not used to being summoned, except by high officials, and then if the meeting would not advantage his cause, he was likely to take a journey in another direction. But when Osmond's man invited him to go down to the shack that morning, he had agreed with a ready emphasis, and now walked along, smiling over the general kindness of things. The change of air after his sea voyage was doing him good, and he had been able to command anew the sense of physical prosperity which had once been his habitual possession. That forbade him morbid premonitions and withdrawals relative to the bodily life. It hardly seemed possible, this robust guardian declared, that anything should happen to him, save after a very long period, when inevitable decay would set in. But in a harmonious mood and prospect retreated so far that it might almost as well not threaten at all. He had no doubt that when change fell upon the aged, it was as beneficent in its approach as the oncoming of sleep. But of these things he need not think, except as they might be brought to his mind by the disasters of other people. Acquiesce in the course of nature, said his philosophy, and refuse to anticipate trouble as trouble. It could always be curbed or stamped out when it came. That abounding certainty was a part of his power.

He found his way without difficulty. The neat rows of growing things led him in from the road, and directing his steps toward the shack, where he had understood Osmond lived, he saw a figure advancing to meet him, a man in a blue blouse, like a workman, beating his hands together as he came, to dust the soil from them. When they were at a convenient interval, the man looked at MacLeod with a measuring gaze, and MacLeod returned the challenge with what was, perhaps, too frank encouragement. He put out his hand, but Osmond shook his head. He opened his two palms, displaying them.

"I didn't expect you for a few minutes yet," he said, "or I should have washed. I'm just out of the dirt. Come on down to the house. We won't go in. There are some seats outside."

MacLeod knew at once, through the keen sense that served him in his fellowship with men, that the excuse was a true one, yet that Osmond was glad he had it to offer. He evidently had no desire to shake hands. That seemed reasonable enough. The man was quite unlike other men in his unstudied speech, the clear, healthy, and yet childlike look of his eyes. It was as if, working in the earth, he had become a part of it. When they were in the shade of the great oak tree by the house, each in his rough chair, MacLeod stretched out his legs, with much enjoyment, and offered his host a cigar.

"No, thank you," said Osmond. He felt briefly, and was ashamed of himself for entertaining it, a childish regret that he did not smoke. Every easy habit gave the man of the world an advantage the more. "Light up," he said grimly, as MacLeod, after a questioning look which seemed also a commiserating one, was about to return the case to his pocket. "I like to see it--and smell it--rather."

So MacLeod brought out his pipe and did light up.

"I smoke very little," he explained. "That's the way to skim the cream. It's the temperate man for flavors. Know that?"

Osmond, temperate in all ways from necessity, hardly knew how he should have felt about it if desires and delight had presented themselves to him as companions, not as foes. He pulled himself up, with an effort. MacLeod's effect on him was something for which he was not prepared. The man's physical fitness, his self-possession in the face of anything that might be required of him, made hot blood in Osmond. There was no ground for them to meet upon. Temperance of life in order to enjoy the more keenly? Then, to be honest, he would have to confess that for him temperance was his master, and that was a confidence he would not give. There could be no easy commonplaces. He spoke bluntly:--

"I wanted to see you."

"I wanted to see you, too," said MacLeod cordially. "Of course I know all about you. Peter talks about you by the yard."

Osmond's rebellious tongue formed the words, "I don't believe it." But he did not utter them.

"You've worked out a mighty interesting scheme down here," MacLeod continued, taking his pipe out of his mouth and looking about him.

"We have worked," said Osmond.

"It's like the older peasant life of Europe." MacLeod spoke rather at random, seeking about for some thoroughfare with his crusty host. "A sort of paternal government--"

"Not in the least," said Osmond. "My men are my neighbors. They work for me and I pay them."

"Without discontent?"

"I hope so. If I found a man doing half time and grumbling, I should kick him out."

"They don't combine?"

"We all combine. I get good work. They get good wages. It's a square deal."

"Profit-sharing?"

"No, not exactly."

"It strikes me as a sort of community," said MacLeod. "Everybody at work and everything in common."

"Now, why does it strike you that everything is in common? The place is mine."

"Ah, my dear fellow!" MacLeod forgot the simplicity of the moment and put on his platform voice. "Nothing is ours."

Osmond regarded him with a slow smile coming,--his perfect clothes, his white hand, his air of luxurious equipment.

"Isn't it?" he asked ironically. "Well, it looks mighty like it. But I haven't any data. I know what goes on inside my own fences. I don't know much more. What do you want of Peter?"

"To-day?"

"Any time. All the time. He has joined your league. What do you intend to do with him?"

MacLeod put his hands in his pockets and stretched his legs a little farther. He regarded the outer circle of hills, and then brought his gaze back over the pleasant rolling land between. Finally he looked at Osmond and smiled at him in what seemed a community of feeling.

"My dear fellow," he said, "I am not considering the individual."

"I am," said Osmond, with an offensive bluntness. "I am considering Peter. What are you going to do with him?"

"Your brother joined us of his own free will."

"Yes. But now you've got him, what do you want to do with him?"

"Isn't it of any use for me to tell you that when a man joins us, he has passed beyond personal recognition or privilege? Outside our circle, he is an individual; he counts. Inside--well, it is difficult to say what he is. We want him then to consider himself one of the drops that make a sea. The sea washes down things--even the cliffs. The drop of water is of no importance alone. With a million, million others, it moves. It crushes."

Osmond sat looking straight at him with eyes that burned. His hands, hanging at his side, were clenched. He recognized the might of the man, the crude physical power of him like an emanation, and he felt the despairing helplessness of trying to move a potency like that. Cliffs might be corroded by the sea; but a human force that respects no other cannot be easily invaded. He spoke without his own will, and heard himself speaking:--

"You haven't any soul!"

MacLeod was regarding him with as direct a gaze.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked, with a moderate interest. "Do you mean I haven't any mercy, any kindness? Is that what you mean?"

It was not what he meant. It was the indwelling spirit such as he saw in grannie, the mobile thing in Peter that, changing, blossoming in errant will here and there as the sun of life bade it, seemed in one form or another to proclaim itself undying. He shook his head.

"No," he said, "that's not what I mean."

A smile ran over MacLeod's face and moved it most delightfully.

"Well," said he, "if we're going to take inventories--have you a soul?"

Osmond shook his head again.

"I don't know," he answered.

"Well, then, what's the use of slanging me? If you're in the same box yourself--Come, who has one? has anybody?"

Osmond thought then of Rose, and of the fire of the spirit playing over her, that brightness he could neither classify nor define. Yet he must believe in it.

"Yes," he said. "I have seen it."

"You have? And you think I'm exempt. Why?"

Osmond was not getting anywhere. MacLeod and his own ineptitude of speech seemed to be forcing him into the solicitous fright of the mother, bent on shielding her child from the wolf.

"You are too powerful," he said, and realized that he was using the evidence Rose had given him, thought for thought.

"I hope so. I ought to be. I've got to overturn power."

"What's the use? You're a czar yourself. You're only another kind."

MacLeod looked at him thoughtfully, as if struck by the form of words.

"My dear fellow," he said, "is it possible you believe in the present state of things? Do you want one man to possess everything and the next man nothing?"

Osmond frowned his negation. MacLeod, unfairly it seemed to him, made him feel young and inadequate to the matter. He had the eyes to see what cause was just, yet he had not the equipment to maintain any cause at all.

"What is the use," he essayed, "for you and men like you to head revolts? It only means you are ruling instead of the rulers you overturn. It will all be done over again. The big man will rise to the top. The little man will go under. And in time you will have the same conditions repeated. It's because you are not teaching love. You are teaching envy and hate."

"How do you know I am?"

Osmond kept on as if he were speaking to himself, groping painfully for what he found.

"You are not preaching good work. You are preaching revolt against work--class hatred and discontent."

"Do you believe in non-resistance?"

"No."

"Do you believe in Midas, king of gold, swelled up with power, sitting smiling on the throne he has forced others to build for him, and saying, 'I am not as other men are'?"

"No. But I believe in work. You mustn't take it out of a man, that certainty that his own work is the greatest privilege he's got. Oh, you mustn't do that!"

There it was again, his hungry worship of achievement. It might even have seemed to him that oppression was not much to bear if, at the same time, a man had the glory of setting his hand to something and seeing it prosper. MacLeod, who knew something about his life, but nothing of its inward processes, began to feel that here was more than at first appeared, and answered rather temperately,--

"I don't believe you know much about the general conditions under which work is done. Work means to you Peter's painting a picture. Let it mean, for example, a great many Peters in a mine delving all day for some smug capitalist who wants to endow monuments to himself and get his children into society. What then?"

What then, indeed? Osmond could not answer; but a moment later he said again, tenaciously,--

"I don't want you to destroy the idea of good work."

"Well, now!" MacLeod spoke impatiently. He realized that here was not a man whom his torrent of bloody facts would move, but who demanded also a more persuasive rhetoric. "Well, now, you acknowledge the world is upside down. Shall we leave it so?"

Osmond shook his head dumbly.

"Shall we say the great scheme counteracts its own abuses, and we won't interfere? When an empire gets sufficiently

corrupt, it tumbles apart of its own rottenness? Or when we see just cause, shall we go to war?"

"Grannie has the whole secret of it in her hand." This he said involuntarily, for he had no idea of talking to MacLeod about grannie. But the subject had passed beyond their predilections of what was best to say. "Science won't do it--war won't do it. Religion will."

"Ah! You are an enthusiast."

"No. But there is something beyond force and beyond reason."

"Religion, you mean."

"You can call it that. It is what has made that old woman up there at the house live every day of her life as if she were the multi-millionaire of the universe--without a thought of herself, without a doubt that there is an inexhaustible reservoir, and that everybody can dip into it and bring up the water of life. Sometimes when she told me that--how rich we all are, if we only knew it--I used to see the multitudes of hands dipping in for their drop--old wrinkled hands, children's hands."

He was musing now, and yet admitting the other man to his confidence. It was proof of MacLeod's charm that even Osmond, who kept his true self to himself, and who started by hating a girl's oppressor, had nevertheless fallen into a maze of self-betrayal. MacLeod spoke softly, as if he recognized the spell and would not break it--

"Yet, the Founder of her religion said, 'I came not to send peace, but a sword.'"

"How do you know who the Founder of her religion is? I don't know it myself. I don't know but she dug it out of the ground, or breathed it out of the air. She has her sword, too, grannie has. You never saw her licking a boy for torturing a rat. I have."

"What shall we do?"

Osmond roused himself a little from his muse.

"I read something the other day in a book--about the town of Abdera. I suppose you know it."

MacLeod shook his head.

"In the town of Abdera they suddenly began to love one another, that's all. They went round chanting, 'O Cupid, prince of God and men!'"

"Is that going to obviate all the difficulties?"

Osmond looked at him with dog's eyes, the eyes that seek and wonder out of their confusion of incomplete knowledge.

"Every man would refuse to rest," he said, "while any other man was hungry. They would all be humble, the rich as well as the poor. Now, one's as cocky as the other. I don't know that the cockiness of the ignorant is any more picturesque than the cockiness of the privileged."

MacLeod was smiling a little. These, he saw, were pretty dreams, but hardly of the texture to demand destruction. They would fall to pieces, in good time, of their own flimsiness.

"Do you believe in kings?" he asked idly.

Osmond glowed.

"I know it's a mighty pity not to," he said. "Some people have got to be fostered chiefly because they have gifts. If you don't draw a little circle round them, you lose the gifts maybe, and you certainly lose the fun of adoring them. I'd like to be a soldier of Alexander--if I couldn't be Alexander himself. But you'll never get anywhere smashing round and yelling that one man's better than another because he works with his hands. No! the man that brings peace will bring it another way."

MacLeod regarded him for a moment curiously.

"But why," he said at length, "why won't you trust me to bring it precisely that way?"

Osmond smiled faintly.

"No," he said, "you couldn't."

"But why? You say I am extremely powerful. You rather accuse me of it. I am too powerful, in fact. Wasn't that what you

said?"

"Yes."

"Well, why not trust me to administer your great awakening?"

Osmond kept his ironic smile of unbelief.

"You are not the man," he said. "You would not believe in it. You wouldn't live it. You are very powerful. But your mastery wouldn't serve you. That's where you can't pretend."

"Now where have you got your idea of me?" MacLeod was looking at him sharply. "You never saw me before to-day. Yet your idea was already formed before I came down here. Who's been talking to you?"

Osmond had entrenched himself at last in his customary reserve.

"You are a public character," he said indifferently.

"Has Peter been talking about me?"

"Yes. He speaks of you."

"But not in this fashion. Peter believes in me, over head and ears."

"Yes. He believes in you. I wish he didn't."

"Ah!" MacLeod drew a deep breath. "My daughter! Do you know my daughter?"

The question was too quick, and Osmond quivered under the assault of it. He felt the blood in his face. His heart choked him. And MacLeod's eyes were upon him.

"Do you know her?" MacLeod was asking sharply.

"Yes," Osmond heard himself answering, in a moved voice. "I have seen her."

MacLeod spoke with what seemed to the other man an insulting emphasis. Yet Osmond had not time to calm himself by the reminder that he was not used to hearing Rose spoken of at all as mortal woman. In his dreams she was something more than that.

"My daughter," MacLeod was saying, "has an intemperate habit of speech. If she has talked me over with you, she has inevitably made your opinions. For Rose is a very beautiful woman. I needn't tell you that."

Then something strange happened to Osmond. He experienced a sensation which he had accepted as a form of words, and had only idly believed in. He saw red. A rush and surge were in his ears. And as if it were a signal, known once but ignored through years of tranquil living, he as instantly obeyed. He was on his feet, his fists clenched, and MacLeod, also risen, was regarding him with concern and even, Osmond thought in fury, with compassion. The red deepened into black and Osmond felt the suffocation and nausea of a weakness MacLeod instantly formulated for him.

"My dear fellow," he was saying, "sit down here. You're faint."

But Osmond would neither sit nor accept the cup of water MacLeod had brought him from the pail left on the bench for the workmen. He stood, keeping his grip on himself and battling back to life. Presently he was conscious that Peter was there, calling him affectionately. Now again he felt the blood in his face, the wetness of the hair above his forehead, and he knew he was not the man he had been. MacLeod was speaking, in evident solicitude.

"Your brother has had an ill turn. He's all right now, aren't you, Grant?"

Osmond looked at him, smiling grimly. MacLeod seemed to him his foe not only for the sake of Rose, but because the man, great insolent child of good fortune as he was, represented the other side of the joy of fight. Osmond almost loved him, because it was through him that he had been inducted into a knowledge of that unknown glory. MacLeod picked up his pipe from the bench, tapped it empty, and pocketed it. He gave them a pleasant inclusive nod of fellowship.

"I'll trot along," said he. "See you at dinner, Peter."

"What was it, Osmond? What was it?" Peter was asking, in a worried voice.

Osmond suddenly looked tired. He passed his hand over his forehead, and put back his matted hair.

"Pete," he said, "I suppose it was a hundred things. But all it really was, was the rage for fight, plain fight. But whatever it was, I've got something out of it."

"What?"

"I know how men--other men--feel."

"Other men don't want to tackle one another, as a general thing, like bulldogs."

"Oh, yes! they recognize the instinct. They're ready to stamp on it. I wasn't ready. I'm glad to have met that instinct. It's a healthy old devil of an instinct. I respect it."

Peter was staring as if he did not know him.

"What was it, Osmond?" he asked again.

Osmond shook his head and laughed.

"I'll wash my hands," he said. "I feel as if there were dirt on them and the touch of clothes that are not mine." He stopped on his way to the bench where there was a basin and towel for hasty use. "Pete," he said, "you don't want to scrap a little, do you?"

He did not look like the same man. Light was in his face, overlying the flush of simple passions. He looked almost joyous. It was Peter who was distraught, older with a puzzled sadness.

"Don't!" he said. "Don't think of such devilment. There's no good in it. Why, we get over that when we are under twenty--except in an emergency."

"Ah, but this is an emergency," said Osmond, coming out of his washing with clean hands and a dripping face. "It was an emergency for me, if it wasn't for him."

XXII

MacLeod kept his thoughtful way on to Electra's gate. There he turned in with no lack of decision, and walked up to her door. She had seen him, and came forward from the shaded sitting-room. It was as if she had been expecting him. Whether she had acknowledged it to herself or not, it was true that Electra had never felt so strong a desire for the right companionship as at that moment. As soon as she saw him and he had put out his hand to her, she felt quieted and blessed. He was, as he had been from the first, the completion of her mood. As he looked at her, MacLeod, little as he knew her face, noted the change in it. She seemed greatly excited and yet haggard, as if this disturbance were nothing to what had preceded it. And her bright eyes fed upon him with a personal appeal to which he was well used: that of the lower vitality involuntarily demanding the support of his own magnetic treasury.

"You are tired," he said, as she drew her hand away and they sat down.

"No," returned Electra. "I am not tired."

"Tell me what has done it!"

The tender disregard of her denial broke down reserve. She looked at him eloquently. It seemed to her that he had a right to know. She answered faintly,--

"I have been through such scenes."

"Scenes? With whom?"

"Your daughter has told me"--She hesitated for a moment, and then, still confident that his worship of the truth must be as exalted as her own, ended with unstinted candor, "She says she was not my brother's wife."

Electra was looking at him, and it appeared to her now as if, in a bewildering way, his gaze absorbed hers. It was very strange, how he seemed to draw the intelligence of the eye into his and hold it unresisting. She hardly knew how he looked, whether surprised or sympathetic, or whether he was moved at all. But she was conscious of being gripped by some communion in which she acquiesced. After a moment he leaned forward and took her hand.

"Will you promise me something?" he asked.

"Anything!" The quickness of the answer was as eloquent as its force.

"Promise me that this thing--this subject--shall never come between you and me."

"Gladly."

"We won't talk of it."

"No."

"We won't ask each other how it seems to us."

"No."

"There!" He released her hand, and seemed also to free her, in some subtle way. He was smiling at her, and she felt a keen gladness, like a child who is told he has been good.

"Then we can be friends," he said, with a spontaneous relief, it seemed to her, like her own. "The best of friends."

"Yes. The best of friends."

Electra felt rich. Her heart swelled, as now she reflected that here was one who understood her. She had that warm consciousness common to all MacLeod's partisans, that his world and hers were alike. Each was mysteriously prevented by other people from enjoying the full freedom of that world, because each had been, until now, unaccompanied. But they had met at last. The path was plain. All sorts of gates were opening to them.

"Was that all?" MacLeod was asking her. "Were there other scenes?"

Immediately she wished to tell him everything. Yet this was difficult. She hesitated.

"I am"--she flushed redly--"I am not engaged to Peter. He doesn't care about me."

"My dear lady! He would say you do not care for him."

Then Electra saw her good fortune. She was enchanted with the freedom which had fallen upon her in time for her to accept a more desirable bondage. She lifted her head and looked at him in a proud happiness.

"No," she said, "I do not care for him. I never did. I see it now. I am free."

"Are you glad to be free?"

MacLeod had a way of asking women persuasive questions. Though they were interrogative, they had the force of suggestion, of the clinching protest he might make in answer, when confession came. And they only noted, long after, that he never did answer. Electra did not know that form of communion, and it struck her as something holy. She looked him in the eyes, with a clear and beautiful gaze.

"Yes," she said, "I am very glad. Now I am free to devote myself to the most wonderful things, to worship them if I like."

There was passionate sincerity in her tone. It would have made a smaller thing of her vow if she could have said she was free to worship him.

"I am going to tell you something. You must not repeat it."

"I never will."

"I am going back to France."

"You have been summoned!"

He smiled at her and shook his head slightly, as if the manner of it were the only thing he could deny. She followed with another question, rather faintly, for his news left her shivering.

"To France, you said?"

"That is all I can say," he assured her. "It will be France first."

"You will be in danger!" She did not put that as a question. It was an assertion out of her solemn acceptance of his task. But that he did not seem to hear.

"When are you coming to France?" he asked her.

