Josephine Daskam Bacon

While Caroline Was Growing

WHILE CAROLINE WAS GROWING

BOOKS ABOUT CHILDREN

BY

JOSEPHINE DASKAM BACON

THE MADNESS OF PHILIP

MEMOIRS OF A BABY

BIOGRAPHY OF A BOY

THE IMP AND THE ANGEL

SISTER'S VOCATION

TEN TO SEVENTEEN

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JOSEPHINE DASKAM BACON

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To S. B.
long Caroline's admirer,
from J. D. B.

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WHILE CAROLINE WAS GROWING

I

AN IDYL OF THE ROAD

CAROLINE rocked herself back and forth from her waist, defying the uncompromisingly straight chair which inclosed her portly little person.

"Bounded 'n th' *north* by *Mass'jooseits*; bounded 'n th' *north* by *Mass'jooseits*; bounded 'n th' *north* by *Mass'jooseits*," she intoned in a monotonous chant. But her eyes were not upon the map; like those of the gentleman in the poem, they were with her heart, and that was far away.

Out of the window the spring was coming on, in waves of tree-bloom and bright grass; the birds bickered sweetly in the sun-patches; everything was reaching on tiptoe for the delicious thrill of May--and she was bounding Connecticut! It was idiotic. What was a knowledge of the uninteresting limits of her native State compared to that soft fresh wind on her cheek, that indescribable odor of brown earth?

Two fat birds descended with a twitter into a crystal rain-pool, and bathed, with splashes of spray; Caroline's feet itched in her ribbed stockings. A soiled and freckled boy, bare from the knees, whistled by the window, jangling a can of bait, his pole balanced prettily on one ragged shoulder. As he reached the puddle, a pure inconsequence of good feeling seized him, and he splashed deliberately in it, grinning around him. Caroline mechanically bent and unbuttoned the top button of her stout boots. He caught her eye.

"Where you going?" she called through the glass.

"Oh, I d'no--anywheres, I guess!" he answered invitingly. "Want to come?"

"I can't. I have to go to school," she said shortly.

"And so ought he--you ought to be ashamed of yourself, calling through the window to that Simms boy!" cried a disgusted voice. Caroline twitched her shoulder spitefully.

"A great girl like you, too! Why, he's no better than a common tramp, that boy," proceeded the voice. "Look at his clothes!"

"Nobody wears good clothes to go fishing," Caroline grumbled. "I wish he had mine!"

"Fishing! He never wears them anywhere. He hasn't got them to wear. And he'd be glad enough to get yours, I can tell you."

"He wouldn't do any such thing! He told me Saturday he'd rather be a dog than a girl; he'd get more use of his legs!"

There was a scandalized silence. Caroline waited grimly.

"What are you doing?" said the voice at last. "Studying my jography," she replied.

"Well, mind you do, then."

"I can't, if everybody talks to me all the time," she muttered sullenly.

Nevertheless she resumed her rocking and crooning.

"Bounded 'n th' *east* by Rho *Disland*; bounded 'n th' *east* by Rho *Disland*; bounded 'n th' *east* by *Rho Disland*."

The housemaid appeared just under the window, dragging a small step-ladder and a pail of glistening, soapy water. Her head was coifed in a fresh starched towel, giving her the appearance of a holy sister of some clean blue-and-white order; her eyes were large and mournful. She appealed instantly to Caroline's imagination.

"Oh, Katy, what a lovely Mother Superior you would make!" she cried enthusiastically.

"I'm a Presbyterian, Miss Car'line," said Katy reprovingly. "You'd better go on with your lessons," and she threw up the window from the outside.

A great puff of spring air burst into the room and turned it into a garden. Moist turf and sprouting leaves, wet flagstones and blowing fruit-blossoms, the heady brew of early morning in the early year assailed Caroline's quivering nostrils and intoxicated her soul.

"Oh, Katy, don't it smell grand!" she cried.

Katy wrung the soapy cloth and attacked the upper sash.

"You've got the nose of a bloodhound," she observed. "I b'lieve you'd smell molasses cookies half a mile."

Caroline sighed.

"I didn't mean them," she said. "I meant—"

"You'd better be at your lesson; your aunty'll be here in a minute if she hears you talking, now!"

Katy was severe, but fundamentally friendly. Caroline groaned and applied herself.

"Bounded 'n th' *south* by Long Island *Sound*; bounded 'n th' *south* by Long Island *Sound*; bounded 'n th' *south*--oh, look!"

Up the neat flagged path of the side yard a spotted fox-terrier approached, delicately erect upon his hind legs, his mouth spread in cheerful smiles, his ears cocked becomingly. He paused, he waved a salute, and as a shrill whistle from behind struck up a popular tune, he waltzed accurately up to the side porch and back, retaining to the last note his pleased if painstaking smile.

Caroline gasped delightedly; Katy's severity relaxed.

"That's a mighty cute little dog," she admitted.

Another shrill whistle, and the dog returned, limping on three legs, his ears drooping, his stumpy tail dejected. He paused in the middle of the walk, and at a sharp clap, as of two hands, he dropped limply on his side, rolled to his back, and stiffened there pathetically, his eyes closed.

Caroline's chin quivered; Katy's position on the ladder was frankly that of one who has paid for an orchestra-chair; Maggie had left the cookies and stood grinning in the kitchen door; an aunt appeared in an upper window.

One more clap, and the actor returned to life and left them, but only for a moment. He was back again, erect and smiling, a small wicker basket balanced on his paws. Marching sedately up to Maggie, he paused, and glanced politely down at the basket, then up at her.

Flesh and blood could not resist him. Hastily tugging out from her petticoat a bulging pocket-book, she deposited a dime in the basket; the aunt, with extraordinary accuracy, dropped a five-cent piece from the window; Katy mourned her distance from her own financial center, and Caroline ran for her bank. It was a practical mechanism, the top falling off at her onslaught with the ease of frequent exercise, and she returned in time to slip six pennies under the two hot cookies that Maggie had added to her first contribution. At each tribute the terrier barked twice politely, and only when there was no more to be hoped for did he trot off around the corner of the house, the cookies swaying at a perilous angle under his quivering nostrils.

A moment later a tall young man stepped across the grass and lifted a worn polo-cap from a reddish-yellow head.

"Much obliged, all," he said, with an awkward little bow. "Good day!"

He turned, whistled to the terrier, and was going on, when he caught the heartfelt admiration of Caroline's glance.

"Want to pat him?" he inquired.

She nodded and approached them.

"Shake hands with the lady, William Thayer, and tell her how d'you do," he commanded, as she knelt beside the wonderful creature.

The terrier offered a cool, tremulous paw, and barked with cheerful interrogation as she shook it rapturously.

"Those were fine cookies," said the young man. "I had 'em for breakfast. I'm going to buy a bone for William Thayer, and then he'll have some, too."

"Was that *all* you had?" she inquired, horror-stricken. He nodded. "But I'll make it up on dinner," he added lightly.

Caroline sprang to her feet.

"You go over there behind that barn and wait a minute," she commanded.

The young man--he was only a boy--blushed under his tan and bit his lip.

"I didn't mean--I'll get along all right; you needn't bother," he muttered, conscious of Katy's suspicious eye.

"Oh, do! Please do!" she entreated. "I'll be out there in just a minute; hurry up, before Maggie gets through those cookies!"