Electra had now no more doubt of the unspoken pact between them than if it had been sealed by all the most blessed vows. It would have cheapened it rather if he had delegated her to the classified courts of sympathy. Instead, it left them a universe to breathe in. It pointed to undiscovered cities beyond the marge of time. It made her his in a way transcending mutual promises. This same full belief rose passionately to assert itself, and perhaps to soothe that small sharp ache in her heart, the kind that rises in woman when man, though he takes the cup, yet offers none in turn.

"Immediately," she answered, without question. "Or, when you tell me to come."

"Will you write to me there?" He scribbled a street and number on a blank card and gave it to her. "I shall not get word from you for a month, at least. Perhaps not until the late autumn. But I shall get it. And if I don't answer, you will know I shall answer by coming--when I can."

Even that seemed enough. It was evident that until he came she would be upholding something for him, keeping the faith. It was beautiful in a still, noble way, one that left her indescribably uplifted. Her eyes were wet when he looked at her. Seen thus, Electra was a fine creature, her severity of outline softened into womanly charm. It seemed unnecessary to claim from him any high assurance of what he had for her to do, yet she did say, for the pleasure of saying it,--

"You are going to let me help you?"

"What else is there for either of us to do," he said quickly, "but to help everybody?"

The blood rushed swiftly to her face and showed her in a glow. She leaned toward him in a timid and what seemed to her, for a moment, an ignoble confidence, because it touched such sordid things.

"I have some money. I will give that--and anything I have. You must teach me. I have everything to learn."

He seemed to promise that, as he seemed to promise other things, partly by his answering smile, partly by the inexplicable current of persuasion pouring from him. He rose.

"Now," he said, "I must go. It is nearly noon."

"You won't stay to luncheon?"

"Won't the others be here?"

"My grandmother and Mr. Stark."

She was hardly urging him, because it seemed to her, too, a doubtful pleasure, if it must be shared.

"Not to-day, then. But I shall see you again."

"Before you go."

Her face called upon him like a messenger beseeching news.

"Many, many times," he told her smilingly. "Many times, even if they have to be within a few days. Now, good-by."

She watched him down the walk, and as if he knew that, he turned, as the shrubbery was closing about him, and waved his hat to her. That seemed another bit of prescience,--to know she was to be there. Electra was very happy. She sat down again in a swoon of the reason and a mad hurry of what cried to her as the higher part of her nature, unrecognized until now, and thought of her exalted fortune.

MacLeod found Rose ready to question him. She was at the gate, to have her word immediately. He noted the signs of apprehension in her face, and, taking her hand, swung it as they walked.

"Has anything happened?" she asked irrepressibly.

"I've been down to--what do they call it?--the plantation."

"What did you talk about?"

"Oh, crops!"

"You don't know anything about crops!"

MacLeod laughed.

"Well, the other man did. I can always listen."

"Have you been there all the time?"

"No. I went in to see Electra."

Rose stopped short in the path between the banks of flowers. It was a still day, and the summer hush of the plot--a velvet stillness where the garden held its breath--made the time momentous to her. Unconsciously she gripped her father's hand.

"She has told you!" she breathed. Her eyes sought his face. MacLeod was looking at her smilingly, fondly even. She shuddered.

"You are a goose, Rose," he said lightly. He released his fingers from the clasp of hers and gave her hand a little shake before he dropped it. "But I can't help it. If you will go on tipping over your saucer of cream, why, you must do it, that's all."

They walked on, and at the steps she paused again, though she heard Peter's voice within.

"You're terribly angry with me, aren't you?" she said, in a low tone, seeming to make it half communion with herself.

"Angry, my girl! Don't say a thing like that."

"You look exactly as you did the night Ivan Gorof defied you--and the next day he died."

MacLeod laughed again, so humorously that Peter, coming forward from the library, his own face serious with unwelcome care, smiled involuntarily and returned to his every-day mood of belief that, on the whole, things go well.

"I didn't kill him," MacLeod was saying, as he mounted the steps.

Rose shivered a little.

"No," she insisted. "But he died."

MacLeod was beguilingly entertaining at dinner that day, and in the afternoon he and Peter went to drive. At supper, too, he was in his best mood, and that evening Rose, worn out by the strain of his persistent dominance, escaped to her own room. There she sat and counseled her tense nerves. She was afraid. Then when she heard the closing of grannie's door, she slipped downstairs to her tryst. The night was dark, and there was a grumble of thunder from the west. In her excitement she took swift steps, as if all her senses were more keenly awake than they had been in the light, and kept the path unerringly. She had no doubt that he was there, but he called to her before she could ask. His voice vibrated to the excitement in her own heart.

"Good child, to come!"

She found her chair and sank into it.

"I had to come." At once she felt light-hearted. There seemed to be no bounds to his protection of her. "I have told Electra."

"I knew you would."

"She has told Peter. They know it now--all but grannie--dear grannie."

"She can wait. She won't flicker. She won't vary. Nothing can shake grannie's old heart."

"What did he say to you to-day?"

Osmond laughed. It was a low note of pleasure.

"Platitudes," he rejoined.

"And what did you say to him?"

"Platitudes again. He said his kind, I said mine. I learned a few truths."

"About his business?--that's what it is. I can say it when I'm not in the same room with him--business."

"About me. I learned what other fellows know when they are boys."

"Did he teach you?"

"He? No. Yes. Through my hatred of him."

"Ah, then you hated him! Was it because I taught you to?"

"Partly. Partly because he is an insolent animal. He is kind because he is well-fed. Yet I think it was chiefly because he has ill-used you."

"Yes," she owned sadly. "I betrayed him to you."

But Osmond had escaped from recollection of the day into a mood half meditative, half excited fancy.

"I have been thinking back, since he left me," he said, "ever so many years. I see I haven't had any life at all."

"Ah!" It was a quick breath of something sweeter than pity. It could not hurt.

"I have been turning away from things all my life, because they were not for me. But now I think--what if I didn't turn away? What if I met them face to face?"

"What, playmate? You puzzle me."

"Grannie indulged Peter. Even in his eating, she couldn't refuse him anything."

"But she loved you best!"

"No doubt of it. But he was well. He could have anything, even hunks of cake. Grannie hates to deny pleasures to any living thing. 'I guess it won't hurt you!' I've heard her say it to him over and over. But to me--"

"To you?"

"Why, to me she never varied. 'Son,' she'd say, 'that isn't the way to do. We can't risk it.' So I turned aside and ate good crusty bread and drank milk. I didn't want cake. I didn't want Peter's coffee. But I wonder how it would seem to have ridden them all bareback, all vices, all indulgences, and conquered them after I'd known them--not turned aside and gone the other way."

In that mood she hardly knew him. The clean, sweet, childlike quality had gone; it had fled before this breath of the passion of life. She felt vaguely how wrong he was. He was idealizing the world as he did not know it and the conquest of the world as it appeared in her father, the master of all its arts.

"Playmate," she said, though she was doubtful of her own wisdom.

"Yes, playmate."

"There isn't anything desirable in evil knowledge. I've heard him say--you know--"

"Tom Fulton?"

"Yes. I've heard him say he wanted to know everything about life--bad and good. He was black with knowledge. I might have learned it from him. I thank God he spared me that. I wish you would be grateful for your clean life. I wish you'd see there's no magic in the things my father knows, for instance. It's better to make a lily grow."

"Ah, but I've discovered things in myself that are exactly like the things in other men--and other men are used to them. So when an ugly beast puts up its head, the man gives it a crack and knocks it silly. Then it lies down a spell, and the man goes about his business. He gets used to its growling and clawing away at intervals. He's only to knock it down. But I don't fully know yet what is in that pit of mine. I discovered something to-day."

"What?"

"The lust for fight."

She shuddered.

"I wasn't prepared for it. Another time I should be. It was an ugly devil--but I loved it."

She was silent, and after a moment he asked her, in his old anxious, friendly tone, "Have I hurt you?"

"No. But somehow it seems as if you'd gone away."

"I know. I'm still communing with that brute in me--the fighting brute. I must be honest with you. I can't help thinking he'd give me a special kind of pleasure."

"Would he?" She asked it wistfully. He had opened the windows of their house to strange discords from without. "What kind of pleasure?"

He was glad to tell. The magnitude and newness of his emotion that day made it something to be flaunted while the disturbed currents of his blood kept their fervor. Later he might put it to the test of equable judgment. Now it was all a glory of hot action.

"Playmate," he said, "I wanted to kill him."

"My father? Oh, why, why?"

"Maybe for your sake. Yes! there was an instant when I said I would kill him and free you from him." She could not answer. He heard the rustle of her dress and added quickly, "Now, don't go. Of all nights, to-night is the night I can't spare you."

"I thought it was the one when you didn't need me."

"I need you to listen. I'm a blaring, trumpeting egotist to-night. Please understand me! Stop being a woman a minute, and see how it would seem to be a man--not like me, but free to live and sin and refuse to sin."

"You are free," she said, in her low, pained voice. "You have refused all the ignoble things."

"Ah, but I didn't even parley with them. I wish I could feel I'd whacked them and broken their skulls instead of going the other way."

"Playmate," she cried, "you are all wrong. You must not parley with them. You must refuse to look at them."

"Refuse to look at the worm that eats the root? No. Find him and stamp on him. The worst of it is, I begin to be rather terrified. I see that life is a bigger thing than I thought."

"Not to grannie. To her it's big and simple."

"Because she knows the way. Well, what if there are many ways,--not like hers, not the true way,--but ways we ought to look at before we can say we know life at all? Think of it, playmate. You are a woman, younger than I, delicate as a rose; yet you know more about life than I. You know how to meet men and women. There aren't surprises you can't master."

She sat wondering what it was that had moved him, and whether it was not simply the power of MacLeod's personality, equally compelling to love or hate. But Osmond was going on in that fierce monologue.

"I feel as if I had been waked up. Once I had my riding dream. Now I have a million dreams. Did I tell you my riding dream? Some nights--chiefly when there's a moon--I wake and lie there and fancy I am on a horse. There's the smell of the horse and the leather, the creak of the saddle, and we are riding like the devil or the wind, always over plains that stretch out into more miles, however far I ride. I am bent over the saddle, peering forward. That's what I had when my blood moved too fast for me. Now I shall dream of fight. Playmate, what is it?"

"It isn't anything. I didn't speak."

"Yes, but there was that quick little breath. I keep hurting you somehow. Do you suppose I want any of it except for you? I want to ride to you. I want to fight because I could fight for you."

"Ah," she said sadly, "you think so now for a minute. But you had forgotten me."

"Yes, I had," he owned. "That's being a man, too. We have to forget you or we couldn't ride and we couldn't fight. But it's all for you."

There was the thunder again.

"I must go back," she said.

"Yes, it's going to rain. You must go. One minute. It won't come yet. Does he know you have told Electra?"

"My father? Yes."

"What did he say?"

"He--accepted it." For some reason, she dared not tell him how that acceptance troubled her. Osmond himself seemed like an unknown force as ready to bring confusion as calm.

But he knew.

"You are afraid of him," he said. "Dear child, don't be afraid. Sit down hard and say 'no' and 'no,' whatever he demands. You are here with us. Grannie is an angel of light. She'll send for shining cohorts and they'll camp round about you. There's Peter--your Peter. And I'll die for you."

"No! no!" The assurance of his tone was terrifying to her. She saw him dying in unnecessary sacrifice. "Nobody must die for me. We must all live and be good children and do what grannie would want us to."

"Then the first thing is to run home and go to bed. The storm is coming. Good-night, dear playmate. I'll follow on behind and see you don't get lost."

"One minute!" She paused, not knowing how to say it. "Can't you take it back?" she ventured. "What you said about my father?"

He laughed, with an undertone of wild emotion.

"Not even for you! I did want to kill him. If I got my hands on him, I should want it again. But it was for you."

"Good-night."

She was going, and he called after her,--

"Remember!"

"What shall I remember?"

She halted hopefully, and the old kind voice was near her:--

"Remember I would die for you."

XXIII

Peter was early at Osmond's door. He did not find him working, though the other men had been many hours afield, but standing still gazing off into the distance. Osmond was pale. He looked as if he had not slept, and the lines about his mouth hinted at decisions.

"I want to speak to you," said Peter abruptly.

"Yes. I want to speak to you, too." The answer was gravely and almost unwillingly given. "Come out under the tree."

They took their way silently to the apple tree, but there neither could, after old custom in a talk, throw himself on the ground to luxuriate and, in moments of doubt, chew a blade of grass. Peter walked back and forth, a short tether. Osmond, fixed in some unexplained reserve, awaited him. Peter spoke first, nervously.

"Electra has given me up."

"Well, it was bound to come."

"Why was it?"

"It was a dream, Pete. You dreamed it when you were a boy. It was the best you had then."

"Well, there's something else. That's not a dream. But I don't know that I can talk of it yet. What was it you wanted to say to me?"

At intervals all night Osmond had been wondering how to broach it.

"You know, boy," he began at last, "it isn't good for you any more to have me send you money."

Peter stared.

"But it's our money," he said.

Osmond too stared, but not at him. He was wondering whether Peter could possibly fail to see that the money, all these years, had not come by favor, that it had been earned by Osmond's own arduous grappling with the earth, that struggle out of which the man had gained strength and the earth had yielded her fruits.

"You see, boy," he hesitated, "there isn't anything but the place, and that's grannie's."

"Yes, but the place earns something."

"Not without a good deal put into it."

"Ah!" Peter drew a breath of pure surprise. "You're tired of overseeing, old boy. I don't wonder. Of course you must let up."

Again Osmond waited, not so much to commune with himself as from sheer disinclination to face the awkwardness of speech. It was impossible to say, "I am not tired of serving you, but you must not be served. You must carry your pack."

"You see," he began again, "the place must stand intact while grannie lives. After that, we don't know. But now--Pete, you must paint your pictures."

"Of course!" But the response was wavering. Peter smiled radiantly. "Come, old chap," he said, "you're not going to make rules for me, because it's better for the white man to bear his burden."

Osmond, too, tried to smile, and failed in it.

"I don't know but I am," he said, with a wry face. "Pete, I want you to go in and conquer--earn your fame, earn your bread. I don't want you to depend on anybody, even on me."

Peter was wrinkling his brows. He was delightfully good-tempered, and money meant very little to him save as a useful medium of which there was sure to be enough. He had never regarded it as a means of moral discipline.

"That's very awkward," he said, "because--Osmond, I want to marry."

"To marry! You said she had given you up!"

"Oh, Electra!" That issue had withdrawn into a dim past. "Osmond, I have spoken to Rose."

"Rose!" Now again Osmond felt the blood beating in his ears. Was it the impulse of fight, he asked himself, or another, as savage? But this time he did not mean to be overborne. Peter was speaking simply and boyishly, with a great sincerity.

"I see now there never was anybody but Rose, from the minute we met. I told her yesterday."

"So you are--engaged." Osmond brought out the commonplace word with a cold emphasis.

Peter looked at him, surprised.

"No. She's not to be had for the asking. I had to tell her. But I've got to earn her. If you knew her as I do, you'd see that."

Osmond's brain was in a maze of longing to hear what she had said, and with it a fierce desire to escape that knowledge. Also he was overborne by a passionate recoil from his own suggestion of cutting off his brother's income. At least he might have some share in their happiness. He could work here like a gnome underground, delving for the gold to deck their bridal. And underneath was that new pain at the heart: that earth pang so sickening that it might well threaten to stop the heart's beating altogether.

"There never was anything like her," said Peter, out of his new dream. "She needs happiness, sheer happiness, after what she has been through. That settles it about living abroad." He looked up brightly. "We must be in Paris."

"You think she would wish it?"

"We should be near her father, near headquarters. For of course we should be working for the Brotherhood."

Osmond turned abruptly.

"I must get to hoeing," he said.

Peter followed him. Something in the air struck him with a new timidity.

"You know," he qualified, when they were well into the field, "she hasn't accepted me."

"No."

"I'm not the man for her, in many ways. Who is? But by the powers! I bet I could make her happy."

He took off his hat to strike at a butterfly, not to destroy it but to prove his good-will, and Osmond, without glancing at him, knew exactly how he looked, and thought bitterly that to Peter Rose was only one of a hundred beautiful things that made the earth a treasury. And to Osmond there was but one, and that was Rose.

Peter took the path homeward, and Osmond kept on across the field. At the farthest bound, he stepped over the stone wall into the bordering tangle on the other side, and crossed that field also and went on into the pasture, to the pines. This land was his, and the deep woods, stretching forth in a glimmering twilight, had been in many moods his best resort. He did not enter far, but sat down in a little covert where in spring there were delicate flowers. There he faced himself.

Everything brought its penalty, even life. This he knew at last. He could not feed on what he called his kinship with Rose and escape the suffering from a bond unfulfilled. Instead of halting outside the garden of being, smelling its fragrance and thankful for a breath, he was inside with other men who owned the garden and felt free to eat the fruit. He had never really been outside the garden at all. He had merely been turning away from the blossoming trees, denying himself the certainty of what the fruit might be, working carefully about the roots and learning the unseeing patience of the earthworm. And the one flower had bloomed in the garden at last, so sweet he could not ignore it, so white it lighted the air like a lamp that was stronger than the sun. He had bade himself never to forget that he was not like other men; but he was exactly like other men, for he loved a woman.

As he sat there, overcome by this conviction of the tyranny of the universe, one thought pierced him like the light of stars. He could have made her happy. A sweet exultancy told him that her nature turned to him as irrevocably as the needle to the north. He could sway and dominate her. He could comfort her with the unconsidered tenderness that, when he thought of her, came with his breath. As by a revelation he understood what she had meant when she told him how love had been her waiting dream. In a passion of sympathy he saw her trailing through sad undergrowths in pursuit of that luring light--now stumbling in the bog of earthy desires other hands had led her to, now pricked by thorns of disappointment, but never for a moment sullied through that wretched progress; and when the marsh was past, washing her garments and her feet in the water of life--that unquenchable spring of belief in the mystery. That was what it was, the divine mystery, the force that led through all appearance to the real, through all false glitter to the light. It was a heavenly vision, the possibility as she saw it: the rounded life, the two bound in a mutual worship, carrying their full cup carefully to the altar where they would make their vows. He saw how lesser desires could be wiped out by one pure passion, how no price is too great to pay for the soul's treasure, not so much the possession of it, but the guarding it for all the uses of the world.

While he lay there, the scent of the pines in his nostrils, it seemed to him that he was living through the progress of his completed life with her. There was not only the overwhelming passion of it, but the intimate communion of quiet days. She would turn to him for counsel and for sustenance, as he would turn to her. This would be the interchange of needs and kindnesses. There would be funny little queernesses of the day to keep them laughing; and they would be kind, not forgetful in their castle of content, but kind, the stronger that they had multiplied their strength by union.

And then settled upon him again his wonder at the inexorability of things, that a man could not escape the general laws because he willed to live outside them. He was bound round by necessity. Merely because he would not take a mate, he was not exempt from crying out for her. And as the day went on and the vividness of his first high vision faded, his mind went back to Peter and the incredible truth that Peter also knew he could make her happy. The cloud of jealousy darkened again, and he met earth pangs and strangled them. But as he slew them, more were born, and lying there in the fern he hated his brother and his brother's body, born to regnancy. MacLeod, too, appeared before his inward vision, wholesome, well-equipped, riding the earth as Apollo drives the horses of the sun. Him, too, he hated, and for Rose's sake longed again to put him away with his own hands out of the air she breathed. Spent by his passions, he lingered there in the coolness of the unheeding woods while the afternoon gloomed into night.

Madam Fulton sat on the veranda, thinking sadly. She found herself puzzled by one thing most of all. Several times a day she had asked Billy Stark, "Do you really believe there's anything in that notion about money's being tainted?"

"Don't fret yourself," he counseled her, in his kind voice; but she would sit wrinkling her brows and putting the question again to herself, if not to him.

"The trouble is, Billy," she had said, this morning, "I get so puzzled. It's like trying to learn a new language when you're old. My eyes are too blurred to see the accents. My ears are dulled. There's that girl that comes looking like an angel

and says she's a sinner. I thought she might be a comfort; but no, if you please. She just looks Electra in the face and says, 'I'm as good as the best, only I prefer to do things in my own way.' I wish Electra hadn't made me so frightfully self-conscious."

But smile at it all she might, something had wrought upon her. She looked older and more frail, a pathetic figure now, leaning forward in a ruminating dream, and reminding Billy Stark, in a hundred unconsidered ways, of the shortness of the time before she should be gone. His heart ached. He had truly loved her in his youth, and afterwards, in other fashions, for many years.

As she sat there in her daze of past and present, she was aware that a tall white figure stood before her in the sun. She recalled herself with a start from those never-to-be-explored bounds, and came awake, humorously frightened at the thought that here, judging from the height and whiteness, was an angel come to make remarks upon tainted money. But it was only Electra.

"The next thing to it," said Madam Fulton, with her broad-awake smile.

"What did you say, grandmother?" asked Electra.

"Nothing, my dear. What were you going to say? Sit down. You dazzle me in that sun."

Electra sat down and considered how she should speak, having triumphant news to tell. Then, in the midst of her reflection, the news got the better of her. She began with an eloquent throb in her voice.

"Grandmother, I am going abroad."

"So Peter has spoken, has he? When is it to be?"

"I am not going with Peter. That is all over."

"Well, you're a silly girl. You never'll get such a nice boy again. Peter could make a woman laugh from morning till night, if she'd have the sense to please him."

"I am going for a year. At least, I say a year. I put no limit to it in my own mind. Do you want to go with me, grandmother?"

"No, I'm sure I don't. If I go with anybody, it will be Billy Stark."

"Then I must go alone," A high determination ruled her voice.

"Alone! Mercy, Electra! you're a young woman. Don't you know you are?"

"I am glad I am young," said Electra. Her eyes were shining. "I shall have the more years to devote to it."

"You don't mean to say you propose crossing alone? Did you want to drag me out of my coffin to see you landed there respectably?"

"I am quite willing to go alone," said Electra, still with her air of beatific certainties. "I shall be the more unhampered. You must stay here all you want to, grandmother. Keep the house open. Act exactly as if it were yours."

A remembrance of the time when she had thought the place not altogether her own tempered the warmth of that permission. Some severity crept into her demeanor, and Madam Fulton, recognizing its birth, received it humbly as no more than she had earned.

"When are you going, Electra?" she asked.

"In about a month. Grandmother!" Electra, in her worship of the conduct of life, hardly knew how to express strong emotions without offense to her finer instincts. "I don't forget, grandmother," she hesitated, "that I ought to be with you."

"Why ought you?"

"Because--grandmother, haven't I a duty to you?"

"A duty!" the old lady muttered. "The devil fly away with it!"

"I beg your pardon, grandmother?"

"I beg yours, my dear. Never swear before a lady! No, no. You haven't any duty towards me."

"But there are other calls." Electra struggled to find words that should not tell too much. She ended lamely, "There are calls I cannot disregard." There rose dimly before her mind some of the injunctions that bid men leave father and mother for the larger vision.

"There's Billy Stark," said the old lady, with a quickened interest. "Fancy! he's been away all day."

Electra rose and went in again. She was not sensitive now to the ironies of daily life, but it did occur to her that her grandmother was more excited at seeing Billy Stark home after a day in town than by her own great conclusion. Electra had thought solemnly about the magnitude of the decision she was making when she gave up the care of grandmother to follow that larger call, but again she found herself outside the line of recognized triumphs. She had announced her victory and nobody knew it.

Billy Stark had brought his old friend a present: a box of the old-fashioned peppermints she liked. She took off the string with a youthful eagerness.

"My dear," said she, "what do you think has happened now?"

"I know what has happened to me," said Billy. He threw himself into a chair with an explosive sigh, half heat and half regret. "I've had business letters. I've got to be off."

"Off!" She regarded him in a frank dismay. "Billy, you break my heart!"

"I break my own heart," said Billy gallantly. "I've taken my passage. Say the word, dear girl, and I'll take it for two."

She looked at him in silent trouble. Tears had dimmed her eyes.

"Well, Billy," she said at last, "this is the pleasantest summer I shall ever have."

"Say the word," he admonished her again. "We've got more summers before us."

She smiled at him, and winked away the tears.

"Then come back and spend them here. Electra's going, too,—like a stowaway. You won't let her cross with you, and see at least that she doesn't hold services on board?"

"God forbid!" said Billy. "I'm afraid of her."

"I don't blame you. Billy, I suppose we ought to be saying solemn things to each other, if you're really going."

"Clip ahead, old lady. What do you want to say?"

"I'd like to clear up my accounts a little. I want to get my books in order. I don't intend to die in a fog. Billy, how much of it was real?"

"How much of what, Florrie?"

"Of life. Of the things we thought and felt. Is there such a thing as love, Billy?"

He got up under the necessity of thought and stood, hands in his pockets and legs apart, looking over the garden beds. He might have been gazing out to sea for the Islands of the Blest.

"Florrie," he said at length, "I guess there is."

"Did you love me, Billy? No compliments. We're beyond them."

"Yes," said Billy, after another pause. "I think I did. You were a great deal to me at that time. And when I found it was no use, other people were a great deal to me, one after another. Several of 'em. I looked upon it then as a species of game. But they didn't last, Florrie. You did. You always give me a kind of a queer feeling; you're all mixed up in my mind with pink and blue and hats with rosebuds on 'em and college songs."

It was not much like a grand passion, but it was something, the honest confession of a boy.

"I thought it was a game, too," she said musingly. "Do you suppose it was, Billy? Or were we wrong?"

Billy whirled about and faced her.

"Dead wrong! No, Florrie, it never was meant for a game. It's earnest. The ones that take it so are the ones that inherit the earth. No, not that—but they go in for all they're worth and they've something left to show for it. They don't put their money into tinsel and see it fade."

"Well, what else? Did Charlie Grant love me?"

"Yes. No doubt of it."

"But he loved Bessie afterwards."

"Yes. She lived the thing through with him. She built up something, I fancy. He probably remembered you as I did, all pink ribbons and fluff; but she helped him rear his house of life."

"And my husband didn't love me and I didn't love my husband," the old lady mused. "Well, Billy, it's almost the end of the play. I wish I understood it better. And I've written a naughty book, and I'm going to be comfortable on the money from it. And you wish I hadn't, don't you?"

He saw how frail she looked and answered mercifully,--

"I don't care much about the book, dear. Don't let's talk of that."

"You wish I hadn't written it!"

"I wish you hadn't been so infernally bored as to think of writing it."

"And I'll bet a dollar you wish you'd come back and found me reconciled to life and death, and reading daily texts out of little pious books, and knitting mufflers for sailors, instead of seething with all sorts of untimely devilishnesses. Don't you, Billy?"

What Billy thought he would not tell himself, and he said with an extreme honesty,--

"You're the greatest old girl there is, Florrie, or ever was, or ever will be."

"Ah, well!" she sighed, and laughed a little. "I can't help wishing there weren't so many good folks. It makes me uncommonly lonesome. For you're good, too, Billy, you sinner, you!"

He read the gleam in her eyes, the reckless courage, the unquenched love of life; after all, there was more youth in her still than there had ever been in him or in a hundred like him. He laughed, and said,--

"Oh, I do delight in you!"

XXIV

It was the early twilight, and MacLeod was going to Electra to say good-by. But first he tapped at Rose's door. He had seen her from time to time through the day, and nothing of significance had passed between them. That unbroken level had been exciting to her. She knew he had things to say, and that he would not go leaving them unspoken; delay was only the withholding of bad news. Now she came to the door, a fan in her hand and the summer night reasonably accounting for the breathlessness she felt. Her pallor made a white spot in the dusk; she was like a ghost, with all the life drained out of her. MacLeod stepped inside and closed the door.

"Hot!" he breathed, taking a place by the window.

She could not quite compose herself, and stood near him, fanning him to give herself a pretext for movement. MacLeod looked up at her, smiling. He saw how pale she was.

"Why," he said, with his beguiling kindness, "you mustn't look as if you were afraid of me."

She moved a little, to escape his eyes.

"No," she said, in a low tone, "I don't mean to be afraid. But I am."

"What of, Rose?"

She wanted to say, from her confused suspicions, that he was inevitably contemplating some course that would involve her freedom. But he had turned, and was looking at her in a smiling candor. There was evidently no more guile in him than in the impartial and cherishing sun.

"I wish life didn't present itself to you as a melodrama," he volunteered, with almost a brightness of reproach.

She shook her head. The tremulous expectancy of her face remained unchanged.

"I wish so, too," she answered.

"Well!" He spoke robustly, with a quick decision. "I'm going back. I shall sail next week."

She drew a quick breath. Ready as she was to disbelieve him, it was impossible to deny herself an unreasonable relief. She held herself rigid with anticipation, knowing what the next words would be, and how he would command or entreat her also to go. But they amazed her.

"Rose," said he, "this may be the last little talk we have together here. I want to speak to you about your mother."

"My mother!" Unconsciously she drew nearer him. Her mother was--what? A banished dream, not forgotten, but relegated to dim tapestried chambers because the air of the present seemed to blur out memory by excess of light. She had awakened from her girlhood's dreams; to them, chiefly, her mother had belonged. Now that past beneficence was a faded flower found in a casket, a scent of beauty touched by time.

"Sit down," said MacLeod, and she obeyed him. He stretched out his legs at ease, and put his head back, his eyes closed, in an easy contemplation. "We don't speak of her very often, do we, little girl?"

"No!" Her irrepressible comment was, "I thought you had forgotten her."

But he continued,--

"I was thinking the other day how much you lose in not having known her as she was when I met her first."

"I have the miniature."

"I know. But that's only a suggestion. It doesn't help me bring her to life for you. She had beauty--not so much as you have--and an extraordinary grace and charm. She had, too, that something we trace back to breeding."

He had always undervalued the virtues claimed by gentle birth, and she looked at him, amazed. He understood, and laughed a little. His best weapon against the aristocrat had been tolerance, at its mildest, or a gentle scorn. Where a mob threw eggs, he tossed a rounded epithet.

"I know," he said, "you think I laugh at breeding. Not in her. She had its rarest virtues. She was like an old portrait come to life. She couldn't think of her own advantage. She couldn't lie. Ah, well! well!"

He seemed to be musing over the sadness of things begun and ended all too soon, over a light quenched, a glory gone. Rose found herself passionately anxious to hear more. He had brought her a jewel, a part of her heritage; she might have seen it, but without knowing how bright it was. She was acquiescing, too, in the old spell of his kindness, but never, it seemed to her, so beguilingly administered: for he had come, like a herald accredited by an impeccable authority--the talisman of her mother's name. He was, she thought from his voice, gently amused, even smiling a little to himself.

"You see, Rose, your mother made a bad match. Her people, the few there were, repudiated her. I had no qualifications. I was a poor scribbler, too big, too robust, too everything to suit them. I breathed up all the air. I just went into their stained-glass seclusions and carried her off. They never forgave me."

"Her father died very soon?" She had never referred to the two old people as her grandparents. She found, in her emotional treasury, no right to them, even as a memory. This hesitating question, indeed, seemed a liberty, as it subtly brought them nearer.

"Yes. Your mother was prostrated by that. She had a strong sense of family feeling."

Immediately Rose pictured to herself the wonder of having such clinging tendrils, to aspire upward, and such filaments of root, to mingle with kindred roots in a tended ground. Until now it had seemed to her brave and desirable to walk alone without inherited ties, the cool wind breathing about her, unchecked by walls of old restraint. Now, whether he was gently guiding her thoughts toward his desired ends, or whether some actual hunger in her was impelling them to seek lost possibilities, she did not know; but she was sad. She wanted the spacious boughs of a tree of family life to sit under, to play there and rest. He was continuing,--

"Above all, your mother was a woman of great loyalties, not only to individuals but to her inherited pride. You know that threadbare phrase, *noblesse oblige*? I can laugh when most of them use it. I never laughed when I saw her cutting her conduct by it."

"I never knew--" She was about to say, in her glowing surprise, that she never knew he cared so much for her mother,

or that he had been cherishing such memories.

"That's the reason, my dear," he was saying now, "why you must model yourself on her, and not on me. I don't know that you ever had the least desire to model yourself on me, but I feel very strongly about your knowing what kind of woman she was and letting her--well, letting her decide things for you."

"I wish"--All sorts of longings were choking her and crying for expression; but she could only finish, "I wish she had not died."

"Yes, child. Now these people here, Rose,"--his voice had changed into a decisive affirmation,--"they are a good sort, very gentle, very well worth your meeting them with fairness. You haven't met them fairly. Now, have you?"

"What do you mean?" She was trembling, not so much under his words as from her own dreary shame. The shame had been with her all day, until she was tired with it, and the words seemed to be little separate floutings to make the burden heavier.

"Electra called you an adventuress. She had every right to."

"Yes. She had every right to." But Rose spoke with the unreasoning bitterness of youth that, finding itself in the wrong path, is sure the way, once entered, has no turning.

"She says you came here with a lie on your lips. Isn't that true?"

"But you told me"--She was seeking to get back her lost self, the one that still believed in its own integrity. "I didn't choose to lead the life she thinks I led. You told me it was the noblest thing to do."

"Ah!" He took the words out of her mouth. "I did. But did you make your stand magnificently and face the conventions you defied? No! you came here and told a lie. You chose the cheapest part you could, and played it."

His righteous anger was sweeping her away. Everything helped him, even her own sad sense of inexorable destiny and her poor desert.

"You have taken a very unfortunate step, child," he was saying. "You came here on a questionable errand. Now you have owned up to these people. They know what you are."

"Oh!" She threw out her hands at the horror of it. Until now she had not seen herself as she must be, even in Electra's eyes. His way of presenting things made them intolerably vivid.

"But they--they will not--" She quivered before him, and seemed to crouch and lessen.

"They won't tell? I don't feel sure of that. But do you want to trade on their not telling? Such things are always known."

"Well, I have done wrong. I must suffer for it."

"Who suffers? You--and I. The blow to me is incalculable. I don't understand it. Your mother's memory--that should have kept you straight. So far, child--why, you're a liar."

She was, she told herself, the tears streaming over her face. The happy certainties she had felt with Osmond withdrew into a vague distance. At last she understood; she had sinned, and she was not forgiven.

"Now!" said MacLeod. His voice had a ring she knew. "Now, we must consider what is to be done. One thing I have done already. I have taken passage for you. I will stand by you if you go back to France. I won't support you here. Nor shall they. Think what you did. A cheap adventuress could do no more, except persist in it." He was all breathing indignation.

"Do you mean"--Her voice broke. "Do you mean to take me back to him?"

"The prince? By no means. I mean to take you back to work, to be good and clean and honest. You must retrieve this step. You shall be independent of me, if you like. You shall sing. My dear daughter, you may not think I have shown you much affection,--but your honor is very dear to me." He looked nobly sincere, and yet she bent her brows upon him, and tried to read a deeper soul than he displayed.

"Father!" The word was wrung from her. She had not willingly called him by it for the two years past. "You have persuaded me before. How can I believe you?"

A melting change came over him. It was evident in his voice, his suffused look, his whole manner.

"My child," said he, "can't you believe I loved your mother?"

Immediately the tides of her filial being were with him. If she denied him, she must hurt something to which her very blood bade her be faithful. The house of life, the father, mother, and their child,—these were the sacred three, and it might be her high emprise to keep their union holy.

"Can you be ready to-morrow?" he asked, with that emphasis his followers knew. "You will stay in town with me until we sail."

"Yes."

"Will you be ready?"

"I will be ready."

He got up and bent to kiss her forehead. But she retreated.

"No," she breathed. "I'll do it, father, but don't be kind to me."

He gave her a little pat on the shoulder, and a reassuring, "Nonsense! I'm always kind. We'll have famous times yet, my dear."

She stood droopingly while his steps went down the stairs and out through the veranda and ceased upon the grass. Then she opened her door and crossed the hall to grannie's room and tapped.

"Come in," called the kind old voice. Grannie was in bed, a candle by her, a book in her hand. She looked, in her nightcap, like a beautiful old baby. "I had to crawl in here," she said apologetically. "I get so stiff sitting about. But I don't want to sleep. Draw up the rocking-chair."

Rose went up to the bedside, and dropped upon her knees, looking up so that the light could strike her face. It was a wretched face, but she tried to keep it calm lest it should plead for her.

"My father is going to take me away," she began. "I must pack to-night. But I want to tell you--"

"Take you away? where?" asked grannie.

"To France."

"Why, I don't like that!"

Rose continued,—

"I am not a good woman. My father has told me so. He has shown me. I believe it."

"I guess you're tired," said grannie. She laid a motherly hand on the girl's forehead. Then she smoothed her hair, and tucked a lock behind her ear. "I guess I wouldn't say such things."

"I was never married to Tom Fulton. I thought it was right not to be. But I came here and called myself his wife. I am an adventuress. My father says so."

The old lady sat looking at her with a puzzled glance.

"You blow out the candle," she said then. "It makes it kind of hot. Now I'll move over, and you climb up here and lie down a spell. I guess it'll rest you."

Rose put out the candle, and breathed her relief now that even that light was off her tortured face. Then she did stretch herself on the bed, and grannie put out a hand and held hers.

"T won't hurt your skirt, will it?" she asked. "You've got such pretty clothes. I shouldn't want to have 'em tumbled."

Rose spoke again with her insistent haste,—

"I am an adventuress."

"There! there! don't say that. It's a miserable kind of a word. Did your father come here to take you back?"

"I don't know why he came—not entirely. But he tells me to go with him. I must go."

"Do you want to go, dear?"

She hesitated a moment, and they both listened to the sounds of the summer night.

"I want to be honest," Rose said at last. "It is too late--but I must do the best I can."

"It isn't ever too late," said grannie. "But I don't seem to want you to go. I'm fond of you, dear." Rose lifted the cherishing hand to her lips. "Peter is fond of you, too. He told me so to-day. It is all over between him and Electra. He told you that?"

"Dear Peter! But after this"--she was quivering with impatience to put that test--"you wouldn't be willing to have him like me--after this?"

Now grannie was silent, but only because she was thinking. The tightening clasp of her hand made that evident.

"My dear," she said at last, in her soft old voice, "you can't imagine how stupid I am. I never know how to say things right. But if it was a transgression--I suppose you'd say it was--"

Honesty rose up in the girl, and cried to be heard.

"I thought it was right," she protested sharply. "I did think it was right. About coming here I didn't think much, except that I was lonesome and afraid. Now I understand. I must pay my penalties. I must be honest. It is too late,--but it's all I can do."

"You see, about transgressions," said grannie, "why, they're not to be thought of, my dear, not for an instant after we are sorry. We've just taken the wrong road, that's all. We've got to clip it back into the right one. We can't sit down to cry."

"We've got to take our punishment!"

"Yes, mercy, yes! I guess we have. But we've got to be happy, too. The punishments were given us in love. We've got to be thankful for 'em. Now, do you feel as if't was right for you to go back with your father?"

"There are hard things there. I ran away from them. I must face them."

"Then you go, dear," said grannie. "But don't you forget for one minute that there's the love of God. Peter and I love you, too. And when all the things are done, you hurry right back here, and we shall be here--some of us, anyway--and your room'll be ready for you just the same."

Rose lay there with the ineffable sense upon her of that readjusted balance which we call forgiveness. Life, even the narrow piece of it she was touching, greatened with possibilities.

"Grannie," she said, "there's one thing more."

"What is it, dear?"

"I want to leave a message with you. I want you to tell Osmond something."

"Why, honey, do you know Osmond?"

"Yes, I know him." Then she rehearsed the bare details of their meetings, and finishing, said, quite simply, "I can't see him. I can't say good-by. If I spoke to him, how could I bear to go? But it's he who really sends me."

"What do you mean, dear?"