He turned toward the barn, and Caroline ran back to the house.

"Is that man gone? What are you doing, Caroline?" called the invisible voice.

"Yes, he's gone. I was patting the dog," she answered boldly, stepping through the dining-room into the pantry and glancing hastily about. Only a plate of rolls was in sight; the place was ostentatiously clean and orderly. She sighed and pushed through the swinging door; the refrigerator was a more delicate affair. But Maggie's broad back was bent over her ovenful, and Caroline clicked the door-knob unchallenged.

Two chops sat sociably on a large plate; a little mound of spinach rested on one side of them, a huge baked potato on the other. She slid the plate softly from the metal shelf, peeping apprehensively at Maggie, tumbled the rolls on to the top, and sped into the dining-room. From a drawer in the sideboard she abstracted a silver fork which she slipped into her pocket, adding, after a moment of consideration, a salt-shaker. Stepping to the door, she paused on the little porch for a hasty survey. The coast seemed clear, and she sped across the yard, the silver jingling in her pocket. She was safe from the back, but a flank movement on Maggie's part would have been most disastrous, and it was with full appreciation of the audacity of her performance that she scudded around the barn and gained the cherry-tree behind it.

The young man was sitting on the grass, his head against the tree; his eyes brightened as she approached.

"Have any luck?" he inquired.

She held out the plate, and, as he took it, fumbled in her pocket for the fork.

"It's all cold," she murmured apologetically, "but I knew Maggie'd never warm it. Do you mind?"

"Not a bit," he answered, with a whimsical glance at her eagerness to serve him. "I always *did* like greens," he added, as he accepted the fork and attacked the spinach.

"Here, William Thayer!"

He handed one of the chops to the dog, and stared as Caroline drew out the salt-cellar.

"Did you--well, by--that's pretty kind, now!"

"Potatoes are so nasty without it," she explained.

"Yes, that's why I don't us'ally eat 'em," he replied.

There was a moment's silence, while he ate with the frank morning appetite of twenty, and Caroline watched him, her sympathetic jaws moving with his, her eyes shining with hospitality.

"Nice place you've got here," he suggested, breaking a roll.

"Yes. I *wish* I'd brought you some butter, but I didn't dare cut any off; it was in a jar, and it clatters so. ("Oh, that's all right!") This is nicer than it used to be out here. It *was* the chicken-yard, and ashes and things got put here; but nobody keeps chickens any more, and this is all new grass. They took down the back part of the barn, too, and painted it, and now it's the stables, or you *can* say carriage-house," she explained instructively.

He threw his chop-bone to William Thayer and drew a long breath.

"That was pretty good," he said, "and I'm much obliged to you, Miss." Caroline swelled with importance at the title. "I must have walked four or five miles, and it's not such fun with an empty stomach. I came from Deepdale."

"Oh, how lovely!" cried she. "By the pond?"

"Yes, by the pond. I gave William Thayer a swim, and I had a little nap. It's nice and pretty all around there. I cut some sassafras root; want some?"

He felt in his pockets, and produced a brown, aromatic stump; Caroline sucked at it with a relish.

"Where are you going now?" she asked respectfully, patting William Thayer's back while his master caressed his ear.

"Oh, I don't know exactly. There's some nice woods back of the town; I think I'll look 'em through, and then go on to New Derby. I read in the paper about some kind of a firemen's parade there to-morrow, and if there's a lot of people, we'll earn something. We haven't made much lately, because William Thayer hurt his leg, and I've been sparing of him--haven't I, pup? But he's all right now."

He squeezed the dog's body and tickled him knowingly; the little fellow grinned widely and barked. Caroline sighed.

"It must be grand," she said wistfully, "to walk from one town to another, that way. Where do you sleep?"

"In barns, sometimes, and there's lots of covered wagons all around the farm-houses, outside the towns, you know. A church shed's as good a place as any. I don't like the towns as big as this, though; I like the country this time o' year."

Caroline nodded comprehendingly, breathing deep breaths of the fresh, earth-scented air.

"I wish there never were any houses in the world--nor any schools, either!" she cried.

He smiled. "I never was much for schools, myself," he said. "They don't smell good."

Caroline looked at him solemnly. She felt that the resolution of her life was taken. In one ecstatic flash she beheld her future.

"I shall never go to school again," she announced. "I shall--" A wave of joyous possibility broke over her, but modesty tied her tongue.

"Could I--would you--I'm a real good walker!" she burst out, and blushed furiously. Who was she to associate with a dog like William Thayer?

The young man looked curiously at her. A kind of anxiety clouded his frank gray eyes. "Oh, you mustn't talk like that," he urged, laying one brown hand on her apron. "That wouldn't do for a young lady like you. I guess you better go to school. Girls, you know!"

He waited a moment, but she scowled silently. He began again:

"I guess it's different with girls, anyway. You see, you have to get your education. A young lady—"

"I'm not a young lady," snapped Caroline. "I'm only ten 'n' a quarter!"

"Well, anyway, it isn't respectable," he argued hastily. Caroline opened her eyes wide at him.

"Aren't *you* respectable?" she demanded, appraising unconsciously his clothes, which were, if not fine, at least clean and whole, his flannel shirt finished with a neat blue tie, his shoes no dustier than the country roads accounted for.

He flushed under his thick freckles, and plucked at the grass nervously.

"N-n--yes, I *am*!" he shouted defiantly. "I know lots of people don't think so, but I am! We earn our way, William Thayer an' me, an' we don't want much. I don't see as we do any harm. It don't take much to live, anyhow; it's coal-scuttles an' lookin'-glasses an'--an' carpets that cost money. And if you don't want *them*--oh, what's the use talking? I never could live all tied up."

"Caroline! Caroline!" A loud voice cut across her meditative silence. She shrugged her shoulders stubbornly and put her finger on her lip. The boy shook his head.

"You better go," he said soothingly. "You'll have to sometime, you know. Here, take these," as she jumped up, forgetting the fork and the salt-shaker. "Be sure to put 'em back where you got 'em, won't you?"

"Oh, leave 'em here. I'll come back," she said carelessly, but the boy insisted.

"No, you take 'em right now," he commanded. "I wouldn't want any mistake made."

"Just wait a minute--I'll come back," she repeated, as the call sounded again.

"Caroline! where are you?"

The boy stood up, holding out the silver. "You--you don't want 'em to say I--I took 'em?" he blurted out.

Her eyes opened wide; she looked all the incredulous horror she felt.

"Steal?" she cried, "with a dog like that?"

He nodded. "That's the way I look at it, but some don't," he said shortly. "You better go now. Much obliged for the breakfast. If I come back this way, maybe I'll stop in again, if you'd like to see William Thayer."

"I think she went across behind the stable, Miss Carrie," Katy called helpfully.

Caroline thrust the silver into her pocket and turned to go.

"I'm coming!" she cried desperately, and, patting William Thayer, she took a few backward steps.

"There's a nice brook in those woods," she observed irrelevantly, "if you should want to take another nap," and, turning her back resolutely, she rounded the barn and disappeared.

The boy picked up the empty plate and slipped it into a door at the back of the stable. Then, lifting the dog over the nearest fence, he climbed it and stepped through the next yard into the street.

"That was a mighty nice little girl, William Thayer," he said thoughtfully. "She seemed to understand a lot, for such a little one."