"I don't know how to tell you. Only, he is so true he makes me want to be true, too. He wants to do the hardest thing. This is the hardest thing for me. And I want to go and be honest, not stay and have you all make it easy for me to be honest. And I want to prove myself, to use my voice. I don't intend to be supported by my father. But when I have established myself, I shall come back."

She felt as if she were talking to Osmond himself, and as if his idea of great world spaces and inevitable meetings made it certain for them to part without loss.

Grannie was thinking. She gave a little sigh.

"What is it?" asked Rose.

"Osmond likes you very much, doesn't he?" asked the old lady.

"It isn't exactly liking. We understand each other. He is different from anybody."

"Yes."

"He understands me almost before I speak. It is comfortable to be with him."

"Yes. And the boy finds it comfortable to be with you."

"Oh, yes! It is because it is so exactly alike for us both. That is why we are so contented together."

"He will miss you when you are gone."

"Oh, but not as I shall miss him! He is so sure of things. He knows so well when the cord between us is holding. But I shall doubt. I shall want to hear his voice."

Grannie sighed again. She was a happy old woman in her certainties; but sometimes she felt tired, with the gentle lassitude of the old. She had been with Osmond through every step of his difficult way, and she had hoped some tragedies would be spared them both. Much as she believed in ultimate good fortune, she had to shrink from his desiring woman's love. Yet this was to be. A little jealous doubt of the girl crept into her troubled heart. Was she light of love, a lady of enchantments who could appear out of nowhere and make all these strange happenings seem commonplace until her fickle destiny should snatch her away again, leaving hurt and mourning hearts behind? Grannie was humbly conscious that there were many things outside her world, exotic flowers of life her upland pastures did not breed. That they were poison flowers she could not well believe; but when her dear boy tasted the essence of them, she had to pause and sternly think it over, whether it was well.

"My dear," she said, "you must be honest with him." The gentle voice had steel in it.

"Honest? With Osmond? How should I be anything else? What reason--why, grannie!"

"Osmond is not like other men."

"He is better. He is like a spirit."

"No. He is only a man that's had heavy loads to carry. You mustn't be cruel to him."

"Grannie, I never heard you speak like that. You have been so kind."

"I am kind now, but Osmond is my boy. Do you feel to him as you did to Tom Fulton?"

"Oh!" It was a cry of pain. "What has Tom Fulton to do with it, to do with me?" the girl asked, in that hurt surprise. "All I want is to forget him. He made himself beautiful to me because he lied to me. The things I loved he said he loved--and then he laughed at them. But Osmond--what has Osmond to do with Tom Fulton?"

"You have made Osmond love you," said grannie. "That's all."

The chamber was very still. Rose could hear the ticking of grannie's watch beside her on the stand. Presently she spoke in a wondering tone.

"Love me? Grannie, is it that?"

"What did you think it was?"

"I didn't think. I thought it was something greater."

"There is nothing greater, Rose. Is there anything more terrible?"

The girl turned her face over, and dropped it for a minute on the hollow of the old woman's arm. Then she spoke, and to grannie's amazement she laughed a little, too.

"Oh, I never dreamed I could be so happy!"

"Happy! But is he happy?"

"He must be, if he knows it. Do you think he knows it, grannie?"

"I'm afraid he does, my dear," said grannie sadly.

"Has he told you so?"

"Not a word."

"If he does, tell me, grannie. Betray him. I need to know everything he knows--everything."

It was a new Rose, one none of them in America had yet seen. There were tumultuous yearnings in her voice, innocent

insistencies; she seemed to be clamoring for life, the boon that it was right and sweet for her to have.

"He doesn't speak of you," said grannie. "What could come of it, if he did?"

"What could come of it? Everything could come of it. I shall write him by every mail. Tell him that. I will write him all my life, every minute of it from morning till night. And I will come back, soon, soon,—as soon as I have earned money to be honest on. Tell him that, grannie."

But grannie sighed.

"I am afraid you are not very reasonable," she said. "And I shouldn't dare to give him such messages. How do I know what they would mean to him? Why, my dear, you may meet some young man to-morrow, any day. You may want to marry him. What do you think Osmond would feel, if you wrote and told him that?"

"Why," said Rose, in a pained surprise, "you haven't understood, after all. But he will understand. No, don't tell him anything, grannie, only that I'll write to him every mail and that I shall come home. He will believe me. Now I must go and pack."

But grannie held her anxiously.

"I'm afraid I've made you troubled," she said.

"No, you've made me rich. I don't care what happens to me now. I can face it all. Dear, dear grannie! I thank you for forgiving me." She kissed the two kind hands, and stood beside the bed for a minute. "He comes to you in the morning, doesn't he? Tell him all that then. Only tell him I couldn't bear to say good-by. But I shall come back, and there will be welcomes, not good-bys." She went softly out, and grannie heard the closing of the door.

Rose, in her own room, did not begin at once to pack. She was alive again with the most brilliant triumph and delight. Her father's influence had slipped from her, and she stood there shuddering in the delicious cold of a strong wind of life. If she was to go forth, to make herself whole with her own destiny, she was going, not as the puppet of his will, but exhilarated by marvels. There were still large things in the world, strong loyalties, pure faithfulness. She felt like a warrior girded with a sword.

XXV

Osmond was sitting in his playhouse under the tree. He did not expect Rose to come, but he had things to think about, and in the playhouse he never felt alone. He was studying his own life as it had been and as it was. The past looked to him all submission and a still endurance. He marveled that a man could live so long and not look man's lot in the face. A thousand passions had been born in him at once, and they seemed almost equally good to him because they were all so strong. He sat there drunk with the lust of power and reviewing his desires as, one by one, they came and smiled upon him.

First he desired a woman, the one woman, Rose, not now romantically through the mist of dreams, but as the wild man wants his mate. Was that love? he asked himself, in this dispassionate scrutiny, and decided that, as men chose to name it, it was love. They crowned it with garlands, they sang about it and drank to it, but that was only to make it sweeter.

He remembered again the passion of protection he had felt for her, the desire to slay whatever crossed her path. That was hate, he knew, and it seemed to him good. All these things were the forces that made up life, and life was a battle.

And then, as he did intermittently after every wave of thought, he remembered that Peter was in love with Rose, he recalled the gay certainty of the boy when he had said he could make her happy, and he saw her in Peter's arms. And this was jealousy.

At once he rose to his feet and listened. A step was coming nearer, heavy and halting, pausing for frequent rests. The familiar sound of it and the appeal of a presence not yet known made him knit his brows and peer forward through the dark. When the step ceased again, for an interval, he cried out, "Grannie!"

"Why, dear, you there?" called grannie.

He ran to her and put his arm about her, and so they came onward to the chair which had been a throne for Rose. When she had sunken into it, he began to scold her gently. She had not been so far from home for many a day. She had

chosen night and a rough path. Why did she do it?

"I had to see you, dear," said grannie. "Maybe I didn't consider how hard it would be, but when I started out, I wasn't thinking much about my aches and pains. I had to see you. So I just dressed me and came."

"But, grannie, it's the middle of the night!"

"Yes, child, I suppose it is. Night or day, it's all one. Osmond, her father's going to take her away from here."

"Rose!"

"Yes, dear, she's going. Do you think it's best to let her go with him?"

"No! It's outrageous and impossible."

"I thought you'd say so. Well, Osmond, she meant to go away to-morrow morning without seeing you. But she sent you her love. It seemed to me that.... So I thought you'd better have it to-night."

She heard him breathing heavily, but he did not speak. Once he walked away from her and back again.

"What has made her want to go?"

"She doesn't want it. But he has worked upon her. He's told her she is bad; some dreadful things I guess he said. I don't believe in that man, Osmond. I never did, first minute I laid eyes on him."

"No, grannie, he's not to be believed."

"I thought maybe you'd better have the night-time to think it over in. You may want to do something."

"Grannie, what can I do?"

"I don't know, son. But you're the head of the house."

Again he strode away on his impatient march, and grannie waited and prayed a little, and thought how her knees ached and how she hoped God would help him. He was back again.

"You know how it is with me?" he said roughly.

"Yes, child."

"It's a big proposition."

"It's the biggest there is, son. I've just been telling her so."

"Rose? What has Rose said?"

"Not much. Only I had the feeling, when I was with her, that she loved you and didn't hardly know about your loving her. So I came down here."

"You did right to come."

Grannie drew a long breath. The thing was out of her hands, now, she knew. What his hands would do with it did not yet appear. She rose.

"Well, son," she said, "I'll go back. Come with me to the wall. Then I'll manage it alone."

He did go with her, helping her in a tender silence, and at the door she kissed him good-night.

"What time is breakfast, grannie?"

"Eight o'clock."

The next morning when they had assembled in the dining-room, grannie, standing with a hand on the back of her chair, waited. Her face had a flush of expectation. Her eyes sought the window.

"There!" she said, "he's coming. Peter, I've moved your place. Osmond will sit opposite me."

"Osmond!" Peter almost shouted it.

"Yes," said grannie, in what seemed pride. "I thought Osmond would be here."

Osmond came in, a workman in his blouse, fresh from cold water and the night's stern counseling. Rose, hearing his step, could not, for a minute, look at him, because he had once forbidden it. The commonplace room, with the morning light in it, swam before her. After he had spoken to grannie, he walked up to her and offered his hand. Then their eyes met. Hers were full of tears, and through their blur, even, his face looked stern and beautiful.

"I wanted to see you," Osmond said; and she answered, feeling his kindness as from some dim distance,--

"To say good-by?"

"No, not to say good-by."

Then they sat down, and there was no constraint, but a good deal of talking; and, strangely, it was Osmond who led it. He did not touch upon things of wider interest than his own garden ground, where he was at home. He had pleasant chronicles of the work to give grannie, and MacLeod took a genial interest. Only Peter sat, wide-eyed at the turn things were taking, and Rose grew paler and left her plate untouched. She did not know whether it was joy that moved her, or grief at parting with him. Only the morning seemed like no other morning. When they rose from the table, Osmond turned at once to MacLeod.

"May I see you for a minute or two?" he asked. "We'll go into the west room, grannie."

While Peter started forward, as if to help or hinder as the case might be when he understood it, Osmond had led the way, still with the air of being master of the house, and Rose stood with downcast eyes, as if miserably conscious that the interview would concern her. Inside the west room, cool in the morning, and with a restful bareness about it, a retreat where people went to sleep or read, Osmond turned at once to the man whom, at that moment, he delighted in as a worthy foe. Osmond had never known before the keen, salt taste of victory. All his triumphs up to this time had been as slow as the growth of a tree that recovers itself after lopped branches. Now he felt the anticipation of combat.

"We needn't sit down," he said rapidly, yet with self-possession. He looked taller, even, MacLeod thought with wonder. His dark eyes were full of fire. "I love your daughter," said Osmond, in a full, steady voice. He chose the words the poets had taught him to use simply, and also, perhaps, the novels he had been reading since he had known Rose.

"My dear fellow!" cried MacLeod expansively. And then, remembering the peculiar circumstances of the case, "I'm sorry, devilish sorry for you."

Osmond smiled. He felt capable, if there were no other way of doing it, of wresting the lady's fate from evil chances with his hands. Yet he liked MacLeod to resist. It made the fight more splendid.

"She must not go back with you," he said. "You are not to insist on it. Don't insist. That will save us all trouble."

MacLeod had gathered himself together. He put his hand in his pocket and meditatively brought out his pipe, fingering the case with an absent and lingering interest, as if he felt the call to a lost rite.

"My dear fellow," he said again, "this is too bad. I'm sorry."

"Rose will remain here," said Osmond briefly. "My grandmother will take the kindest care of her."

"But I can't allow it, you know," said the father, still with tolerance. "Rose is due in Paris. We're both due there. It's very good of you, very hospitable and all that,--but you mustn't carry this Lochinvar business too far. It's too rapid a world, you know. I'm too busy, my dear fellow. That's the truth."

Osmond stood gazing at him reflectively, not in doubt or hesitation, but because he liked the look of so big an animal, and considering that it would be charming to see the creature yield. Osmond had not sharpened his weapons or even decided what they were. He only knew MacLeod must bend, and that there was in himself a big, even an invincible force to make him.

"Rose is not going," he said quietly.

Then MacLeod laughed. The morning was hurrying by and this vapping was a hindrance to be shuffled off. "You say you love my daughter?" he remarked, with a veiled meaning in the tone. "What then? You don't propose to marry her?" The tone said further, "You don't tell me you propose to marry anybody?"

"I only said I loved her," returned Osmond simply. "I thought it would be well for you to know that. It seemed fairer."

MacLeod smiled again, as if he were smiling down on something. Osmond opened the door, knowing where he should find her. She was there at the end of the hall, sitting in one of the high-backed chairs, her hands in her lap, her head bent sweetly as she listened. She was pale, and there was terror in her face. As Osmond read that, his own passion

quieted, and he spoke with perfect gentleness:--

"Rose, will you come here?"

She obeyed at once, and they three were in the room together and Osmond had closed the door. He put out his hand to her, and without hesitation she gave him hers.

"Rose," he said, "I have been telling your father you will not go back with him."

Her eyes dilated. Her lips parted eagerly.

"I have said I would," she began; but he forestalled her.

"I have forbidden it, Rose. I have told him I forbid it."

His touch on her hand seemed to be leading her, drawing her into his own breast. They looked at each other, and both forgot the other presence in the room. The color came back slowly to her cheeks, and Osmond's eyes filled with tears.

"Answer, dear," he said, with the same gentleness. "Let me hear you answer."

"Very well," she returned, like a gentle child. "Shall I go now, Osmond?"

He led her to the door, opened it, and closed it after her. Then he glanced at his adversary. MacLeod had sunk into a chair and was sitting astride it, his chin bowed upon its back. He looked terror-stricken. One hand held a little box, and he was tendering it to Osmond.

"Open it," he gasped. "Crush one in your handkerchief. Let me smell it."

Osmond ignorantly but deftly did it, and held the handkerchief to MacLeod's face. MacLeod breathed at it greedily. He lifted his left hand as if it were half useless to him. "Rub it," he said savagely. "Wring it off. Such pain! my God, such pain!"

In a moment more the attack was over, and he looked like an old man, inexplicably ravaged. Osmond's question sprang impetuously.

"Is it--excitement?"

MacLeod smiled a little and moistened his lips.

"You think you did it?" he suggested. "No. You didn't do it. It comes--of itself--like a thief in the night, like the very devil. Nobody's to know it. Understand that."

"Then you need her with you!" Osmond broke out, in a fresh understanding.

"Need her? need Rose? Get that out of your mind. The world is full of women. She'll go back with me, but not because I need her."

He walked past Osmond and out through the empty hall, and slowly, but still erect, to the driveway and the road. Osmond stood watching him. He saw him straighten more and more, and assume his wonted carriage though without its buoyancy. Osmond followed for a little distance, but when MacLeod turned to look at him and then went on again, he stepped over the wall and crossed the lot to his own plantation. MacLeod, he knew, was going to Electra's for a last word, and for himself, he had struck his one sharp, quick blow for Rose. She should have an interval alone, to make her abiding decision calmly, and when the moment came for MacLeod's going, Osmond would be there again, to hearten her.

But MacLeod, when Osmond had really turned aside, halted more and more. At last he was sick with fear of that enemy inside his breast. There was no moment now, he knew, when he might not expect it, tearing away at the delicate harmonies within the gates of life. What would happen when the pain grew fiercer still? The enemy would let in that other he refused to think upon, though even that was more tolerable than having this evil creature claw at him when men could see him cringe. And as life itself is death when it is once sapped of power, he threw up his head and strode on faster. One step with the old vigor and abandon--and there it was again.

Later that same morning, Peter was hurrying along the road, for the carriage was due and MacLeod had not returned. Peter was not more than reasonably sorry to lose his chief, because he meant to follow soon. He had the excited sense of being ready for flight, of great freedom before him and strength in his wings, and of leaving Osmond and grannie with regret, yet happily, for something untried and as wonderful as youth. He ran along the road, hat in hand, in love with the morning breeze, and Electra met him. She looked wan, he saw, and with an incredulous pang, he questioned whether she could be moved by their separation. But he was glad of a definite and hurried question to ask.

"Where is MacLeod?"

A look like hope flashed into her face. She stopped and turned half about, as if for instant flight back to the house.

"Was he coming to me?" she asked breathlessly.

"We thought he might be there."

"Did he say he was coming?" Her eagerness looked like hunger for a desired good, slipping, by some chance, away from her.

"No! no! he may have gone to the plantation. I'll run down there and find him."

He hurried on, and Electra, watching his light, easy lopes, wished she, too, were a man and running to find Markham MacLeod.

At the pasture-bars, in a bed of roadside fern, Peter found him. MacLeod lay majestically, stretched at length, upon his side, as if some one had disposed him in the attitude of sleep. Peter knew. Yet he stooped and touched one of the beautifully shaped hands with his finger. He stood there a long time, it seemed to him, looking not at the figure at his feet, but off into the morning sky, and MacLeod was not in his mind: only Osmond and what Osmond had said about the lust for fight. Osmond seemed to fill the world. He had wished to kill the man, but God instead had killed him. Yet the other thing might have been. Peter wondered that he had not realized what his brother was to him, and again that he had too often foregone Osmond's companionship, this summer of their reunion, for lesser loyalties. He comprehended him, at the moment, with an exaggerated passion that was pain: a gigantic figure, all sacrifice, all patient truthfulness, and, in its own bounded life, as much to be loved and protected as a woman, and yet untrained and ready for a savage deed. And all the time Electra was advancing rapidly toward him on the road, aimlessly, but, as she afterwards believed, drawn by some premonition of what she was to find. Her approach broke Peter's fearful vision. She was like a figure walking into his dream, and he hurried toward her, remembering what she must not see. He motioned to her harshly with his hand.

"Go back!" he called.

But Electra came inevitably on. Then Peter placed himself before her.

"Something has happened," he said quietly, while she looked him in the face. "Go home."

But now she was gazing past him, and the figure in the bracken caught her sight. With a low cry, the inarticulate sound that throws suffering woman back to her kinship with the mother brute, she ran past him and stooped over MacLeod; Peter, dull with feeling, thought she tried to raise his head, and failing that, she took the hand and nursed it on her bosom. Peter judged apathetically that he had never really known Electra; she looked now like a woman numb with grief over a dead child. Then he waked himself out of his maze.

"Don't!" he heard himself calling. "People will come."

"Who will come?" she returned sharply, as if she challenged them all to show why this should not be her dead. Then she wakened. "Go!" she cried. "Get help. It can't be true."

"I will call the men. We can get him home among us."

He ran over the wall and on to the field where men were hoeing. When they had dropped their work and followed him, they found Electra sitting there by the roadside, as if she were the one mourner over the dead, and she did not rise until they stooped to lift him, and arranged how he should be carried. Then she said to Peter, again as if it were her right,--

"Have him taken to my house."

Peter stared at her, but he remembered Rose.

"That will be better," he said; and added, "but who will tell her?"

"His daughter?" said Electra, in her clear tone. "I will tell her. But there is a great deal to do before that. She can wait."

So they walked along the road like a strange funeral procession, Electra in front, as if she had a right to lead. She turned in at her own gate, and they followed, and she walked on up the steps and into the library, where they laid him down. Madam Fulton and Billy Stark had gone for a drive, and the house, in its morning order, looked as if it had been prepared for the solemnity of this entrance. Now Electra's methodical capacity came into play. She sent one man for the doctor and another to the kitchen for hot water and for brandy. But when they were hurriedly dispersed, she turned to Peter and said, with a heart-breaking quiet,--

"And yet, he is dead!"

She sat down upon the floor beside the couch and laid her head on the dead man's heart. Peter knew it was to listen for a flutter there, but with his sensitive apprehension of all emotion, he felt also that she was glad to put her head upon MacLeod's breast. He was conscious of being useless in his inactivity, but he could only stand and stare down at them, the dead man and the mourning woman. Presently Electra got up and stood, dry-eyed, and looked at him.

"He was coming to me," she said, in awe at the loneliness of the event. "I couldn't sleep last night. I wish I had known a little more. Instead of thinking about him, I could have met him. I could have been with him."