Caroline stalked aggressively into the dining-room, and finding it for the moment empty, hastily replaced the salt-shaker. The fork she laid in the pantry. Hardly was her pocket clear of the telltale stuff when her aunt appeared before her.

"I suppose you know you're late for school, Caroline," she began, with evident self-control. "If you think I am going to write you an excuse, you are very much mistaken."

"All right," Caroline returned laconically. "Is my lunch ready?"

"It was nothing in the world but that dog; I cannot understand the fascination that tramps and loafers have for you! You never got it from this family. Why do you like to talk to dirty tramps! Some day a strange dog will bite you. Then you'll be sorry!"

"He wasn't a bit dirty. If you weren't so afraid of dogs, you'd know William Thayer wouldn't bite!" she retorted indignantly. "I think I might have three cookies--those are nasty little thin ones. And you never put enough butter."

Caroline and her namesake-aunt were as oil and water in their social intercourse.

"Now, that's another thing. I cannot see where you put all the food you eat! You get more than the boys, a great deal. And boys are supposed--not that any one grudges it to you, child, but really—"

"I'm getting later all the time," Caroline remarked impartially. "You needn't cut the crusts off; I like 'em."

Her aunt sighed, and handed her the lunch-basket; a fringe of red-and-white napkin dangled invitingly from the corner.

"Now run along; what are you going in there for?"

"My jography."

She stood for a moment looking out at the flagstone where William Thayer had waltzed so seductively, then strolled slowly out, along the porch and by the house. The lilies-of-the-valley were white in the sidebeds; their odor, blown to her on quick puffs of west wind, filled her with a sort of pleasant sadness, the mingled sorrow and delight of each new spring. She bent her strong little legs and squatted down among them, sniffing ecstatically. What was it she was trying to remember? Had it ever happened? Years ago, when she was very little—

"Caroline! are you trying purposely to be naughty! It is twenty minutes past nine!"

She muttered impatiently, stamped her foot deliberately upon the lilies, and ran out of the yard.

It will never be known what Caroline's definite intentions were on that morning. It is not improbable that she meant to go to school. She undoubtedly walked to the building devoted to the instruction of her generation and began to mount the steps. What power weighted her lagging feet and finally dragged her to a sitting position on the top step, she could not have told; but certain it is that for ten minutes she sat upon the text-book of geography, thoughtfully interposed between her person and the cold stone, her chin in her hand, her eyes fixed and vague. Behind her a chorus of voices arose in the melody that accompanied a peculiarly tedious system of gymnastics; she scowled unconsciously. Before her, clear to the inward vision, lay a pleasant little pond, set in a ring of new grass. Clear lay the pebbles and roots at the bottom; clear was the reflection of the feathering trees about it; clear shone the eyes of William Thayer as he joyously swam for sticks across it. Great patches of sun warmed the grass and cheered the hearts of two happy wanderers, who fortified themselves from a lunch-basket padded with a red-fringed napkin. Happy yellow dandelions

were spotted about, and the birds chirped unceasingly; the wind puffed the whole spring into their eager nostrils. Truly a pleasant picture! As in a dream, Caroline walked softly down the steps and toward the north.

For ten minutes she kept steadily on, looking neither to the right nor to the left, when the rattle of a particularly noisy wagon attracted her attention. She caught the eye of the driver; it was the egg-and-chicken man. He nodded cheerfully.

"Hello, there!" said he.

"Hello!" Caroline returned. "You going home?"

"Sure," said the egg-and-chicken man. "Want a ride?"

Caroline wasted no breath in words, but clambered up to the seat beside him.

"Startin' out early, ain't you?" he queried. "Goin' far up my way?"

"Pretty far," she answered cautiously, "but not so very."

"Oh!" said he, impressed by such diplomacy. "'Bout where, now?"

"Have you sold many eggs this morning?" she inquired with amiable interest.

"Twenty-three dozen, an' seven pair o' broilers," he informed her. "Goin' as far as my place?"

"I s'pose it's pretty cold as early as you get up," Caroline suggested pleasantly.

The egg-and-chicken man surrendered. "Middling," he answered respectfully, "but it smells so good and things looks so pretty, I don't mind. I'm glad I don't live in the city. It's all pavin'-stone an' smoke. This time o' year I like to feel the dirt under m' feet, somehow."

"So do I," said Caroline fervently. They jogged on for a mile in silence.

"I have to get out here," said he, finally, "but don't be scared. That horse won't move a peg without me. I'll be back in a minute."

But when he returned she was not there.

The houses were thinning out rapidly; one side of the road was already only a succession of fields, and along a tiny worn path through one of these Caroline was hurrying nervously. She crossed the widening brook, almost a little river now, and kept along its farther bank for half an hour, then left it and struck into the fringe of the woods.

It was very still here; the road was far away, and only the chatter of the birds and the liquid cluck of the little stream disturbed the stillness of the growing things. She walked softly, except for the whisper of brushing against the spreading branches that choked the tiny path. The heat of noon was rising to its climax, and the shafts of light struck warm on her cheeks.

Suddenly a sound disturbed the peace of the woods--a scratching, rattling, scurrying sound. Something was moving through the dead leaves that had gathered among the roots and trunks. She started back nervously, but jumped forward again with a cry of delight, and caught William Thayer in her arms.

Even as he was licking her cheek, the path widened, the trees turned into bushes, the underbrush melted away, and the brook, a little river now, bent in upon them in a broad curve, spanned only by stepping-stones. It ran full between its grassy banks, gurgling and chuckling as it lapped the stones, a mirror for the fat white clouds where it lay in still pools.

In the shelter of a boulder, a lad crouched over a fire, coaxing it with bits of paper and handfuls of dry leaves. Just as the flames shot up, the dog barked cheerily, and the lad turned to welcome him. His eye fell on Caroline; amazement and real pleasure grew into a delighted laugh.

"Well, if you don't beat the Dutch!" he cried. "How'd you get here?"

"I came in the wagon with the egg-and-chicken man," said she happily, "and then I walked 'cross lots. William Thayer knew me just as well!"

"'Course he did. He always knows his friends. Now, see here. You can stay and watch this fire, an' I'll go over there a ways where those men are buildin' a fence; I'll bet they'll give us something. You look after the fire an' put on these old pieces of rail; it was hard work gettin' dry stuff to-day. We won't be long."

They disappeared between the trees, and Caroline sat in proud responsibility before the delightful little fire. The

minutes slipped by; from time to time she fed the blaze with bits of bent twigs, and at the proper moment, with a thrill of anxiety, she laid two pieces of the old fence-rail crosswise on the top. There was a second of doubt, and then they broke into little sharp tongues of flame. With a sigh of pleasure, she turned from this success, and, opening the lunch-basket, laid the napkin on the ground and methodically arranged four sandwiches, two cookies, and an orange on it. Then, with her fat legs crossed before her, she waited in silence. Between the sun at her back and the fire on her face, she grew pleasantly drowsy; the sounds about her melted imperceptibly to a soft, rhythmic drone; her head drooped forward....

"Hello, hello!"

She jumped and stared at the boy and the dog. For a moment she forgot. Then she welcomed them heartily and listened proudly to his admiring reception of her preparations.

"Well, William Thayer, will you look at that! How's this for a surprise? And see what we've got." He balanced a tin pail carefully between the two crossed sticks in the heart of the fire, and unfolded from a newspaper two wedges of pumpkin-pie. In William Thayer's little basket was a large piece of cheese.

"It's coffee 'n milk mixed together; they had bottles of it," he explained. "William Thayer 'll take back the pail. Are you hungry?"

Caroline nodded.

"Awful," she stated briefly.

"Well, then," he said with satisfaction, "let's begin."

Caroline attacked a sandwich, with shining eyes, and when in another minute the boy took from his pocket a tin ring that slipped miraculously out of itself into a jointed cup, and dipped her a mug of hot coffee from the bubbling pail, she realized with a pang of joy that this was, beyond any question, the master moment of her life.

"I take this along," he explained, "so's when I go by, and they're milking, I can have some warm. Anybody'd give me all I want if William Thayer dances and drops dead for 'em. It tastes good early in the morning, I tell you."

She sighed with pleasure. To drink warm milk in the cool, early dawn, with the cows about you, and the long, sweet day free before!

They sipped turn about; the boy divided the orange mathematically; the pie was filled with fruit of the Hesperides.

"That was mighty good, that dinner," he announced luxuriously, "an' now I'll have a pipe."

The pungent, fresh odor of the burning tobacco was sweet in the air; a dreamy content held them quiet.

He did not ask her whence or whither; she had no apologies or regrets. Two vagabonds from every law of home and duty, they were as peaceful and unthoughtful of yesterday's bed and to-morrow's meal as William Thayer, who slept in the sun at their feet.

For long they did not talk. An unspoken comprehension, an essential comradeship, filled the deep spaces of silence that frighten and irritate those whom only custom has associated; and Caroline, flat on her filled stomach, her nose in the grass, was close in thought and vague well-being to the boy who puffed blue rings toward the little river, his head on his arms.

"I put the plate into that door in the barn," he said, finally. "Did you put those silver things back?"

Caroline grunted assent.

"But they wouldn't think that you--what you said," she assured him earnestly. "It's only tramps they're afraid of."

He glanced quickly over at her, but she was utterly innocent.

"One came to the kitchen once, and asked Mary for some hot tea or coffee, and she hadn't any, but she said if he was very hungry she'd give him a piece of bread and butter, and he said to go to hell with her bread and butter. So she doesn't like them."

The boy gasped.

"You oughtn't to--had you--that isn't just right for you to say, is it?" he asked awkwardly.

"What--hell?" Caroline inquired placidly. "No, I s'pose not. Nor damn nor devil, either. But, of course, I know 'em.

Those are the only three I know. I guess they're about the worst, though," she added with pardonable pride. "My cousin, the Captain, knows some more. He's twelve 'n a half. But he won't tell 'em to me. He says boys always know more than girls. I suppose," respectfully, "you know more than those three, yourself?"

Her companion coughed.

"A boy--" he began, then paused, confronted with her round, trustful eyes.

"A boy--" he started again, and again he paused.

"Oh, well, a boy's different," he blurted, finally.

Caroline nodded humbly.

"Yes, I know," she murmured.

There was silence for a while. The river slipped liquidly over the stones, the white clouds raced along the blue above them, the boy smoked. At length he burst out with:

"You're all right, now! You're just a regular little chum, aren't you?"

She blushed with pleasure.

"I never had anybody along with me," he went on dreamily. "I always go alone. I--I didn't know how nice it was. I *had* a chum once, but he--he--"

The boy's voice trembled. Caroline's face clouded with sympathy.

"Did he die?" she ventured.

"No," he said, shortly; "no, he didn't die. He's alive. He couldn't stand my ways. I tried to stay in school and--and all that, but soon as spring came I had to be off. So the last time, he told me we had to part, him and me."

"What was his name?" she asked gently.

The boy jerked his head toward the dog.

"*That's* his name," he said, "William Thayer." A little frown gathered on Caroline's smooth forehead; she felt instinctively the cloud on all this happy wandering. The spring had beckoned, and he had followed, helpless at the call, but something--what and how much?--tugged at his heart; its shadow dimmed the blue of the April sky.

He shrugged his shoulders with a sigh; the smile came again into his gray eyes and wrinkled his freckled face.

"Oh, well, let's be jolly," he cried, with a humorous wink. "The winter's comin' soon enough!" and he burst into a song:

"There was a frog lived in a well,
Kitty alone, Kitty alone;
There was a frog lived in a well;
Kitty alone and I!"

His voice was a sweet, reedy tenor; the quaint old melody delighted Caroline.

"This frog he would a-wooing ride,
Kitty alone, Kitty alone."

She began to catch the air, and nodded to the time with her chin.

"Cock me cary, Kitty alone,
Kitty alone and I!"

The boy lifted his polo-cap in a courtly manner, and began with grimaces and bows to act out the song. His audience swayed responsive to his every gesture, nodding and beaming.

"Quoth he, 'Miss Mouse, I'm come to thee'--
Kitty alone, Kitty alone;
Quoth he, 'Miss Mouse, I'm come to thee,
To see if thou canst fancy me.'
Cock me cary, Kitty alone,
Kitty alone and I!"

Caroline swung her hat by its ribbons and shrilled the refrain, intoxicated with freedom and melody:

"Cock me cary, Kitty alone,
Kitty alone and I!"

She drummed with her heels on the ground, the boy waved his cap, and William Thayer rolled over and over, barking loudly for the chorus. Suddenly the boy jumped up, pulled her to her feet, and with grotesque, skipping steps pirouetted around the dying fire. The dog waltzed wildly on his hind legs; Caroline's short petticoats stood straight out around her as she whirled and jumped, a Bacchante in a frilled pinafore. The little glade rang to their shouting:

"Kitty alone and I!"

He darted suddenly through an opening in the bushes, William Thayer close behind, Caroline panting and singing as she gave chase. Through a field, across a little bridge they dashed. He flung the empty coffee-pail at an astonished group of men, who stopped their work, their fence-posts in hand, to stare at the mad trio.

Breathless at last, they flung themselves on a bank by the road and smiled at each other. Caroline laughed aloud, even, in sheer, irresponsible light-headedness, but over the boy's face a little shadow grew.

"It won't seem so nice alone after this, will it, William Thayer?" he said, slowly.

Caroline stared.

"But--but I'm coming! I'll be there," she cried. "I'm coming with you!"

He went on as if he had not heard.

"Who'll there be to eat our dinner with us to-morrow, William Thayer?" he questioned whimsically.

Caroline moved nearer and put her hand on his knee.

"There'll be--won't there be me?" she begged.

He shook his head.

"I guess not," he said bluntly.

Her eyes filled with tears.

"But--but you said I was a--a regular little chum," she whispered. "Don't you like me?"

He was silent:

"Don't you? Oh, don't you?" she pleaded. "I don't *need* much to eat, really!"

The lad looked at her with a strange longing. The fatherhood that lives in every boy thrilled at the touch of her fat little hand on his knee; the comradely glow in her round brown eyes warmed his restless, lonely heart. He shook her off almost roughly.

"I guess they'd miss you more'n that salt-shaker," he said grimly. "I wish I could take you with me--honest, I do. But you better stay home and go to school. You don't want to grow up ignorant, and have your folks ashamed of you."

"But you--you aren't ignorant!" she urged warmly, her admiration shining in her eyes.