Peter shuddered.

"I am glad you were not with him."

Electra was not listening. She had placed her hand on the hair of the fallen man, tenderly and yet with reverence.

"He is splendid, Peter, isn't he?" she said, as if she wondered at life and its fleeting forms. "He looks like a god, sleeping." Some echo of her words came back to her, and she felt a momentary pleasure at their sound. Then, very shortly it seemed, men came, the doctor and others who had authority, and Electra was turned out of the room.

"Go upstairs," Peter besought her.

But she stepped out, bare-headed, into the air.

"No," she answered, "I am going to tell his daughter."

"No!" Suddenly Peter remembered how little she was fitted to be a kindly messenger. "No, Electra. I will go."

Electra looked at him in a calm surprise.

"He would wish it," she said. "He would wish me to do everything." And she was gone.

Peter went back into the room, where there were quick voices and peremptory demands. Markham MacLeod was being interrogated in a way that had never befallen him before. His body was being asked to bear witness of the fashion by which it had come to its dumb estate, wherein it could not compel others, but was most ruthlessly at their will.

Rose, at grannie's knee, in a mute gratitude that now she was to stay here, because it had been wonderfully decreed, saw Electra coming up the walk. She ran to meet her light-heartedly; in her flooding delight it seemed to her as if even Electra might acquiesce in her reprieve.

At the foot of the steps they met, Rose all pleadingness, as if again she begged Electra to love her. But Electra delivered her news straightway. She felt like nothing but the messenger of MacLeod.

"He is dead," she said, with the utmost quietude.

Rose stared at her.

"Who is dead?" she managed to ask.

"Markham MacLeod."

Rose leaned forward and gazed still in her face. She was well convinced that this look was real: a look of hopeless grief, though the words were so fantastic.

"Electra," she said gently, and even put out a hand and touched her on the arm. "Electra! What is it?"

"I have told you," said Electra, "he is dead. We found him in the ferns, Peter and I. He is at my house. We thought you ought to know it."

"Come!" said Rose. She seized her hand, and Electra pulled it away again, quietly, and yet as if it had no business in that hasty grasp. "Let me go home with you."

"If you wish," said Electra. "I suppose you have a right to be there. They may want you." And in silence they hurried down the path together and out into the road. At Electra's own gate, she turned to Rose.

"It is strange, isn't it?" she said.

"What, Electra?"

"That he could die."

"Electra, he has not died. No one has died." Rose spoke gently, knowing that in some way the other woman had been shocked and her reason shaken. "Come into the house and we'll find Peter."

But at the moment Peter and the doctor appeared together in the doorway, and the doctor turned to give orders to a servant in the hall. Peter saw them and came quickly down to them. It was apparent to Rose that something had happened.

"Tell her, Peter," said Electra, in some impatience. "She won't believe me. Tell her he is dead."

Peter and Rose stood looking at each other, she questioning and he in sad assent. Then there crept upon her face a look that was the companion to Electra's. The color faded, her eyes widened.

"My father?" she breathed, and Peter nodded.

"Yes," said Electra, as if she were astonished at them both and their dull wits, "Markham MacLeod is dead."

That evening grannie was in her own room, and Peter and Rose, below, talked intermittently of that strange morning.

"It is incredible, Peter, isn't it," she began, "for him to die like this?"

He nodded.

"I expected violence," he said. "We all expected it."

"Isn't it strange, too, that I can't feel grief! I'm neither glad nor sorry. I feel very still."

"The whole world will feel grief," said Peter loyally.

"Yes, but to me--Peter, it is just as if he were not a man, not something I had loved, but a thing that was great to look at and had no soul. It was like a tree falling, or a huge rock undermined. Don't you see? As if it were the natural thing, and there was no other way possible."

She began to feel the inexorability of great revenges, and to see that when a soul has for a long time denied us answer in our needs, we refuse to believe that it can speak. MacLeod had grown to be a beautiful spectacle of the universe, full of natural health and power. Now that he had fallen, there was nothing left. She had no vestige to remember of those responses in the dim reaches of being when one calls and another answers: homely loyalties, sweet kindnesses, even overlaid by later pain. He had lived what he called the natural life, and its breath had failed him and he was no more. Some time, she knew, in this dull brooding, she might try to whip herself up into an expected grief; but now, in the bare honesty of the moment, she accepted the event as it was.

"Osmond has been great," said Peter.

She started back to life.

"What has he done?"

"Everything. He's been Electra's right-hand man. I'll run down to see him a minute presently."

He hoped Rose would send some word of appreciative thanks. Old Osmond, he knew, would like it. But she got up and gave him her hand, in her grave affectionate way, and said good-night. She remembered how Osmond and her father had met in contest, and she knew Osmond would not seek her until Markham MacLeod was wholly gone.

XXVII

Peter met his brother midway in the field, and waited for him.

"I'll go with you," he said.

"No," said Osmond, "I'm not going now. Come back to the shack."

"You're a regular night-owl," said Peter, as they turned. "When I don't find you after dark, I know you're in the woods, prowling. What makes you?"

"It's a good place to think things out,--and swear over 'em."

"What things, old man? You know I wouldn't tell. Nothing would tempt me to."

Osmond laughed a little.

"If you care so much as that, I'll tell you," he said, with a sudden harshness for himself in retrospect. "I go into the woods to think about life, my life, my difference from other fellows."

They sat down on the bench at the door, and a whippoorwill, calling, made the distance lonely. Peter had no answer for the truth he had evoked. It was too harsh. Only a woman could have met it, and that with kisses, not with words.

"Do you know," he said abruptly, "what all this makes me want?--this horrible excitement?"

"No, boy."

"It makes me want to paint. I want to paint everything I see: Markham MacLeod lying there in that bed of fern, Rose with all the life washed out of her, and you now, your face coming out of the dark. Everything's been unreal to me since it happened--except paint--and you."

"Poor old chap!" said Osmond. But he fled on from that concurrent sympathy to a dearer plea. "Paint, Pete," he urged. "Let all the rest go. Let MacLeod die. But you paint."

Peter was looking at him now, fascinated. The pale face out of the dark was all one glowing life. Peter wondered at him, his strength, his beauty. Again he felt as he had that morning, as if he had never known his brother, and as if it would pay for any pains to comprehend that pathetic and yet adventurous soul. Peter was more than half woman, with his quick perception of what went on in other minds. He understood, at that moment, that the great adventure of all is life itself: not, as it seemed to him, to paint, to love, but to taste all things with this richness that was beginning to be Osmond's, this hunger for the forbidden, even, so it was hunger. Osmond had begun to recognize his own nature, and for the first time his brother began to recognize him.

"Osmond," he said, in a wistful eagerness, very beguiling, "whatever you did, I should believe in it."

Osmond looked at him with that faint sweet smile upon his face, and his eyes offered hints of ineffable meanings.

"Would you, boy?" he asked.

Peter went on. It was almost like a woman's confession of her love.

"Osmond, you say you think about your life when you are alone. What do you think?"

"I think it is full of passions as an egg is of meat. They have been growing while I ignored them. I saw them marching before me and round and round me. They thought they were my masters."

"What then?"

Osmond remembered how the morning seemed when he met Rose in the sunlight, and touched her hand.

"Then," he said gravely, "I was their master. That's all."

"Oh," said Peter exultingly, "you'd be the master in the end. You're great!"

"Pete," said Osmond suddenly, "is this death coming?"

"Is what death?"

"It's too queer for life."

"To sit here talking like this?"

"No, not that exactly, but the sense of things to come. It seems as if life wasn't going to be the same again, and nothing was quite big enough to come after things as they've been lately,--but death, and that's only big enough because it's

unknown."

"What will come?" asked Peter. He felt at once like a little boy, half afraid, and afraid of his fear, yet with his brother to uphold him.

"We won't go to bed to-night, will we? We'll sit here, even if we hold our tongues. I can't go to bed."

They did sit there for an hour or so. Peter spoke.

"What are you thinking, old man?"

"Of Rose."

It was not strange to Peter to hear him speak of her familiarly. He returned,--

"I've been thinking of her, too."

XXVIII

The deed was over. The great emotional wave that mounted, in Europe and America, at the death of Markham MacLeod, threw its spray upon this quiet shore. Letters came from his disciples and his lovers, and Rose, wondering as she read them, answered in a patient duty. If a great man is one who moves things, then her father had been great. He was bigger to her now than when she feared him. Though there were mutterings afar of what must come now Markham MacLeod was dead, this country spot took on its old tranquillity. Peter sat in the garden and painted. He seemed to think of nothing else. Rose was too busy to sit, and he began a portrait of grannie; then his only communication with the world seemed to be his flashing glance at her and at his canvas. Osmond, in the plantation, bent his back and worked with the men, and no one knew what he thought. To Peter he was gravely kind, and Rose, with a growing emotion that seemed to her likely to become terror in the end, realized that he had not sought her.

One morning while Peter was in the garden smoking, before he called grannie to her chair again, and Rose was at the library table answering letters, Madam Fulton appeared at the door.

"Where's Bessie Grant?" she asked.

Rose was at once on her feet and came forward to give her a chair, relieve her of her parasol, and stand beside her in a deferential waiting that, for some reason, never displeased this pulsating age with its memory ever upon the habitudes of youth.

"Where's Bessie Grant?"

"She will be in presently. Peter is painting her."

The old lady lay back in the chair and gazed at her absently, as if she merely included her in a general picture of life. Madam Fulton had changed. Her eyes were wistful, and she looked very frail.

"Billy Stark sails on Saturday," she volunteered, as if it were the one thing in her mind.

Grannie came in at the moment, and laid a kindly hand on her old friend's shoulder. Rose went back to her chair, and left them to their talk, while she put up her papers before quitting the room. Madam Fulton looked at grannie now.

"You've had your morning coffee, haven't you?" asked grannie, because she could think of nothing else to offer.

"Yes, I've had coffee, and I've had cereals. Electra is looking after me with that kind of an air, you know, as if I were a rockbound duty. My soul! If it wasn't for Billy Stark, I should die."

"Poor Electra!" said grannie softly.

"Now what do you want to call her that for? Why is she 'poor Electra' because she chooses to go round like a high priestess strapping me down on altars and pouring libations of cereals and cream? I could stand it if her heart was in it, but it's miles away. And Billy Stark is going."

Grannie only patted her hand.

"Well, well!" said she. "It's been nice to have him here."

"It's been heaven. It's the only heaven I shall ever know."

"We get a little mite of it here every once and a while," said grannie. "Don't you think so?"

"No, except when Billy Stark comes,--and he won't come again. Electra's going, too."

"Abroad?"

"Yes. She's going abroad. At once, it seems. Rose MacLeod!"

Rose looked up from her papers.

"What was it about your father that put the devil into people?"

Rose answered with an unsmiling candor.

"I don't know, Madam Fulton."

"But you know what I mean?"

"He had great personal power."

"You are not in mourning for him?" She had been considering the girl's dress and its fluttering ribbons.

Rose returned with dignity,--

"I am not in mourning."

"Well, Electra is. She hasn't put on black, but it's all over her. She's perfectly shameless. I asked her this morning why she was hurrying her sailing, and she said it was because he would wish it. There were things to do for him."

"That he would wish it?"

"Your father. Don't you see? She's got an idea that she's his earthly vicegerent, and there's some majestic poppycock about the Brotherhood. I can't understand it, and I don't want to. All I know is, she's mad. Bessie Grant, when I told the Lord I wanted things to happen, I didn't mean this kind, and He knew it perfectly well."

Rose had risen and stood in grave attention.

"Oh, she mustn't do that," she said earnestly. "I must tell her."

"Well, go and tell her, then," said the old lady, turning back to Mrs. Grant. "If you can make her listen, you'll do more than I can. I ought to chaperon her, though you might as well chaperon the Lion of Lucerne. Bessie!" And then as Rose left the room, she bent forward, and leaned her head on grannie's breast. "Bessie," she repeated, "it's a miserable world."

To grannie all ages were as one. The old and the young were alike defenseless, when they were in trouble, and she put her arms about the frail creature and held her warmly.

"Hush, dear!" she said, and forgot this was not one of her own children. "Mother's sorry." Then they both smiled a little, but grannie went on: "You must come right here, you know. Electra will be gone, and Billy, and you don't want to carry on the house alone. You come here, dear, and stay with me."

"Could I?" Madam Fulton lifted her tear-wet face. "If I could stay here a little while, maybe I might pull myself together. I don't know how to do it, Bessie. I don't know how to live. I never did."

Rose had run over to the other house in an unreasoning haste. Electra was in the library, putting her desk in order. Her firm white hands were busy, assorting and arranging. She turned her head as Rose came in, and, without rising, spoke to her collectedly and bade her be seated. She was older, Rose thought; she looked even like a different woman, not merely one whom middle age had overtaken. Purpose sat on her brow, and her eyes looked straight at you, as if she bade you tell your business and be gone. The one effect upon Rose was to make her sorry, infinitely sorry for her. Electra had broken the globe of her hopes upon a rock, and she was not even going to walk on and leave the shards forgotten there. Rose spoke at once, to use her courage while she felt it hot.

"Madam Fulton tells me you are going abroad."

"Yes. I sail next week."

"Is it with any purpose? Electra, did my father make you love him?"

Electra faced her. Color flowed into her cheeks. Her eyes glowed beyond any promise they had ever given.

"I am glad you ask me that," she said, and her full tone was strangely unlike the even consonance of the old Electra's voice. At last she forgot how she did things or why. Life was sweeping her along. "He never made me love him. It was ordained. It was like nothing else on earth."

Rose felt cold with the sad knowledge of it.

"Yes," she said, "he had great power over people."

A smile stole upon Electra's lips.

"We had planned it all," she said. "I was to go to Paris. I was to work with him. Now that he is gone, I must carry on the work for both of us."

Rose regarded her with a wistful compassion, not knowing how much she might help her, and yet wishing to offer all she had.

"Electra," she said, "what do you mean by carrying on the work?"

"His work, the Brotherhood."

"But, dear child, you would have to submit yourself for years and years to all sorts of tests before you would be trusted. I don't even know whether it won't fall apart, now he has gone. It may do that and reorganize in a different form. And how would you find it? You think of it as a definite body with headquarters anybody can reach. Why, Electra, you might stay a dozen years in Paris and not put your finger on it."

Still Electra turned to her that look of rapt allegiance. She heard apparently, yet the words made no impression on her fixed resolve. Now she spoke, and rather sweetly. All the tones of her voice, all her looks, had a reminiscent value, as if they were echoes from her lost relation with him.

"He told me where to write," she said, as if she were satisfied with that. "I shall go there."

"I know, the address for his letters. But he was never there. Now that he is gone, the place will be for other uses. Everything connected with the Brotherhood keeps fluctuating, changing. There would be no safety otherwise."

Electra was looking at her in that removed, patient way that made another woman of her. It was almost like a mother who has cares to think of and can spare no time from them for alien presences.

"I must go," she said again. "He would wish it."

Rose now had her moment of delay. Her mind went back over that weary road, to the past the present had so illumined for her. It tired her to think the trouble ever attendant on her father's life was to go on, ripple after ripple, now that he had sunken into the mystery of things. Once over the horror of his death, there had been a throb of thankfulness that at least an end had been made to his great power of bringing pain. And now here was another life to be thrown into the void after him, another woman to love a dream. She awoke from that momentary musing, to hear Electra saying,--

"You will excuse me, if I go on working? I sail so soon, and I must leave everything in order."

"Electra," said Rose. Then she called her name again, as if appealing to the softest of her moods. "How can I tell you! Electra, you mustn't love my father."

Again that swift smile came to Electra's face. The face itself was all a burning truth. The old crude precision in her seemed suddenly to have flowered into this warm candor that spoke and liked to hear itself disclosing, regardless of its auditor.

"You cannot"--she looked at Rose with happy inspiration, as if she had been the first to make the saying--"you can't kill love with reason."

Again Rose deliberated. When she spoke it was with an air of sad decisiveness.

"Electra," she said wistfully, "did he ask you to marry him?"

"I never thought of it," said Electra at once, in the simplest unreserve. "It would have seemed too small, to limit it and bound it."

"Yes. That is what he would have said, too small. You were a quick pupil."

Electra glowed.

"I know what he would have said, if he had had time. He did not need to tell me."

Rose sat wondering what argument would move her.

"Electra," she ventured, "have you had any curiosity about my father's relations to other people?"

"He had no time to tell me," said Electra, with a proud dignity.

"No, he would not have told you. He never confused his relations. Did you know he was adored by women?"

Electra's face flamed. She made no answer. If she could have set forth adequately what was in her tumultuous thoughts, she would have told Rose that nothing seemed so entirely her own as her part in Markham MacLeod's life. She had no curiosity over his past, no doubt of what her future would have been with him, accepting what he chose to give her, and finding it enough.

Rose pursued her into the cloister of her thought.

"Do you know, Electra," she was urging, "do you know how women devoted themselves to him?"

"They must have devoted themselves to him. I am one of them. I am proud to be."

"Ah, but, Electra, to take so much and give nothing!"

"How do you dare to say he gave nothing?"

"I know. I was slow in learning. I learned it first through your brother. No, don't put me off with a gesture. I must speak of him. It was he who showed me the cruelty of my father's attitude toward women. He laughed over it, but he showed me."

"He was never cruel." Electra seemed to be dreaming away in a sad reminiscence of his kindness.

"But to promise so much, Electra, and give nothing! He implied to every one, I have no doubt, that she was his great helper, that he would have married her if he had not been set aside by his work. That was like him. He was a sponge drinking up devotion."

"Yes, and he gave it back to the hungry and the thirsty and the cold."

"I don't know. I do know what he absorbed. One woman did translations for him. She worked like a dog, and he paid her with one of his looks. Another--she was a titled lady--kept his suite of rooms ready for him, and when he came, treated him like a prince. And they all had this sense of intimacy with him. Each thought she was the only one. Each felt she was divided from him by hard circumstance, but she should possess him in the end."

"In heaven?" asked Electra, eager for the slightest knowledge of him.

"No, not in heaven. My father always said his expectations stopped here. He never carried the game on there."

"The great souls"--Electra began, and stopped. Trouble was upon her brow. She knew there was a goodly reason for every act he did, yet human jealousy was in her. She had to seek out arguments. "The great souls are different," she halted. "They are many-sided. Look at Goethe--"

But Rose had heard that reason. She was tired of it.

"It's a pity they make it so hard for other people," she said wearily. "Because they are great, must they be greedy, too? But that was my father. He may have been a great man, but he was not the man you think him. If you saw him as he was,--he was a big, dominating animal, that's all."

Electra sat staring at her, condemning, Rose knew, not Markham MacLeod, but his daughter. The charm of his mastery was still upon her. Rose and Peter, more mobile than she, had escaped with the cutting of his cord of life. It was as if they had been under a crude natural magnetism, and now that the magician had gone into another room, they were free. But Electra had petrified in the attitude where he had left her. She had a pitying certainty that Rose had never known him. Something like indignation came now into her face. She spoke passionately:--

"Why do you want to take it away from me?"

Rose could not answer. Tears were in her eyes from pure pity at the loss and pain of it all.

"We knew each other so short a time," brooded Electra; and it was apparent that she believed the relation had been as

much to MacLeod as to her. "Why can't you let me have the comfort of it?"

"If it didn't mean so much time, so much energy wasted! If you wouldn't devote your life to it,--you might, you know. It's quite like you, Electra. And that would be a pity; because he was never for a minute such a person as you think him,--never, Electra, never in the world."

Electra rounded upon her in a flash of indignation.

"Tell me what you think him."

Rose's mind ran back to that first night when, with the daring inspired in her by their meeting, she had given Osmond a portrait of her father. Now was the time to paint it again, but, for some reason, she could not. The man had not changed, but his aims obscured him. Behind them, he was nothing, but they were large enough to make his monument. Instead of answering directly, she found herself saying,--

"I have had such letters about him!"

"From the Brotherhood?"