He blushed and kicked nervously at the grass.

"I am," he said angrily. "I am, too. Oh, dear, I wish--I wish--"

They looked at each other, troubled and uncertain.

"You're a girl," he began again, "and girls can't; they just can't. They have to stay with their folks and keep nice. It's too bad, but that's the way it is. You'd want to see 'em, too. You'd miss 'em nights."

Caroline winced, but could not deny. "Oh," she cried passionately, "why do girls have to do *all* the missing? It's just what that Simms boy says: 'If I couldn't be a boy, I'd rather be a dog!'"

"There, there," he said soothingly, "just think about it. You'll see. And you're not exactly like a girl, anyhow. You're too nice."

He patted her shoulder softly, and they lay quietly against the bank. Her breathing grew slow and regular; raising

himself cautiously on one elbow, he saw that she had fallen asleep, her arm about William Thayer, her dusty boots pathetically crossed. He watched her tenderly, with frequent glances up and down the road.

Presently an irregular beat of hoofs sounded around a bend, and a clattering wagon drew steadily nearer.

The egg-and-chicken man jumped out and strode angrily toward the little group.

"I've caught you, have I, you young—"

"'Sh!"

The boy put up a warning hand.

"She's fast asleep," he whispered. "Are you goin' to take her home?"

The man stared.

"Oh, I'm no child-stealer," said the boy lightly. "Here, just lift her soft with me, and I'll bet we can put her in without waking her up at all."

Without a word, the man slipped his hands under Caroline's shoulders, the boy lifted her dusty boots, and gently unloosing her arm from the dog, they carried her lax little body carefully to the wagon and laid her on the clean straw in the bottom, her head on a folded coat. She stirred and half opened her eyes, murmured broken words, and sank yet deeper into her dream.

The man pointed to a book on the seat.

"That's her lesson-book," he whispered hoarsely. It was the despised geography.

"Her folks think a heap of her, I tell you," he added, still eying the boy uncertainly. "She's about as bright as they make 'em, I guess."

"I guess she is," said the lad simply. "She'd ought to have been a boy. She'd have made a fine one."

The man's face cleared.

"Do--do you want a job?" he said abruptly. "We're short up at my place, and I wouldn't mind the dog. I remember you, now. You caught a chicken for me once; my wife gave you a hot supper."

The boy smiled faintly and shook his head. "I remember," he said. "No, I don't believe I want any job, thank you. I--I'm sort of--I have to keep along."

"Keep along? Where?"

He waved his hand vaguely.

"Oh, just along," he repeated. "This year, anyhow. Maybe--well, good-by. Her folks might be gettin' anxious."

He stepped up to the cart and looked once more at the flushed cheeks and brown hands, then strode off up the road.

The egg-and-chicken man gathered up the reins and the wagon started. Caroline scowled a little at the motion, but slept on. The boy whistled to the dog.

"Come on, William Thayer," he said. "I guess it's just you and me now."

II

A LITTLE VICTORY FOR THE GENERAL

CAROLINE, Miss Honey, and the General were taking the morning air. Caroline walked ahead, her chin well up, her nose sniffing pleasurably the unaccustomed asphalt, the fresh damp of the river and the watered bridle path. The starched ties at the back of her white pinafore fairly took the breeze, as she swung along to the thrilling clangor of the monster hurdy-gurdy. Miss Honey, urban and *blase*, balanced herself with dignity upon her roller-skates and watched with patronizing interest the mysterious jumping of young persons with whom she was unacquainted through complicated diagrams chalked on the pavement.

The General sucked a clothespin meditatively: his eyes were fixed on something beyond his immediate surroundings. Occasionally a ravishing smile swept up from the dimples at his mouth to the yellow rings beneath his cap frill; he flapped his hands, emitting soft, vague sounds. At such times a wake of admiration bubbled behind him. Delia, who propelled his carriage, which resembled a victoria except for the rearward position of its motor power, pursed her lips consciously and affected not to hear the enraptured comments of the women who passed them.

To the left the trees, set in a smooth green carpet, threw out tiny, polished, early May leaves; graceful, white-coated children dotted the long park. Beyond them the broad blue river twinkled in the sun, the tugs and barges glided down, the yachts strained their white sails against the purple bluffs of the Palisades. To the right towered the long, unbroken rows of brick and stone: story on story of shining windows, draped and muffled in silk and lace; flight after flight of clean granite steps; polite, impersonal, hostile as the monuments in a graveyard.

Immobile ladies glided by on the great pleasure drive like large tinted statues; dressed altogether as the colored pictures in fashion books, holding white curly dogs in their curved arms; the coachmen in front of them seemed carved in plum-colored broadcloth; only by watching the groom's eyelids could one ascertain that they were flesh and blood. Young girls, two, three, and four, cantered by; their linen habits rose and fell decorously, their hair was smooth. Mounted policemen, glorious in buttons, breathing out authority, curvetted past, and everywhere and always the chug-chug-chug of the gleaming, fierce-eyed motor cars filled one's ears. They darted past, flaming scarlet, sombre olive and livid white; a crouching, masked figure, intent at the wheel, veiled, shapeless women behind a whir of dust to show where they had been a breath before.

And everywhere, as far as the eye could reach, a thin stream of white and pink and blue, a tumbling river of curls and caps and bare legs, were the children. A babble of shrill cries, of chattering laughter, of fretful screams, an undercurrent of remonstrance, of soothing patience, of angry threatening, marked their slow progress up and down the walk; in the clear spaces of the little park they trotted freely after hoops and balls, rolled and ran over the green, and hid, shouting, behind the bushes. It was a giant nursery, and the mere man who trespassed on its borders smiled deprecatingly, and steered a careful course among the parasols and tricycles, stooping now and then to rescue some startled adventurer, sprawling from the disgusted shock of encounter with this large and rapidly moving object.

To Caroline, fresh from untrammeled sporting, through neighborly suburban yards, this disciplined procession, under the escort of Delia and the General, was fascinating to a degree. Far from resenting the authority she would have scorned at home, she derived an intense satisfaction from it, and pranced ostentatiously beside the perambulator, mimicking Miss Honey's unconscious deference to a higher power in the matter of suitable crossings and preferred playfellows with the absorbed gravity of the artist.

"See! General, see the wobblybubble," Delia murmured affectionately. "(Will you see that child turn his head just like a grown person? Did you ever see anything as smart as that?) Did he like the red one best? So does Delia. We'll come over here, and then you won't get the sun in your precious eyes. Do you want me to push you frontwards, so you can see me? (Watch him look at me--he knows what I mean just as well, the rascal!) Just wait till we get across, and I will. Look out, Miss Honey! Take hold of your cousin's hand and run across together, now, like good girls."

Miss Honey made an obedient snatch at Caroline's apron strings, and darted forward with a long roll of her skates. The road was clear for a block. Delia, with a quick glance to left and right, lowered the perambulator to the road-level and forged ahead. Caroline, nose in air, studied the nearest policeman curiously.