"Yes. And they will keep on coming for a long time now, because it is everywhere, you know, in far, far-off places. And there's a tremendous loyalty in them, not only to him but to the Brotherhood."

"How can you read them and not be loyal, too!"

Rose considered why she could. Was it because the Brotherhood seemed, in her latest acquaintance with it, to have all the seeds of the old conditions that made a world of hate? If it had been the pure bond it promised to be, could even her father's sins have quenched the flame in her? Then she remembered one night when, in her father's absence, some one had spoken like a poet and created, in shining imagery, a new world. She had seen it, the new world, hanging like a crystal in the rejoicing sky.

"One night Ivan Gorof spoke," she began.

Electra's brows came together.

"He was the man that died."

"How did you know?"

"Peter told me."

"Yes. Well, there was a time when Ivan Gorof was like a flame. He was more moved than any one. He was a student,--and so enthusiastic, so believing,--I can't tell you! Afterwards he changed. That came suddenly. But this night he spoke about the Brotherhood as he wanted it to be. He said it could be a chain of hands round the earth, of people who wanted to do justice and show mercy. The old oppressors killed, he said. The Brotherhood must not kill. It can put to death,--but justly."

"What did he mean by justly?"

"Ah, that I don't know. I don't believe he knew, that night. He was like a man seeing a vision. But if such a thing could grow and grow, he said, that would be the kingdom of God. It would begin with the poor. Then some day a king would join it, and there would be rejoicing and wonder because some would think the king was mad and others would know it meant a great step upward. And they would all choose law, not liberty as the Brotherhood sees it. And then, he said, there would be a new heaven and a new earth, and it wouldn't be possible for oppressors to live, because everybody would love love and be afraid of hate. But it would all come through men who hated injustice more when they did it than when it was done to them."

"But that," said Electra, in no great interest, "is only Christianity."

"Is it? I don't know about that. I thought it was Ivan Gorof."

"What did he say?"

"My father?"

"The chief."

"It was reported to him, and I believe he said it was visionary. He probably smiled a little. He said there would be no peace without the sword. And afterwards Ivan told him to his face--I heard him--that it would come by the sword, but

not the sword of war. It must be the sword kept hanging in the temple to be used for the god of the temple."

"Was the chief indignant?"

"He disapproved. Ivan was ignored, after that. He was quietly crowded out. My father," she could not resist saying,-- "my father was very intolerant of new leadership."

"Naturally! He thought of the general good."

Rose sighed.

"Perhaps he did, Electra; I should like to think he did."

But she had told Electra nothing yet, she realized, to keep her from going forth with an ignorant intent. She tried once more, not to destroy the image of MacLeod, but to make it a just one. Yet if it were better to have the image broken, that, too, must be done.

"My father," she said, "took life like a great play."

"A game!" put in Electra quickly. She had heard him use the word, though as he said it, it seemed noble.

"Yes. He was always rearranging scenes on the big stage, ringing down the curtain and putting it up on another act. But what Ivan Gorof wanted--that silent spread of good--that he couldn't understand. He wanted war and himself a big figure in the midst."

"He was a leader!" cried Electra jealously, "the greatest of all."

Rose smiled wistfully.

"I haven't weakened your faith, have I?" she asked. "You don't doubt the wisdom of throwing yourself into this."

Electra rose suddenly from the desk, with an air of terminating the interview. Her voice rang like metal.

"If you talked to me until you were an old woman, you couldn't convince me. He was great--great! I should have followed him, if he had lived. I shall follow him all the faster now."

Rose, too, came to her feet.

"I almost think," she said, "I shall hear of your speaking for the cause."

A flush went over Electra's face. She looked wonderfully equipped for some high task, and also as if she recognized her own value and was glad she had that to give. Rose went back to Ivan Gorof and his great night.

"I keep remembering more and more of what he said," she mused. "He said the Brotherhood, as he saw it, would have its way because it was so beautiful. It would be like men in shining raiment regarded because they made a light, and people would see the light and want to walk by it."

"I must put that down," said Electra absorbedly. "I may at any time have to talk about him as I knew him."

"Ivan Gorof?"

"The chief. Was it Ivan Gorof who said that?"

Immediately, Rose saw, the words had lost their lustre. They were of no value, save as they had the sanction of MacLeod. Electra moved a pace nearer the door. She was impatient, Rose believed, to have her gone.

"Good-by, Electra," she said lingeringly and sadly. "I can't persuade you, can I?"

"No, you can't persuade me."

"And you glory in it!"

"Yes. And I thank God I have something to glory in."

At last she had it, the purpose of her life, though it was only a memory. But after all, what might she not turn it into? For she was pressing on as rashly as if the army of her desires were not at the cliff's edge below which foamed the sea, and in the sea, perhaps, lay glorious disaster.

"I shall be in Paris within a month," Rose hesitated. "If I can do anything for you there,--I told you the Brotherhood was not easily found, but I could introduce you to the leaders."

"They will flock about you," said Electra, with a candid bitterness, "because you are his daughter."

"Not long. There are things to do,--money to make over to them, money that stood in his name. Everything was in his name. I don't know how much he had of his own, so I shall keep my mother's and give back the rest."

"That will be right," said Electra. She did not add "ethically." Outlines had grown too sharp for that.

Rose held out her hand, and Electra, after a perceptible hesitation, took it in her firm grasp. Having it, she seemed warmed, through the contact, to something more humble and more natural. Still holding it, she looked Rose in the face, as if she tried to read her deepest self.

"Tell me," she said, and stopped.

"Yes, Electra." The girl's voice was very soft. She felt as if she could tell Electra anything that would help her.

"Did he love you?" The words came with difficulty, whether from jealousy or pure interest Electra herself could not say.

Rose stood a moment, not so much considering her answer as grieved that she must give it.

"No, Electra," she said then. "My father loved nobody,--but himself."

Then, as Electra dropped her hand, she went away. But after three paces she returned, doubtful of her own judgment, but ready to venture it.

"Electra," she said, "the papers have begun already to report a woman's speeches to the Brotherhood. You saw that yesterday."

Electra bowed her head silently. She was white to the lips.

"That woman was Ivan Gorof's mistress. My father separated them, for a time, just as he is separating you now from all your past. Ivan Gorof accused him of it, and next day he died. But I know, as well as I know anything, that now she has gone back to Ivan Gorof's memory. She will preach the Brotherhood as he saw it. Don't you see, Electra, until a man rises that is strong enough, she will lead the Brotherhood herself?"

Electra struck her hands together in a passionate, unconsidered gesture. But she recalled herself immediately.

"Good-by," she said coldly, and, turning about, went in.

XXIX

Rose, unquiet over her useless mission to Electra, sought out Peter where he sat in the sun, his mind swaying in its constant rhythm between his happy work and his charming dreams. He left the garden chair and came forward to her, struck by the pathos of her face, and a little irritated, too, because MacLeod's death was a sorrow past, and it seemed unfortunate, at least, that there should be so much melancholy in bright weather.

"Electra is going abroad, you know," she said.

Peter turned with her and they paced along the grass. Rose went on,--

"She was much impressed by my father."

"I know."

"She belongs to the Brotherhood now."

Peter nodded, his mind still with Osmond, but cheering a little in the consciousness of her graceful presence.

"Peter!" She stopped, and laid a finger on his sleeve. "Say something to her! She is going over there to work, to throw herself into that movement. She might as well jump into the Seine."

"Yes," said Peter musingly. "Yes, of course! I'll go see her. I'll go at once."

She assented eagerly. She seemed to hurry him away, and not knowing quite what he was to do when he got there, he found himself, obedient but unprepared, at the other house, before Electra. She was agreeably welcoming. Peter had ceased even to remind her of young love, chiefly because it was a part of her dignity to put the incomplete dream aside.

When she was forced to remember, sometimes by a word of grandmother's, it gave her an irritated sense of having once been cheek to cheek with something unworthy of her. But this morning Peter meant nothing whatever. A larger bulk had blotted him out. He plunged, at once.

"I am going to Paris, too, Electra. We shall meet there."

She smiled at him with a fine remoteness.

"Perhaps," she said. Then a wave of her old distaste came over her, and she asked, with the indifference that veils forbidden feeling,--

"Are you going together?"

"Together?"

"Yes. Are you going with Rose MacLeod?"

Peter frowned.

"We have not mentioned it," he said. Their coming to America together had seemed most natural, but some intonation of her tone made the implication odious. Seeing his look, she said, not giving him time to answer,--

"You will help me with the Brotherhood. I must get in touch with it by every possible means."

The color came into his face. He looked half ashamed, half wondering.

"I can't account for it," he returned, "but--Electra, I shan't have time for those things any more."

"Not have time--for that!"

It was as if she accused him of lacking time to breathe.

"I can't help it," said Peter. "It's all true, Electra, as true as it was; but I've got to paint. That's my business."

"Don't you feel that you owe anything to Markham MacLeod?"

He looked at her with interest, noting the indignation that made a handsomer woman of her; but only for that reason, not because the indignation stirred him. Peter hardly knew how he felt about Markham MacLeod. He scarcely thought of him at all, save as Rose recalled him. As to the Brotherhood, now that this great persuasive force was gone, Peter could view it dispassionately, and it did not move him. It was like waves heard a long way off, the waves of a sea he once had sailed, but from which he had escaped to this upland meadow where the light was good. Only when Rose, possessed by the remembrance of Ivan Gorof's vision, had gone home and told him about it, had he felt the flare of that old enthusiasm to be in the surge of the general life,--but chiefly then because she had chanced to use the phrase "shining armor," and he saw a knight pricking through a glade, with sunlight dappling between leaves, and knew it would be good to paint. There was nothing to say to Electra, because, as Rose had told him, she could listen to nothing but the Brotherhood, and wakened only to MacLeod. It was not that she refused other challenges; but her face grew mystical and he knew her mind was afar from him. He got up to go.

"In Paris, then, Electra," he said awkwardly.

Her brows contracted. She remembered the other tryst that was to have been, and could not answer.

"You will let me know where you are. I shall find you," Peter said, as he went down the steps, "at once."

But as he walked away, he knew it would have to be some incredible chance to bring them together. There was no room for him.

Electra sat there, her feet together, her hands in her lap, like a carved image, and held herself still in her dream of fantasy. She hardly knew where she was in these days. This was not the world as she had known it. Bound beyond bound of possibility lay over its horizon. There had been her former world, full of disappointments, lacking in opportunities for picturesque morals, and Markham MacLeod had walked into it, and turned on a light under which the whole place glittered. He had caused things to be forever different. One such illumination made all things possible. She felt like an adventurer setting sail. There in the room where he had talked to her, she sat and thought of him and even felt him near. The great stories flashed out before her, as if she turned page after page. Dante--how many times did he see Beatrice? She must look that up. But once would be enough, once for souls to recognize each other and then be forever faithful. At a step in the hall she recalled herself. It seemed as if everybody interrupted her in her passionate musings. This was Madam Fulton, and Electra remembered she had something to say to her. Madam Fulton looked

very tired and irked in some way, as if she found the daily burden hard to bear. Electra rose, and waited scrupulously for her to sit.

"Billy Stark comes back to-morrow," said Madam Fulton. She took a chair, and laid her head back wearily.

"When does he sail?"

"Next week. You go Wednesday. He goes Saturday."

Electra dared not remind her of that wild threat of marrying Billy Stark and sailing with him. Her grandmother looked a pathetically old woman, and such fantasy seemed to have withdrawn into its own place.

"Grandmother," she began delicately. She had a fear of disturbing something frail that might fall to pieces of its own weakness.

"Well."

"Shall you stay on here?"

Madam Fulton roused herself.

"No," she said. "I am going to Bessie Grant's. She'll help me pull myself together, and in the fall I shall move back to town."

Electra came awake to her pathetic look.

"You are not feeling well, grandmother," she said solicitously.

"Feeling well!" The old lady repeated it with a fractious emphasis. "I'm worn out."

"Is it anything particular, grandmother?"

"Billy Stark is going away, isn't he? Isn't that particular enough? He's the only human creature left, except Bessie Grant and that pretty girl."

"Rose MacLeod?"

"Yes; but she's too young. She tires me; you all tire me, all but Billy and Bessie Grant. No, you can close the house, or I will, after you're gone. I shan't be in it."

There was something inevitably foolish to Electra in the regret of an old woman at losing the company of an old man whom she had not married at the proper time. She found herself hoping, with some distaste, that grandmother would forget him as soon as possible, and settle down into the decencies of age. But Madam Fulton seemed to have gathered herself and summoned energy for action. She sat upright now, and composed her face into more cheerful lines. She looked at Electra, and a wicked smile flickered out.

"I believe," said Madam Fulton, "if I have the strength, the day he sails, I believe I'll marry Billy Stark and go along with him."

Electra looked her pain and then her purpose to ignore it.

"I have left everything in complete order, grandmother," she said. "It will be easy to close the house. I have made my will."

"Bless me!"

"I have given you half my property. The other half I leave to the Brotherhood."

"For heaven's sake, Electra! What do you want to act like that for?"

Electra was too enamored of that deed to keep it hidden.

"It is for a monument to Markham MacLeod," she said, from her abiding calm. "But it is to be used by the Brotherhood. He would wish that."

Madam Fulton was regarding her, not satirically now, but in an honest wonder.

"Electra," she said, "I glory in you."

"Grandmother!"

"I do. I can't help it. You've gone bad, just as I said you would. And you never were so human in your life. Brava! I'm proud of you."

But Electra lifted her head a little and did not answer. Grandmother, she knew, could hardly understand. It made her isolation the more sacred.

"You give me courage," the old lady was saying. "Why, you put some life into me! I don't know but I've got the strength to fly with Billy, after all."

Electra rose. She could not listen. But at the door she turned, a new thought burning in her.

"Grandmother," she said irrepressibly, "if you would make your will--"

"Bless you, I haven't sixpence," said the old lady gayly, "except the tainted money from the book."

"That's what I mean." Electra came back and stood beside her. She breathed an honest fervor. "That money, grandmother,--it is tainted, as you say,--if you would leave that to the Brotherhood--"

Madam Fulton was on her feet, with an amazing swiftness.

"My money!" she cried. Then a gleam of humor irradiated her face, and she ended affectionately, "My own tainted money? Why, I'm devoted to it. And I tell you this, Electra: if there's one scrap of it left when you inherit, if you give it to your brotherhoods, I'll haunt you. As I'm a living woman, you shan't have a chance. I'll make my will and Billy Stark shall help me, and I'll leave it to that pretty girl, and she shall buy ribbons with it. And--My heavens! but there's Billy Stark now."

He was coming up the walk, and she flew to meet him in an ingenuous happiness, half dramatic fervor to plague Electra, who, walking with dignity, went out the other way.

Madam Fulton was laughing, at Electra, at life itself.

"Billy," said she, "I'd rather see you than all the heavenly hosts."

Billy took off his hat and wiped his forehead.

"I found I'd got things pretty well in order," he explained. "I thought you wouldn't mind my coming sooner."

"Mind! I'm enchanted. Come along in and have cold drinks and things. Bless me, Billy! how it does set me up to see you."

She led the way into the dining-room, and when no one answered the bell, on into the kitchen for exploration in the icebox. She tiptoed about, her pretty skirt caught under one arm, her high heels clicking. The pink came into her cheeks. She had the spirit which is of no age. Then they sat down together at the dining-table in the shaded calm, and while Billy drank, she leaned her elbows on the table and, with the ice clinking in her glass, drank and made merry. She might have been sixteen and in a French cafe. Her spirits were seething, and she feared no morrow.

"I never can let you go in the world, Billy," she said, out of her gay candor.

He was instant with his gallant remedy.

"Come with me, then!"

"Sometimes"--she paused and watched him--"sometimes I almost think I will."

William Stark was a tired man that day. He had been telephoning and besieging men in their offices and talking business; he felt his age. It was one of the days when it seemed to him that sacred business even was less than nothing,--vanity,--and when he wondered, without interest, who would spend the money he might make. He was plainly fagged, and here was a gay creature of his own age, beguiled by the old perennial promises, whom life had not yet convinced of its own insolvency. He wondered at the youth of women, their appetite for pleasure, their inability to realize when the game is done. There was the curtain slowly descending between age and its entertainment, and Madam Fulton was clapping her unwearied hands as if things could go on forever. Grant her an encore, and she would demand another. As for him, he would fain go home to bed. But Billy was a man of his word. His loyal heart could not allow itself to recognize the waywardness of his sad mind. The one had done with life in all but its outer essences. The other, in human decency, must go on swearing the old vows to the last. His face took on a resolution that made him more the man, and sobered her. He put out his hand.

"Will you come, Florrie?" he asked.

"Yes, Billy," she answered. "I'll come."

"You honor me very much." He sat there holding the frail hand and wondering at himself, wondering at them both. If he had known he was to go back in this guise, he might not have had the courage to come. But it was well. It was a good thing, having missed many ventures, not to let this one pass. Madam Fulton was having one of her moments of a renewed grasp on life, a gay delight in it which was a matter of nerves and quite distinct from memory or hope. She was discoursing gleefully.

"We won't tell Electra."

"Not if you'd rather not."

"She shall sail, and we'll sail after her. We'll send her cards from London. My stars, Billy! do you think we're mad?"

"You may be," said Billy. "As for me, I'm a great hand at a bargain."

And while there were flutterings of wings before sailing, Osmond bent over his ground and delved and thought. His brows were knitted. He hardly saw the earth or his fellow workmen, but answered mechanically when men came for orders, and went on riving up the earth, as if it were his enemy, and then smoothing it in tenderest friendliness.

XXX

Rose and grannie had been living in an atmosphere of calm. Something was not determined yet, and they had to wait for it. Osmond had not come to the house for his early calls on grannie, and Rose, awake in her room to hear his step, at least, listened for it with a miserable certainty of disappointment. Every morning she gave a quick look of inquiry as she and grannie met, and the old lady would say,—

"No, dear, no!"

She sickened mentally under the delay, and at last her heart began to ask her whether he would ever see her again. On the day she told grannie that she was going to Paris to settle MacLeod's estate, grannie said,—

"That's right. But you'll come back."

"I must come back. You must let me." It was a great cry out of a warring heart. "But I must see him before I go. May I send for him to come?"

"You must send for him, my dear, and have your talk," said grannie.

So it was grannie who gave the message to Peter, and afterwards told him Rose was to see Osmond alone. Peter walked up and down the room. He did not altogether understand.

"What is it now, child?" asked grannie.

"I wondered if Rose needs to see him. This is all so painful for her! Why should she be bothered?"

"She must see him," said grannie. "It wouldn't be possible for her to go away without."

"She demands too much of herself," said Peter, stopping in his stride.

Grannie was smiling at him in a way that indicated she was very old and Peter was young. A wave of knowledge swept upon him.

"What is it, grannie?" he demanded. "What is between them?"

"You must let them find out."

"But what is it? I ought to know. Don't you see what I mean? I'm going to marry her, grannie, when all this is over."

Grannie looked at him in quick concern.

"Oh, no, Peter," she said. "No, you can't do that."

"Why can't I?"

"She doesn't love you, Peter."

"But she will. I can make her happy. I depend on showing her I can."

"That isn't enough, Peter."

"What?"

"To make her happy. You might make her miserable, and if she loved you, it would be all one to her."

"Tom Fulton made her miserable. Was that all one to her?"

"She isn't the girl Tom Fulton hurt. She's a woman now."

"Then what is it between her and Osmond?"

Grannie looked at him a few moments seriously. She seemed to be considering what he should be told. At last she spoke.

"Peter, I believe it's love between them."

"Love!"

"Yes, dear. She has a very strong feeling for Osmond."

"Osmond!"

Grannie got up out of her chair. She was trembling. Peter could almost believe it was with indignation against him, her other boy, not so dear as Osmond, but still her boy. Her calm face flushed, and when she spoke her voice also trembled.

"Peter," she said, "whatever we do, let us never doubt the kindness of God."

It was a little hard on Peter, he felt, for here was he, too, devoted to Osmond with a full heart; yet nature was nature, and life was life. He could not help seeing himself in the bridegroom's garment.