"Look out, there! *Look out!*"

A man's voice like a pistol shot crashed behind them. Caroline heard quick steps and a woman's scream, looked up at the huge, blood-red bulk of an automobile that swooped around the corner and dashed forward. But Miss Honey's hand was clutching her apron string, and Miss Honey's weight as she fell, tangled in the skates, dragged her down. Caroline, toppling, caught in one dizzy backward glance a vision of a face in the automobile staring down on her, white as chalk, under a black moustache and staring goggles, and another face, Delia's, white too, with eyes more strained and terrible than the goggles themselves. One second that look swept her and Miss Honey, and then, shifting, fell upon the General strapped securely into his carriage. Even as Caroline caught her breath, he flew by her like an arrow, his blue eyes round with surprise under a whirl of white parasol, the wicker body of the perambulator swaying and lurching. With that breath still in her nostrils, she was pushed violently against Miss Honey, who was dragged over her from the other side by a large hairy hand. A sharp blow from her boot heel struck Caroline's cheek, and she screamed with the pain; but her cry was lost in the louder one that echoed around her as the dust from the red monster blew in her eyes and shut out Delia's figure, flat on the ground, one arm over her face as the car rushed by.

"My God! She's down!" That was the man.

"Take his number!" a shrill voice pierced the growing confusion.

Caroline, crying with pain, was forced to her feet and stumbled along, one apron string twisted fast in Miss Honey's hand. Instantly they were surrounded by a crowd of nurses, and Miss Honey, dazed and obedient, was shoved and pulled from one to another.

"Here, get out o' this--don't let the children see anything! Let's get home."

"No, wait a minute. Let's see if she's alive. Have they got the ambulance?"

"Look out, there, Miss Dorothy, you just stop by me, or you'll be run over, too!"

"See! She's moving her head! Maybe she's not--"

Sobbing with excitement, Caroline wrenched herself free from the tangle of nurses and carriages, and pushed her way through the crowd. Against the curb, puffing and grinding, stood the great red engine; on the front seat a tall policeman sat, one woman in the back leaned over another, limp against the high cushions, and fanned her with the stiff vizor of her leather cap.

"It's all right, dear, it's all right," she repeated monotonously, with set lips, "the doctor's coming. It wasn't Pullton's fault. It's all right."

Caroline wriggled between two policemen, and made for a striped blue and white skirt that lay motionless on the ground. Across the white apron ran a broad dirty smudge.

Caroline ran forward.

"Delia! Delia!" she gulped. "Is she--is she dead?"

A little man with eyeglasses looked up from where he knelt beside the blue and white skirt.

"I don't believe so, my dear," he said briskly; "is this your nurse? See, she's opening her eyes, now--speak to her gently."

As he shifted a leather-covered flask from one hand to the other, Caroline saw a strange face with drawn purplish lids when she had always known two merry gray eyes, and tight thin lips she could not believe Delia's. The head moved a little from side to side, the lips parted slightly. A nervous fear seized her and she turned to run away; but she remembered suddenly how kind Delia had been to her; how that very morning--it seemed so long now--Delia had helped her with her stubby braids of hair, and chided Miss Honey for laughing at her ignorance of the customs of the park. She gathered her courage together and crouched down by the silent, terrifying figure.

"Hel--hello, Delia!" she began jerkily, wincing as the eyes opened and stared stupidly at the ring of anxious faces. "How do you f-feel, Delia?"

"Lean down," said the little man softly, "she wants to say something."

Caroline leaned lower.

"General," Delia muttered. "Where's General?"

The little man frowned.

"Do you know what she means?" he asked.

Caroline patted her bruised cheek.

"Of course I do," she said shortly. "That's the baby. Oh," as she remembered, "where *is* the General?"

"Here--here's the baby," called some one. "Push over that carriage," and a woman breathing heavily, crowded through the ring with the general, pink and placid, under his parasol.

"Lift him out," said the little man, and as the woman fumbled at the strap, he picked the baby out neatly, and held him down by the girl on the ground.

"Here's your baby, Delia," he said, with a kind roughness in his voice. "Safe and sound--not a scratch! Can you sit up and take him?"

And then, while the standing crowd craned their necks and even the steady procession moving in the way the police kept clear for them, paused a moment to stare, while the little doctor held his breath and the ambulance came clanging up the street, Delia sat up as straight as the mounted policeman beside her and held out her arms.

"General, oh, General!" she cried, and buried her face in his fat warm neck.

The men coughed, the women's faces twisted, but the little doctor watched her intently.

"Move your leg," he said sharply. "Now the other. Hurt you? Not at all?"

He turned to the young man in a white jacket, who had jumped from the back of the ambulance.

"I thought so," he said. "Though it didn't seem possible. I saw the thing go over her. Right over her apron--never touched her. Half an inch more--"

"Please, is Miss--the other little girl--is she--"

This was Delia's old voice, and Caroline smiled happily at her.

"She's all right, Delia--here she is!"

Miss Honey limped across on one roller-skate, pale, but conscious of her dramatic value, and the crowd drew a long breath of relief.

"You are a very brave girl," said the doctor, helping Delia to her feet and tucking the General, who alternately growled and cooed at his clothespin, into the perambulator. "You have undoubtedly saved the lives of all three of these children, and their parents will appreciate it, you may be sure. The way you sent that baby wagon flying across the street...! Well, any time you're out of a job, just come to me, that's all. Dr. Gibbs, West Forty-ninth. Can you walk now? How far do you have to go?"

The crowd had melted like smoke. Only the most curious and the idlest lingered and watched the hysteria of the woman in the automobile, who clutched her companion, weeping and laughing. The chauffeur sat stolid, but Caroline's keen round eyes saw that he shook, from the waist down, like a man in a chill.

"Yes, sir, I'm all right. It's not so very far." But Delia leaned on the handle she pushed, and the chug-chug of the great car sent the blood out of her cheeks. The little doctor frowned.

"Look here," he said, "I'll tell you what you'll do. You come down these steps with me, there aren't but three of them, you see, and we'll just step in here a moment. I don't know what house it is, but I guess it'll be all right. Oh, yes, you can take him out; he is safe, you know. Come on, youngsters."

Before Delia could protest he had pressed the button, and a man in livery was opening the door.

"We've just escaped a nasty accident out here," said the little doctor easily. "You were probably looking out of the window? Yes. Well, this young woman is a sort of a patient of mine--Dr. Gibbs, West Forty-ninth Street--and though she's very plucky and perfectly uninjured, I want her to rest a moment in the hall here and have a drink of water, if your mistress doesn't object. Just take up this card and explain the circumstances, and"--his hand went into his pocket a moment--"that's about all. Sit down, my dear."

The man took in at a glance the neat uniform of the nurse, the General's smart, if diminutive, apparel, and the unmistakable though somewhat ruffled exterior of Miss Honey.

"Very well, sir," he said politely, taking the card. "It will be all right, sir, I'm sure. Thank you, sir. Sit down, please. It will be all right. I will tell Madame Nicola."

"Well, well, so this is Madame Nicola's!" The little doctor looked around him appreciatively, as the servant ran up the stairs.

"I wish I could stay with you, chickens, but I'm late for an appointment as it is. I must rush along. Now, mind you, stay here half an hour, Delia, and sit down. You're no trouble at all, and Madame Nicola knows who I am--if she remembers. I sprayed her throat once, if I'm not mistaken--she was on a tour, at Pittsburg. She'll take care of you." He opened the door. "You're a good girl, you biggest one," he added, nodding at Caroline. "You do as you're told. Good-by."