"Osmond is the greatest thing there is," he said. "But, grannie--" He stopped.

"I know, I know," said grannie. She was not accustomed to speaking with authority. The passion of her life had all resolved itself into deeds, into a few simple words like the honey in the flower and the slowly fructifying cells. Now she stood leaning on her staff and thinking back over the course she had run. Osmond had been the child of her spirit because he was maimed. She had drawn with him every breath of his horror of life, his acquiescence, his completed calm. What withdrawals there were in him, what wrestlings of the will, what iron obediences, only she knew. There was the sweetness, too, of the little child who, when they were alone, in some sad twilight, used to come and put his arms about her neck and lay his cheek to hers, with a mute plea to her to understand. And now when Osmond had harnessed himself to the earth, God had let a beautiful flower spring up before him, to say, "Behold me." God did everything, grannie knew. He had not merely created, in a space of magnificent idleness, some centuries ago, and then, with the commendation that it was "good," turned away his head and let his work shift for itself. He was about it now, every instant, in the decay of one seed to nourish another, in the blast and in the sunshine. He was ever at hand to hear the half-formed cry of the soul, the whisper it hardly knew it gave. He was the still, small voice. And He had remembered Osmond as He had been remembering him all these years. He had led him by painful steps to the hilltop, and then had painted for him a great sunrise on the sky. The night might lower and obscure it, the rain fall, or the lightning strike. But Osmond would have seen the sunrise. And all grannie could say was,--

"It may not turn out well, dear, but it's a great thing for him to have."

Peter strode away into the garden. She followed him, in an hour or so, and asked if she should sit for him, and all that afternoon he painted on her portrait, with the dash and absorption of one who knows his task.

"Tired, grannie?" he asked at length.

"No, Peter."

"You're going to be a sweet thing with your white cap here against the hollyhocks," said Peter. "I must hurry. When it's done, I'll leave it for exhibition, and then I'll go back to France."

That night he strode away for a walk, and grannie betook herself to her own room. So Rose was alone when Osmond came. She had dressed for him, and she looked the great lady. There was about her that air of proud conquest worn by women when they are willing to let man see how much he may lose in lacking them, or how rich he is in the winning. It says also, perhaps, "This is the wedding garment. It is worn for you."

When Osmond entered, these things were in his mind because it was a part of his bitter thought that he had no clothes to meet her in. For many years he had seen no use for the conventional dress of gentlemen, and grannie had never failed to like him in his clean blue blouse. So he came in, as Rose thought at once, like a peasant of an Old World country. All but the face. What peasant ever wore a mien like that: the clarified look of conquered grief, the wistfulness of the dark eyes, the majestic patience of one who, finding that the things of the world are not for him, has put them softly by? There were new lines in the face, Rose could well believe; in spite of those appealing softnesses of the eyes, it was a face cut in bronze. She held out her hand, and he took it briefly.

"I had to see you," she said, rushing upon the subject of her fears. "I am going away."

They were seated now, and Osmond was looking at her steadily. "But I am coming back," she smiled. "Please be glad to see me."

"I can't seem to talk to you," said Osmond abruptly, also smiling a little, in his whimsical way. "You are such a fine lady."

She glanced down at her dress, and hated it.

"I don't know why I put this on, except, perhaps, I didn't want you to despise me for what I am going to say."

"Despise you!"

She choked a little and dared it.

"You haven't been to the playhouse lately."

"No."

"Why?"

"Have you been there yourself?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I couldn't."

"Well, I couldn't, either."

"Why?" cried the girl passionately. "Why has everything got to change? Why should you tell me you would be there always and then never come again? Why?"

Osmond regarded her in what seemed a sad well-wishing.

"Youth can't last," he said. "That was youth. We are grown up now."

Tears gathered in her eyes. The finality of his tone seemed to be consigning her to fruitless days without the joy of dreams.

"Well," he added, "it doesn't matter. You are going away."

"You said once I should take the key of the playhouse with me."

He smiled humorously, as at a child who must, if it is possible, be allowed some pleasure in the game.

"Take it, playmate," he said.

The color ran over her face. She sparkled at him.

"Oh, now you've said it!" she entreated. "You've called me by my name. Now we can go back."

Osmond still smiled at her. He shook his head.

"You are very willful," he remarked.

"That's right. Abuse me. I like it, playmate."

But he could abuse her no more. Fancy in him was dead or dumb. He was tired of thinking, tired of his own life, with its special problems. A deep gravity came over her own face also. When she spoke, it was with a high dignity and

seriousness.

"Osmond," she said, "I sent for you because I want to give you something before I go away. I can't bear to go. I can't bear to leave this place and grannie--and you. Sometimes I think I shall die of homesickness over there, even in the few weeks I stay, to think what may happen to you before I see you again. So I want to give it to you."

She was under some stress he did not understand, yet speaking with a determined quiet.

"What is it?" he asked gently.

She had no words left, only the two she had thought of for days and days until it had seemed to her he must hear her heart beating them out. She held her hands together in her lap, and spoke clearly, though it frightened her:--

"My love, Osmond, my love."

He had turned his look away from her, and feeling the aloofness of that, she fell to trembling. When he began to speak, she stopped him. It seemed to her that he was bringing rejection of her gift, and she could not bear it.

"No," she said, "don't say it."

But he did speak, in that grave, moved tone:--

"That is dear of you. I shall always keep your present, just as grannie will keep your love for her. It's very precious."

Hope and will went out of her. She put her clasped hands on the chair in front of her, and bent her head upon them, trembling.

"What is it?" she said at last, "what is it that has come between us? Is it what you told me once in the playhouse? that you were going to give your life away when you chose?"

He laughed a little, sadly, to himself.

"How long ago that seems!" he mused. "No, it was a different thing I meant then."

"What was it? Tell me, Osmond."

"I can tell you now, for I shall never do it. It smells of madness to me, now I see what living demands of us. It was only,--well, my body hadn't done me much service in the ways I should have liked."

"Tell me, Osmond!"

"I meant to give it, living, to some scientist, to experiment on. To a doctor, if I could find one that would meet me as I wanted to be met, to work on,--with drugs, with germs,--the things they do to dogs, you know."

She forgot how he had held himself aloof from her, or that some grain of pride might well have met his coldness. She was kneeling beside him, her hands about his neck, her head upon his breast.

"No, Osmond, no," she sobbed. "It would kill me."

The man sat still. Then he spoke, and his voice was hard as iron.

"It will never happen, I tell you."

"To have you tortured," she was sobbing. "To have them hurt you--your hands, your dear hands--"

He lifted one of them, in a dazed way, and looked at it, all brown with work and yet a wonder in its virile power. Then a flame passed over him and burned up what kept him from her. His arms were about her and he bent his mouth to hers. For the first time since he could remember, he forgot what he had called his destiny. And after they had kissed, he said,--

"Now, sweetheart, now we can talk. It's better so, even if we say good-by to-morrow."

She drew apart from him and went back to her chair. But there she stretched out her hands to him and Osmond took them, and so, holding them, they spoke out their true minds. Her eyes were brimming full.

"I wasn't sure you would take my present," she said. "It's dear of you to take it, Osmond."

"Your love, your wonderful love!"

"I selected it with great care, dear." She was laughing. "It's very shiny, and nice, and warranted to last. It's the strongest

love I could find. I never saw one like it. Shall we live in the playhouse now, dear?"

"You will live in my heart. Rose, I kissed you."

She bent to him.

"Kiss me again. Kisses are little blooms budding out of my love. You are a gardener-man. You know the faster flowers are picked, the sooner they bloom again."

He was regarding her in wonder.

"You must be crazy to think you like me!" he said honestly. Again she laughed.

"I am! stark mad. I feel as if a thousand birds were singing and all the lilies opening: You remember how they smelled that night, Osmond? You wouldn't go with me to smell them. They've come to us. They're here."

He held her gaze.

"Be serious," he said.

"I can't, I like you so!"

"Only till I ask you this. You said once you had always been in love with love."

"Always. Ought I to be ashamed of it? I am not. I am proud. To find the half of you that you have been lonesome for, and then be faithful to it,—oh, beautiful!"

"Are you in love with love, or are you in love with me?"

"With you, dear Osmond." The clear eyes answered him in a joyous confidence.

"I must have taken hold of your imagination."

"Yes! You make me see visions and dream dreams. Hear how fast I talk to you! The words can't tumble out quick enough, there are so many more pushing them."

"No, I mean I have taken hold of your imagination because I am so queer."

"You are queer, Osmond. It's queer to be so darling."

"If I were sure!" He loosed her hands and looked away from her, and his face set gravely.

"What, Osmond?"

"If I were sure it was fair to you—best for you to let you know the truth—then I'd tell you."

"Tell me what?"

He drew her hands back into his. He was looking at her with the first voluntary yielding of his whole self. It lighted his face into beauty, the chrism of the adoring spirit laid upon trembling lip and flashing eye. "I have withheld from you," he said, in quick, short utterance, "because it had to be. But if you care, too, why deny us both one hour of happiness, if we part to-morrow?"

"Deny me nothing," she was murmuring. "Let me see your heart."

"You should see my soul, if it could be. Dearest, it was so from the first minute. I was afraid of you with the terrible fear of love. Don't you see how different it is with us? You longed for love because you are the angel of it. I was afraid of it because it would have to mean hunger and pain and thirst."

"But not now! not now! We have found each other, and it means the same thing for both of us."

"We have got to part, you know, for a couple of ages or so, or even till we die. Maybe I can get into some sort of trim by that time, if I give my mind to it; but here it's no use, dear, you see."

"No use! Osmond, I have given you my love. What do you mean to do with it?"

He caught his breath miserably.

"I am going to—God! what am I going to do! You are honest," he cried, "you mean it all, but—sweetheart, look at me, and see it is not possible. To-night ends it."

She withdrew her hands from his, and sat upright in her chair.

"Then," she said, "you are a coward."

"Am I?" He looked at her, blanched and sorrowful. "Am I, Rose?"

"You are a coward. You love me--"

"You know it! You do know that!"

"You know you do, and then you refuse to take the simple, sweet, faithful way with me."

"What way, my dear?"

She did not even flush at the words, sprung from a great sincerity.

"Shall I ask you? Shall I ask you to let me take your name and live with you, and be true to you?"

They looked at each other in the terrible recognition that brings souls almost too close.

"You are a great woman, my dear," said Osmond. He rose and stood before her. "Look at me. I hate my body. Could you love it?"

"I do love it," said the woman. "And I love your soul. And I am ashamed to think we can know the things we have known and then think of the bodies we live in. Grannie believes in immortal life. I believe in it too, since I have known you."

"There are a good many hours, my dear, when we forget immortal life. The world goes hard with us. In those times, shall you look at me and hate me?"

She was smiling at him through tears.

"I shall look at you and love you, stupid!" she said. "Oh, how little men know!"

"And then," he was continuing, in his bitter honesty, "I am a laboring man. I told Peter you were a terrible Parisian."

She shook her head.

"You don't quite know what you are, Osmond. There's a good deal of grannie in you. Perhaps that is one of the things I love. You work with your hands. Everything is possible to you, every kind of splendid thing, because you have not been spoiled by artificial life, the ambitions of it, the poor, mean hypocrisies. Strange that I should be talking about labor!"

"Why strange?"

"Because I hated the mention of it while my father lived. But now I seem to have gone back to my old feeling of a kind of pity for them all,--the ones that work blindly out of the light,--I see them as Ivan Gorof saw them, that great sea of the oppressed."

"But not every workingman is oppressed."

"No, no! Not here. But in other countries where they are surging and trying to have their ignorant way. And they are no more to be pitied than the rich. And I keep wishing for them, not money and power and leisure, such as the rich have, but something better, something I wish the rich had, too."

"The heart that sees God, grannie would say."

"Maybe grannie would pray for it, Osmond. Maybe I could sing it--I hope to sing now--maybe you could put it into the land and bring it out in flowers."

"That's poetry!" said Osmond. He was smiling at her unconscious way of showing him how lovely she was and how loving. "I am going now, dear. I am going to take your present home carefully and look at it alone."

She knitted wistful brows a moment. Then she too smiled.

"You will see how valuable it is when you look at it," she said. "It will shine so."

He had risen and stood before her, looking at her.

"Rose," he said, "you're a darling."

"Am I?" She was radiant.

"I am going to think up the things lovers have said, and read Solomon's Song, maybe! But now I'm going back to the plantation, to let the Almighty God and the undergods have a chance to tell me how to give you up."

"Ask them now, Osmond," she breathed. "Ask here, while I am here to answer, too."

"No," said Osmond. He shook his head. "Not while we are together. I can't listen to Him."

In the road he met Peter. They stopped, and Peter said at once,--

"I've got three orders from New York. When they're finished, I'm going back to France."

Osmond could not at once recall himself, even for his boy. Peter seemed only a figure of the night, familiarly dear, and yet unrelated to the great dream that swept across the sky with banners. Peter spoke again bluntly.

"I shall paint again all right. You needn't worry. It's got hold of me."

Then they shook hands.

XXXI

Osmond went back to his little house, not to sleep, but to think. The old habit of his life was changed. Henceforward, whether he took a woman's love or left it, things would not be the same. Say she loved him with the enduring passion of a woman at her best, could he let her undertake the half of his strange lot? Could he cut her off from a thousand sources of happiness to be found in the world she knew, even though he forced her to go out into that world and sing, and lessened his claim on her to a swallow flight now and then back to his waiting heart? If her lot were to be a public one, she would have, in a measure, to make it herself; for here was he, with his plants and trees, almost one of them, and he could not give up his hardy life, lest he dwindle and fail utterly. Besides, this was his business, as music was hers. Whatever communion they had, it could never be a unison of pursuits, but rather an interchange of rich devotion. It looked, he concluded, very bad for her.

As he thought that, the night grew chill, and the stars waned in their shining. These were the dull old ways of a world that had swung so long in one orbit that it could never be otherwise. He was bringing the woman to break bitter bread with him, and though she ate it cheerfully in the morning of her hope, it would seem intolerable in the evening, and at night she might refuse it utterly. What right had he to let her vow herself to such things and swell the list of proven failure? But say she loved him! And after all, what was love? Was it the ever-living germ of desire to create new life, that life might live? Was it the gift shut in the hand when life left the creating source, to be squandered or hoarded, to be used for honor or dishonor, but always ignorantly, to serve the power behind creation itself? Was this beautiful creature the sport of her woman's blood, doing the will of the earth, and so most innocently walking into the lure of his arms because they longed for her? He wondered.

And his side of it, the man's side, what did it mean for him to know he worshiped the divinity of her beauty, the sun of her good pleasure, the might of her yieldingness? When he thought of her, the body of things became mysteriously transmuted to what he had to call their soul, because it wore no other name. There was the flame of passion and the frost of awe. The mystical call of her spirit to his had become the most natural of all created impulses. Yet, say that he, too, was in the grip of that greatest force, and nature was tricking the woman out with all the colors of the dawn, to blind him into stumbling along nature's ways. Did nature want him to say, "This is Paradise," until she was ready to let him know it was the unchanged earth? If it was all a gigantic phenomenon of a teeming universe--well, it was good. It was to be worshiped as the savage worships the sun: but not greatly. For clouds hide the sun, and, in spite of it, men die. Better not spill too much blood for a savage god that gives but savage recompense. And, thinking so, he closed his eyes and lapsed into a dull recognition of the things of earth.

How far his mind had rushed upon its track he did not know, but suddenly it came to a stop and jolted him awake. It was as if he had come to a great gulf, the darkness girdling the natural life, and across it were the colors of the dawn. They breathed and wavered in sheer beauty. And at that moment there began in him the fainting recognition of what love might be if men would have it so. First, there was the lure, the voice of the creature calling to its mate. Then there was the unveiling of the soul, the recognition, the sight of the soul as God sees it, so that the two creatures can only

breathe, "How beautiful you are!" And that must not continue, because the soul is a delicate though an indestructible thing, and cannot walk naked through the assaults of time. It would consume the beholder; it would even scorch under the flame of its own being. It withdraws, only to appear again, like the god from the brake, when it is greatly summoned. But always it is there, and the two that hold high fealty remember what they have seen. When the flame sinks, they say: "But it is the flame on the altar. It must not die." So they renew it. When the outer habit of life fails in one of them, to grow poor and mean, the other remembers that one glimpse of the soul, and calls upon it tenderly.

"Revive," says his patient love, "I stay you with the flagons of my hope, I comfort you with the apples of my great belief." And always it is an interchange of life, the one feeding the other with eternal succor.

And now, to come back to the old question: Say a woman loved a man like this man. Osmond seemed not to be debating now, but hastening along the thread of a perfect certainty. Something had put a clue in his hand. Wherever it might lead him, he was running fast. It came upon him, like the lighting of a great fire, that this was a call for high emprise. He loved nothing so much as courage. Here was the summons to the world-old battle where all but a few fail and none are said to succeed unless they die for passion and so life drops a curtain on the after-fight. The great lovers--chiefly they are those for whom the fight never was finished, who chose death rather than endure. He had bitten his teeth all his life on the despair of adventure, but now it came upon him that life itself is the great adventure, and love the crown of it. Say he, loving a woman, went out to fight the dragons of the way. He had no armor such as youth delights in. He was not a Prince Charming, who woos the eye even before he speaks. He had only the one treasure--love. Say he crowned the woman with it, and then challenged God to give their hungers food, be the unseen combatant and fight out the fight beside them? Say he vowed himself like a knight to her service, and their mutual worship scorned the body save as the instrument of life, and glorified the soul? "I am the soul," something cried out in him. "Do not deny me, or you blaspheme the God that also lives. Give me food, the large liberty to be faithful. Lay bonds upon me, patience and loyalty, and I shall rejoice in them and grow strong enough to break them, and delight in perfect liberty."

It all resolved itself, he found, into this question of the soul. Was the marvel true? Did it really exist? For if it did, it must have food and cherishing. Inevitably then he thought of grannie, and his struggling mind seemed to appeal to her clarity, question and answer, and to every question she smiled and told him the dream was true. It did live, this mystery, this imperishable one that came from the bosom of God and would return in safety there.

Osmond rose, in the dewy midnight, and stretched his arms to heaven. He felt what he never had before, in his iron acquiescence, an ecstasy of worship. This was what grannie felt, he knew; it was the daily draught that kept her spirit young. He made no doubt she was praying for him at that moment, and that their buoyant certainties were meeting in the air of quickened life. Hitherto he had walked. Now he saw the use of wings.

He knew what Rose was doing. She would not be waking. She would be lying in her bed asleep, too secure in her glad confidence to wonder over it. Another thought swept in and awoke his quivering sentience to the marvel of his life. Some recognition of the cherishing maternal seemed to grow in him, and as grannie had saved his body for him, so now Rose seemed to have given birth to his new soul. It was like a shining child. With his bodily eyes he almost saw it through the dark, and he longed to take it in his arms to where she slept and lay it on her breast. He could fancy how the shining child would lie there and how, sleeping, her sweet soul would cherish it. And whether he began the next day with the resolve to give her up or to relinquish his own doubts, at least he had had the vision. As the dawn broke he seemed to see her coming toward him, the spirit of it, rosy-clad, bearing in her hands, outstretched, a beaker for his lips. It was the water of life, and her face besought him to know finally that they were to drink of it together. He was shaken with the wonder of it. All his past had been preparing him for ignominy and loss. He trembled when he saw what the girl in the vision meant: that the greater quest is farther yet.

XXXII

Madam Fulton and Electra were busy, each in her own track, making ready to go. Electra was truly concerned because grandmother had fallen into this frenzy of setting her belongings in order and would even fly up to town to her little apartment, on mysterious errands. But Madam Fulton was as gayly confident as she was inscrutable, and even when Billy Stark warned her that she was doing too much, she only whispered,--

"Got the tickets, Lochinvar?"

On the last day, when the house was partly closed and the servants lingered only for an hour or two, Electra, ready to her gloves, came to kiss her grandmother good-by. Madam Fulton drew back a pace and looked at her.