The door shut, and Caroline, Miss Honey and Delia looked at each other in a daze. Tears filled Delia's eyes, but she controlled her voice, and only said huskily, "Come here, Miss Honey, and let me brush you off--you look dreadful. Let me take your handkerchief. Did it--were you--are you hurt, dear?"

"No, but you pushed me awful hard, Delia, and a nasty big man grabbed me and tore my guimpe--see! I wish you'd told me what you were going to do," began Miss Honey irritably.

"And you gave me a big kick--it was *me* he grabbed--look at my cheek!" Caroline's lips began to twitch; she felt

hideously tired, suddenly.

"Children, children, don't quarrel. General, darling, *won't* you sit still, please? You hurt Delia's knees, and you feel so heavy. Oh, I wish we were all home!"

The man in livery came down the stairs. "Will you step up, Madame says, and she has something for you up there. I'll take the baby," as Delia's eyes measured the climb. "Lord, I won't drop her--I've got two o' my own. 'Bout a year, isn't she?"

"He's a boy," panted Delia, as she rested her weight on the rail, "and he's only eight months last week," with a proud smile at the General's massive proportions.

"Well, he *is* a buster, isn't he? Here is the nurse, Madame, and the children. The doctor has gone."

Caroline stretched her eyes wide and abandoned herself to a frank inspection of her surroundings. For this she must be pardoned, as every square inch of the dark, deep-colored room had been taken bodily from Italian palaces of the most unimpeachable Renaissance variety. With quick intuition, she immediately recognized a background for many a tale of courts and kings hitherto unpictured to herself, and smiled with pleasure at the Princess who advanced, most royally clad in long shell pink, lace-clouded draperies, to meet them.

"You are the brave nurse my maid told me about," said the Princess; "she saw it all. You ought to be very proud of your quick wits. I have some sherry for you, and you must lie down a little and then I will send you home."

Delia blushed and sank into a high carved chair, the General staring curiously about him. "It wasn't anything at all," she said, awkwardly, "if I could have a drink--"

Caroline checked the Princess as she moved toward a wonderful colored decanter with wee sparkling tumblers like curved bits of rainbow grouped about it.

"She means a drink of water," she explained politely. "She only drinks water--sometimes a little tea, but most usu'lly water."

"The sherry will do her more good, I think," the Princess returned, noticing Caroline for the first time, apparently, her hand on the decanter.

At this point Miss Honey descended from a throne of faded wine-colored velvet, and addressed the Princess with her most impressive and explanatory manner.

"It won't do you any good at all to pour that out," she began, with her curious little air of delivering a set address, prepared in private some time before, "and I'll tell you why. Delia knew a nurse once that drank some beer, and the baby got burned, and she never would drink anything if you gave her a million dollars. Besides, it makes her sick."

The Princess looked amused and turned to a maid who appeared at that moment with apron strings rivalling Caroline's.

"Get me a glass of water, please," she said, "and what may I give you--milk, perhaps? I don't know very well what children drink."

"Thank you, we'd like some water, too," Miss Honey returned primly, "we had some soda-water, strawberry, once to-day."

Caroline cocked her head to one side and tried to remember what the lady's voice made her think of; she scowled in vain while Delia drank her water and smiled her thanks at the maid. Suddenly it came to her. It was not like a person talking at all, it was like a person singing. Up and down her voice traveled, loud and soft; it was quite pleasant to hear it.

"Do you feel better now? I am very glad. Bring in that reclining chair, Ellis, from my room; these great seats are rather stiff," said the Princess, and Delia, protesting, was made comfortable in a large curved lounging basket, with the General, contentedly putting his clothespin through its paces, in her arm.

"How old is it?" the Princess inquired, after an interval of silence, during which Miss Honey and Caroline regarded her with a placid interest, and Delia stroked the General's hair, from which she had taken the absurd lace cap.

"He's eight months, Madam, last week--eight months and ten days, really."

"That's not very old, now, is it?" pursued the lady. "I suppose they don't know very much, do they, so young?"

"Indeed he does, though," Delia protested, "You'll be surprised. Just watch him, now. Look at Delia, darlin'; where's

Delia?"

The General withdrew his lingering gaze from the clothespin, and turned his blue eyes wonderingly up to her. The corner of his mouth trembled, widened, his eyelids crinkled, and then he smiled delightfully, straight into the eyes of the nurse, stretched up a wavering pink hand, and patted her cheek. A soft, gurgling monosyllable, difficult of classification but easy to interpret, escaped him.

The Princess smiled appreciatively, and moved with a stately, long step toward them.

"That was very pretty," she said, but Delia did not hear her.

"My baby, my own baby!" she murmured with a shiver, and hiding her face in the General's neck she sobbed aloud.

Miss Honey, shocked and embarrassed, twisted her feet nervously and looked at the inlaid floor. Caroline shared these feelings, but though she turned red, she spoke sturdily.

"I guess Delia feels bad," she suggested shyly, "when she thinks about--about what happened, you know. She don't cry usu'lly."

The Princess smiled again, this time directly at Caroline, who fairly blinked in the radiance. With her long brown eyes still holding Caroline's round ones, she patted Delia's shoulder kindly, and both the children saw her chin tremble.

The General, smothered in that sudden hug, whimpered a little and kicked out wildly with his fat white-stockinged legs. Seen from the rear he had the appearance of a neat, if excited, package, unaccountably frilled about with embroidered flannel. Delia straightened herself, dabbed apologetically at her eyes, and coughed.

"It's bottle-time," she announced in horror-stricken tones, consulting a large nickel watch hanging from her belt, under the apron. "It's down in the carriage. Could I have a little boiling water to heat it, if you please?"

"Assuredly," said the Princess. "Ellis, will you get the--the bottle from the baby's carriage and some boiling water, please. Do you mix it here?"

"Mix--the food is all prepared, Madam." Delia spoke with repressed scorn. "I only want to heat it for him."

"Oh, in that case, Ellis, take it down and have it heated, or," as the nurse half rose, "perhaps you would feel better about it if you attended to it yourself?"

"Yes, I think I will go down if you don't mind--when persons aren't used to 'em they're apt to be a little careless, and I wouldn't have it break, and him losing his three o'clock bottle, for the world. You know how it is...."

The Princess shook her head whimsically. "But surely you will leave the baby," and she moved toward them again. "I will hold it," with a half grimace at her own condescension. "It seems so very good and cheerful--I thought they cried. Will it come to me?"

Delia loosened her arms, but tightened them again as the little creature leaned forward to catch at the swinging lace on the lady's gown.

"I--I think I'll take baby with me. Thank you just the same, and he'll go to any one--yes, indeed--but I feel so sort of nervous, I think I'd better take him. If anything should happen.... Wave your hand good-by--now, General!"

The General flapped his arms violently, and bestowed a toothless but affectionate grin upon the wearer of the fascinating, swaying lace, before he disappeared with the delighted Ellis in the van.

"And can you buy all that devotion for twenty, thirty, or is it forty dollars a month, I wonder?" mused the Princess.

"Dear me," she added petulantly. "It really makes one actually *want* to hold it! It seems a jolly little rat--they're not all like that, are they? They howl, I'm sure."

Again Miss Honey took the floor.

"When babies are sick, or you don't treat them right," she announced didactically, "they cry, but not a well baby, Delia says. I"--with conscious pride--"screamed night and day for two weeks!"

"Really!" observed the Princess. "That must have been--er--trying for your family!"