"Electra," said she, "you'll be horribly shocked and you'll want to laugh at me. But don't you do it. Don't you do either of those two things."

Electra's brows came together in a perplexity that yet betokened only a tepid interest. Her own affairs were too insistent. They crowded out the pale, dim hopes of age.

"When, grandmother?" she asked. "Why should I want to laugh?"

"Never mind. But you will. And when you do, you say to yourself that, after all, youth and age are just about the same, only age has tested many things and found they're no good. So if it finds something that seems good--well, Electra, you're off on your fool's errand. Don't you deny other folks the comfort of theirs."

"I don't understand you, grandmother."

"No, of course you don't. But you will. Once I shouldn't have cared whether you did or not, but I've taken a kind of a liking to you. I told you I should when you turned human and made a fool of yourself like the rest of us. And now you're going out into the wilderness, to found a city or something of that sort."

"I am going to help the Brotherhood," said Electra, with punctilious truth.

"And build a monument to that handsome scamp that had the bad taste to come over here to die."

"Grandmother, you must not use such words."

"Must not? Don't you suppose I know a scamp when I see one? If I'd been fifty years younger, I dare say I should be starting out to build him a monument, too. But I'm glad of it, child, I'm glad of it. He's your preserver. He has roused in you the capacity for being a fool. Make much of it. Prize it. It's God's most blessed gift to man. When you've lost that, you've lost everything."

"There is the carriage, grandmother. I must go."

Madam Fulton presented a kindly cheek.

"Good-by, my dear," she said. "I'm sorry I've harried you. I had to, though. I should again. Now we'll meet in Paris, or London--or another world."

Electra, a perfect picture of the well-equipped traveler, in her beautiful suit, her erect pose, was at the door.

"The maids will go in an hour," she said. "Then you've only to turn the key and walk over to Mrs. Grant's. I wish you'd had your trunks taken out before."

"My trunks can wait," chuckled the old lady. "They'll be sent for."

As Electra's carriage turned from the driveway into the road, Madam Fulton laughed again.

Electra had five minutes at the station, and there appeared Peter, wearing the air of haste. He had been painting in the garden, when the carriage went by, and he had dropped brush and palette to run. Why, Peter could not have said, only it seemed cold and miserable to have an imperial lady taking the train alone and then setting sail with no one by.

"You wouldn't let me go up to town with you?" he ventured, with his eager stammer.

"No," returned Electra, "thank you."

"I'd like to awfully," said Peter. "Maybe I could be of use."

"Everything is done. My luggage is on board. We sail at three."

"It seems an infernally lonesome thing to do!"

Electra smiled. She had gained that smile of late. It was a subtle indication of the secret knowledge she had of the resources of her own future. With a perfect and simple conviction, she believed she should be guided by Markham MacLeod or some unseen genius of his life. She should follow his star. She should know where to go.

"Rose said you didn't take the letters she offered you. Is that wise, Electra? If you want to know the Brotherhood--"

"I shall know it," said Electra, with entire simplicity. "The way will open."

She did not say that she could not bear to blur her secret by sharing it overmuch with any one. She was going on a mission for the chief. Other voices would confuse the message. The medium must be kept clarified between his soul

and hers. Peter stood back, feeling, in another form, Madam Fulton's hopeless admiration of this magnificent futility.

"Well," he said, "I shall be there in the late autumn, and I shall find you."

"I may not," said Electra decisively, "want to be found."

But when he thought of the elements into which she meant to hurl herself, he was of the opinion that she would as gladly long to be found as the maiden in the arena before the beasts walked in. Then the train came, and she bade him a civil and correct good-by and was taken away.

Peter went home wondering, his eyes on the ground. Life seemed to resolve itself, not into the harmonious end of tragedy, but into more tragedy. Human things, when a solution was reached, deliberately began a new act. Peter had the childlike egoism of the very religious or the devotee of art. He never could help feeling that, in a way, the world was created for him. Its fortuitous happenings strengthened that belief. He had come home to lose Electra whom he did not love. Markham MacLeod, who, he now saw, had been too bright a sun, blinding his eyes to his own proper work, had been removed. Perhaps that, too, was done for him. And now he should paint his pictures. The Brotherhood still seemed far off and, if not vain, at least a clamorous sea of discontent, the hope of a palace beautiful beyond the touch of time. But near him were dear and intimate things: the feel of the brush in his fingers, the adorable combination of colors as delirious as the sunsets God could make. And in the future there were men and women who also would go singing along the path to perfect pictures and leafy glades. In them was infinite possibility of more pleasure, more delight. And there was his broken heart! For Peter's heart was truly broken. That he knew. He had lost Rose, for she had gravely told him so, and given the simple reason, if he needed it. There was no man for her but one. And the one was Osmond, to whom he would gladly relinquish even the delight of her. So, thinking of his brother who was the best thing born, of his broken heart, of his pictures and the general adorableness of the world, crammed full of things to paint, Peter threw his stick into the air, caught it, and burst into song.

When the maids had left, after their good-by to Madam Fulton, giving the keys into her hand, she sat awhile in the silent house, and took a comfortable nap. It was amazing, she thought, as she sank off, what a lessening of tension it was to have Electra gone. When she awoke, it was still quiet and Billy Stark had not come. He was to run down from town, his last preparations made; the country minister was to meet them at the Grant house, and there they would be married. Then they would take the late afternoon train, and, in due course, sail for Liverpool. Even Bessie Grant did not guess they were to be married; but she, Madam Fulton knew, was ready for the last trump and welcoming evangelists, and that prepared her for all lesser things.

It seemed a little chilly in the house, shut up as it was for the flitting, all except the room where Madam Fulton sat, and she took her chair out of doors, not pausing on the veranda, but going on to the garden beds. It would be pleasant, she thought, to sit there in the sun with the bees humming on their way, and take her last look at the place. As well as she knew she was going to leave it, she knew she should return to it no more. It was not only that her age made it improbable,—for she had no doubt of Billy's ability to run over a dozen times yet; it was some inward certainty that told her she was going for good. It pleased her in every way. She liked new peoples and untried lands.

Yet, as she sat there, old faces crowded upon her, and they were pleasant to behold. Her husband was not there. With his death he seemed to have withdrawn into a remote place where no summons could reach him, even if she wished to call. And she had never wished it. But these were faces scarcely remembered in her daytime mood, very clear in the sunlight and with no possibility of mistake. One was like her own, only where hers sparkled with irony and discontent, this was softer and more sweet. "Why," said Madam Fulton aloud, "mother!" It gave her no surprise. Nothing seemed disturbing in this calm world, where things were throbbing warmly and, she knew at last, for the general good. Then she reflected that this was probably the effect of happiness because she was going to marry Billy Stark. It must be love, she thought, instead of their gay friendship. Youth and age were perhaps not so unlike after all, when one shut one's eyes and sat in the garden in the sun.

Billy Stark faded out of her musings, and the forgotten faces came the more clearly, all smiling, all bearing a mysterious benediction. She found herself recalling old memories with them, doings that had been once of great importance, but of later years had been packed into the rubbish hole of childish things. There was the summer day when she had lost the stolen prism from the parlor lamp, and mother had looked at her gravely for a moment and then smiled, seeing that tears were coming, and said it was no matter. Mother had never known that the tears were all for the loss of the red and blue lights in the prism, and somehow her kindness had not mattered then, because it could not bring the colors back. But now it seemed to the old lady in the garden that mother had been very kind indeed. "Don't mind it," the sweet face seemed to be saying. "Don't mind anything." And as she listened, she was restored to the pleasant usages of some

morning land where one could be reassured in a blest authority that made it so.

It seemed a long time that she sat there in this pleasant company, so far removed from the conditions of her own life that it was actually, at moments, as if she were in another country. But forms began to fade, and, mingled with their going, was the sense that another personality was thrusting itself into their circle, and, being more solid than they, was pushing them out. Billy Stark was calling, in his kindly tone,--

"Florrie! wake up, child."

Her eyes came open.

"Yes," she said, "that's what mother was just calling me." She winked, and rubbed her eyes. "My stars, Billy," said she, "I've been dreaming."

Billy pulled up a garden chair. He looked at her with a tender consideration. Florrie was pretty tired, he thought. She had worn herself out with these forced hurryings. Now he had no doubts about his ability to take care of her, or his wish to do it. Billy was one who, having made up his mind to a thing, cast care behind him, and if it climbed up on the saddle-bow, he promptly knocked it off again. That was why he proposed to be hearty for twenty years to come.

"Shall we turn the key in the door, and be poking over to Bessie Grant's?" he asked. "We'll call here for your trunks, on the way to the train."

"By and by, Billy." She leaned her head on the chair back, and regarded him with her friendly smile. "I haven't waked up yet. What time is it?"

"Five minutes before three."

"No! Electra'll be sailing in five minutes."

"And in half an hour, the reverend parson will be waiting for us at Bessie Grant's."

"Yes, I know. But let me sit a minute, Billy. I had the most extraordinary dream."

"Last night?"

"No, no. Sitting here in the sun. And yet I didn't think I'd slept a wink. Billy, do you remember the day mother stood me in the corner for going fishing with you, and then, when she found you'd stood yourself in the other corner, she laughed and gave us cookies?"

"Seems to me I do. I'd forgotten, though."

"So had I. I hadn't thought of it for years. Then there was the time Jeanie Lake was married and they found out he'd deceived that girl over in the next township, and Jeanie died of a broken heart."

"What makes you think of it now, Florrie?"

"I remember so well how Jeanie looked through the weeks she was fading out, before she died. I remember I thought I shouldn't have taken it so. I'd have struck him on his lying mouth and lived to love another man. But Jeanie looks exactly like herself now."

"You've been dreaming, Florrie," said the old man anxiously.

"Didn't I tell you I'd been dreaming? I saw them in crowds. Don't you hurry me, Billy. Let's sit here a minute and talk about old times." She blinked her eyes awake again and looked at him reassuringly. "You mustn't think I don't want to go, Billy. I do. I'm a little tired, but I'm all keyed up to go. I'm perfectly sure we shall have a lovely time,--the loveliest time that ever was."

"The voyage will do you good," he said, in the same affectionate concern. "The maid will meet us on the pier. And once in London, you'll be the centre of the crowd."

"Fancy! And Electra shall come over from Paris, and you'll make love to me, to shock her. Billy, isn't it queer I didn't dream of Charlie Grant this morning?"

"Why, Florrie? Why should you?"

"Because they were all there, crowds of them I haven't told you about. But not he. I suppose he was with Bessie Grant. Billy, it was when I gave him up, my life went wrong."

"Yes, dear, you told me so."

"It wasn't that I couldn't bear to lose him. I never broke my heart. It was because I made a bad choice,--a bad choice. I said deliberately I wanted the world and the things the world can give. Everything began when I gave him up."

"Time's going, Florrie. The parson will be there."

"Yes. Don't hurry me. Do you suppose we find things because we believe in them?"

"What things, dear?"

"Will Bessie Grant have heaven because she believes in it? Will she find him because she thinks he's there?"

"Come, dear, wake up."

"Well!" The old lady roused herself. The light came back to her eyes, the old smile to her lips.

"I'll tell you what, Billy," said she, "there's one thing I swear I never will forget. Living or dying, I never will."

"What is it?"

"I never'll forget you saw me an old woman and treated me like a young one. I never'll forget you did your best to bring back my lost youth. And if there is a heaven and I set foot in it, and they bring up their archangels, I'll say, 'Away with you and your fine company. Where's Billy Stark?'"

But the light faded as she spoke and her face changed mysteriously, in a way he did not like. A clever thought came to him.

"Florrie," said he, "have you had your luncheon?"

"I guess not."

"Have you been sitting here ever since Electra went, dreaming and starving?"

"I guess so."

"Well, that's it. Now you get on your two feet and take my arm and come over to Bessie Grant's. And she'll give you food and coffee. Bless us, Florrie, we're not going to own we miss Electra's patent foods as early in the game as this!"

She smiled at him. "I believe I am hungry, Billy," she owned. "That's why I had my dream. They always have visions fasting. But it was a beautiful dream. I wish I could have it again."

"You wait a minute. I'm going to get you a nip of brandy." She was rising, and he put her back into her chair. "I know where it is." He hurried down the path, but her voice recalled him sharply.

"Billy, come back. Don't leave me."

He returned to her, where she had risen and was standing tremulously. That same dire change was on her face, as if old age had passed a sponge over it. Her eyes regarded him, in a keen questioning.

"What is it, Billy?" she whispered. "What's coming?" He put her into her chair, and she said again, "Don't leave me."

"I must." There were tears in his kind eyes. "Let me go one minute, dear. I'll get you something."

But her frail hand detained him.

"Sit down, Billy," she was whispering. "No, kneel--there--where I can see you. Keep hold of me."

He knelt at her feet, and she bowed her head upon his shoulder. He put her back gently into her chair, again with the determination to get the brandy; but her face forbade him.

"Florrie!" he called loudly.

No one answered. With the keenness of the shocked intelligence, summoned to record the smallest things with the same faithfulness as the large, he noted how the bees were humming in the garden. He and the bees were alive, but his old friend was dead.

XXXIII

In the hushed interval after Madam Fulton had died and Billy Stark had gone away sadly, knowing he should return to America no more, Osmond went to find Rose. He had seen her briefly, in the common ways of life, but it was evident to her that they were not to meet alone. Perhaps his mind had fixed itself inexorably against her, she thought, and he meant to see her only to say good-by. But even that contented her, if it must be. The splendor of their understanding abode with her and made his will seem easy. When the tide of new love went down, it would be another thing; but now it was at the flood, and the light of heaven shone in it.

He came walking through the garden, and she saw him come. Grannie sat out there among the hollyhocks, waiting for Peter. He had left his painting to bring her a glass of water from the house, and she rested in a somnolent calm. Grannie liked the sunshine, and to-day it was opulent and flooding. To Osmond, looking at her as he came, her serenity seemed even majestic. She had forgotten the world, he saw, and a smile brooded upon her face, that face where no evil passions had ever dwelt, and where peace had lain like a visible sign for many years. As he passed her portrait, he glanced at it in proud wonder because Peter had done it. To Osmond it looked complete as it was, and he found it another and only less beautiful grannie in the garden, with an added touch of life upon the face, something that did not lie there every day. It was a shade of sadness in the midst of the tranquillity, as if grannie also, in spite of her calm, had known great hungers. It tempered her childlike quality and made what might be called her character as enduring as time that had wrought it. She opened her eyes, when he neared her, and her smile came, the one that was for him alone and never failed him.

"What were you thinking about, grannie?" he asked her.

"A good many things," she said. "Florrie and poor Billy Stark."

"You'll miss her, grannie!"

"Not long, son. And I'm very glad she's gone. Florrie never was one to bear old age. She'd have had to meet it soon!"

Osmond smiled tenderly at the ingenuous implication, but then he bethought him it was true. Madam Fulton never had been old. Grannie put out her hand to his.

"I've been thinking of you, son, all the morning. I hoped you'd come."

"Yes, grannie. I couldn't come before."

"No. You look like a new man."

"I am a new man, grannie."

He gave the kind hand a little tight grasp, and left her. Peter was coming with the glass of water, and Peter, too, had a morning light on his face, only his was the look of the maker who sees the vision of fulfillment.

"Good picture, Pete," said Osmond.

Peter nodded in entire acquiescence.

"I don't know what grannie looks like," he said. He was gazing into the glass of water, as if it were a crystal and he could find the answer there. "I've been trying to think. Like a baby--with a sort of innocence--like a fate, a kind one,--like the earth goddess. If I've put in all I see, it's a corker."

"It's the mother look," said Osmond. "But it is a corker, safe enough."

They parted with a nod, but Peter stopped.

"Hear that!" he said.

Rose was singing. The song began so triumphantly, with such dash and splendor, that it was almost like improvising. Osmond felt it like a call. He went on to the house, and Peter, after that moment of listening, also kept on the way that took him to his work. He, too, walked with quickened step, and there was light in his eyes. All the vibrations of his being quickened to the song; but he was thinking what a stunning world it was to have such things in it: paint and canvas and disturbing songs and broken hearts. The song ceased suddenly. He knew why. Osmond had gone into the room and Rose had met him. Peter sighed. Then he laughed, took grannie's empty glass from her, and sat down to work.

"It's a funny world, grannie," he remarked.

Grannie smiled at him. She understood him also, though he was not in her heart as Osmond was.

"You like your work, don't you, Peter?" she remarked. "It's just the right thing for you."

Peter plunged at it.

"It's the best thing out," he affirmed. "It's the top bubble on the biggest wave." Then he too, because the song had ceased, began one on his own account, with an inward rueful apology to his broken heart. For the song should have been a sad one, but Peter could not paint when the vibrations lagged, and so he made it gay.

Osmond followed the voice, and met Rose in the sitting-room, where she stood waiting for him. She wore a morning gown of demure dimity, with a little ruffle about her singing throat. When she saw him, she laughed, for no reason. Then she blushed. For Osmond was not the same. He came up to her and took her hands.

"You don't look like a goddess," he said.

They were smiling at each other out of an equal hope.

"I'm not a goddess. I'm just girl."

"Not a terrible Parisian?"

She looked down at her dress, that had wrought the simplicity.

"I put it on for you," she said. "You didn't like my chiffons that other night."

"How did you know I should come?"

"You knew it. Why shouldn't I know it? Are the wires down?"

Then, by one impulse, they began to walk back and forth through the room, hand in hand, like children.

"You go next week," he said, although he knew she did.

"Yes."

"When do you come back?"

"As soon as I can race through all the business there. In a month, I hope--perhaps less."

"Shall you come straight here?"

"I may stay a day or two in New York. I shall bring letters. I shall try to get a footing there."

"I will meet you in New York. Grannie has folks there. I'll take you to them."

It was a different man that spoke, decisive, dominating. She flushed in keen delight. They stopped at the window and looked out on the garden beds, in that tranquil summer hush, all growth and bloom. He drew her hand to his lips and spoke intemperately.

"What a fool I was to come by day!"

"Why, Osmond?"

"I wanted it to be by day, with no glamour round us, to make you judge, accept, reject things as they are. But now I need the night to help me." She was a picture of breathing happiness. He forgot his part. "Rose," he cried, "it's love between us!"

"It's love," she answered.

"I came to tell you the past is past. It's not to be remembered. Not a doubt! not a fear! not even a fear for you. You're not to love a coward. I won't have that. Will you take me, make what you can of me?"

The light on their faces spoke without their will.

"I'm not going to mark it down," he said. "I'm not going to say it isn't worthy of you. It's going to be, the sort the big lovers died for. I have looked the thing in the face. I adore it. I'm going where it leads me."

She calmed as he grew fervid.

"Sit down, Osmond," she said. "We must talk. There aren't many days to talk in."

But as he sat, he kept her hand.

"Shall I tell you why I've been staying away from you?" he asked.

"If you want to. But I know."

"You don't know the half. I have had to conquer all sorts of fears, chiefly for you. For me it's nothing. I'd rather have one minute of you and lose you to-morrow than not to have had you. But for you!" A wistful shade fell upon his face. "My own dear child!" he mused. "It must be well for you."

"It will be well."

"It shall. It's a great adventure, Rose. It's a big challenge--the biggest. I promise you--"

"No! no!"

"Yes. I promise you my undying faith. And I won't be a coward."

She was looking at him, smiling.

"You're a darling lover," she said. "Such pretty words!"

Then they laughed.

"This is nothing to what I can do," said Osmond. "I shall read the poets."

He leaned to her and they kissed, like children. Tears came into his eyes. He foresaw strange beauties he had never dreamed of. There would be the sweet, slumbrous valleys and the sharp lightnings of fierce love, but there would be also the homely intimacies, the foolishness of children who, hand in hand, can smile at everything.

"Do you suppose you could tell what I am thinking?" he wondered.

The air of the playhouse seemed to be about her, and she knew.

"You are playing we are on a ship," she said.

"Yes, we two alone--"

"We're just starting on the great adventure--"