"Worried to death!" Miss Honey rejoined airily, with such an adult intonation that the Princess started.

"The General, he just laughs all the time," Caroline volunteered, "unless you tease him," she added guiltily, "and then

he squawks."

"Yes, indeed," Miss Honey bore witness, jealous of the lady's flashing smile to Caroline, "my mother says I'm twice the trouble he is!"

The Princess laughed aloud. "You're all trouble enough, I can well believe," she said carelessly, "though you particular three are certainly amusing little duds--for an afternoon. But for a steady diet--I'm afraid I'd get a bit tired of you, eh?"

She tapped their cheeks lightly with a cool, sweet-smelling finger. Miss Honey smiled uncertainly, but Caroline edged away. There was something about this beautiful tall lady she could not understand, something that alternately attracted and repelled. She was grown up, certainly; her skirts, her size and her coiled hair proved that conclusively, and the servants obeyed her without question. But what was it? She was not like the other grown up people one knew. One moment she sparkled at you and the next moment she forgot you. It was perfectly obvious that she wanted the General only because Delia had not wanted to relinquish him, which was not like grown people; it was like--yes, that was it: she was like a little girl herself, even though she was so tall and had such large red and blue rings on her fingers.

Vaguely this rushed through Caroline's mind, and it was with an unconscious air of patronage, that she said, as one making allowances for inexperience, "When you get married, then you'll *have* to get tired of them, you know."

"But you'll be glad you've got 'em, when they're once in bed," Miss Honey added encouragingly. "My mother says I'm a real treasure to her, after half past seven!"

The Princess flushed; her straight dark eyebrows quivered and met for an instant.

"But I *am* married," she said.

There was an utter silence.

"I was married five years ago yesterday, as it happens," she went on, "but it's not necessary to set up a day nursery, you know, under those circumstances."

Still silence. Miss Honey studied the floor, and Caroline, after an astonished stare at the Princess, directed her eyes from one tapestry to another.

"I suppose you understand that, don't you?" demanded the Princess sharply. She appeared unnecessarily irritated, and as a matter of fact embarrassed her guests to such an extent that they were utterly unable to relieve the stillness that oppressed them quite as much as herself.

The Princess uttered an angry exclamation and paced rapidly up and down the room, looking more regal and more unlike other people than ever.

"For heaven's sake, say something, you little sillies!" she cried. "I suppose you want me to lose my temper?"

Caroline gulped and Miss Honey examined her shoe ties mutely.

Suddenly a well-known voice floated toward them.

"Was his nice bottle all ready? Wait a minute, only a minute now, General, and Delia'll give it to you!"

The procession filed into the room, Delia and the General, Ellis deferentially holding a tiny white coat, the man in livery bearing a small copper saucepan in which he balanced a white bottle with some difficulty. His face was full of anxious interest.

Delia thanked them both gravely, seated herself on the foot of the basket chair, arranged the General flat across her knees, and amid the excited silence of her audience, shook the bottle once or twice with the air of an alchemist on the brink of an epoch-making discovery.

"Want it? Does Delia's baby want it?" she asked enticingly. The General waved his arms and legs wildly; wreathed in smiles, he opened and shut his mouth in quick alternation, chirping and clucking, as she held it up before him; an ecstatic wriggling pervaded him, and he chuckled unctuously. A moment later only his deep-drawn, nozzling breaths could be heard in the room. They watched him in hushed satisfaction; once, as he smiled gratefully at Delia, Ellis sighed with pleasure.

"Ain't he sweet, though!" she murmured, and then glancing at the butler, giggled impressibly as the strained attitudes of the circle struck her.

"That will do, thank you, Haddock," said the Princess quickly, drawing a long breath and seating herself, and the two

servants withdrew. Delia noted nothing, her eyes fixed on her charge; clearly, it would not have surprised her in the least if they had all stood, rapt, till the meal was over.

"He takes it beautiful," she said in low tones, looking confidentially at the Princess; "I didn't know but being in a strange place might make a difference with him, but he's the best baby!--"

She wiped his mouth and lifting him, still horizontal, approached her hostess.

"You can hold him now," she said superbly, "but keep him flat for twenty minutes, please. I'll go and take the bottle down, and get his carriage ready. He'll be good. He'll take a little nap, most likely."

She laid him across the rose-colored lap of the Princess, who looked curiously down on him, and offered him her finger tentatively. "I never held one before," she explained. "I--I don't know...." The General smiled lazily and patted the finger, picking at the great sapphire.

"How soft its hands are," said the Princess. "They slip off, they are so smooth! And how good--does it never cry?" This she said half to herself, and Caroline and Miss Honey, knowing there was no need to answer her, came and leaned against her knee unconsciously, and twinkled their fingers at the baby.

"Hello, General! Hello!" they cried softly, and the General smiled impartially at them and caressed the lady's finger.

The Princess stroked his cheek. "What a perfectly exquisite skin!" she said, and bending over him, kissed him delicately.

"How good it smells--how--how different!" she murmured. "I thought they--I thought they didn't."

Miss Honey had taken the lady's other hand, and was examining the square ruby with a diamond on either side.

"My mother says that's the principal reason to have a baby," she remarked, absorbed in the glittering thing. "You sprinkle 'em all over with violet powder--just like doughnuts with sugar--and kiss 'em. Some people think they get germs that way, but my mother says if she couldn't kiss 'em she wouldn't have 'em!"

The Princess bent over the baby again.

"It's going to sleep here!" she said, half fearfully, with an inquiring glance at the two. "Oughtn't one to rock it?"

Miss Honey shook her head severely. "Not General," she answered, "he won't stand it. My mother tried again and again--could I take that blue ring a minute? I'd be awful careful--but he wouldn't. He sits up and he lies down, but he won't rock."

"I might sing to him," suggested the Princess, brushing a damp lock from the General's warm forehead and slipping her ringless finger into his curved fist carefully. "Would he like it?"

"No, he wouldn't," said Miss Honey bluntly, twisting the ring around her finger. "He only likes two people to sing--Delia and my mother. Was that ruby ring a 'ngagement ring?"

Caroline interfered diplomatically. "General would be very much obliged," she explained politely, "except that my Aunt Deedee is a very good singer indeed, and Uncle Joe says General's taste is ruined for just common singing."

The Princess stared at her blankly.

"Oh, indeed!" she remarked. Then she smiled again in that whimsical expressive way. "You don't think I could sing well enough for him--as well as your mother?"

With a great sweep of her arm, she brushed aside a portiere and disappeared.

Miss Honey laughed carelessly. "My mother is a singer," she said, "a real one. She used to sing in concerts--real ones. In theatres. Real theatres, I mean," as the lady appeared to be still amused.

"If you know where the Waldorf Hotel is," Caroline interrupted, "she has sung in that, and it was five dollars to get in. It was to send the poor children to a Fresh Air Fund. It--it's not the same as you would sing--or me," she added politely.

The lady arose suddenly and deposited the General, like a doll, with one swift motion in the basket chair. Striding across the room she turned, flushed and tall, and confronted the wondering children.

"I will sing for you," she said haughtily, "and you can judge better!"

With a great sweep of her half bare arm, she brushed aside a portiere and disappeared. A crashing chord rolled out from a piano behind the curtains and ceased abruptly.

"What does your mother sing?" she demanded, not raising her voice, it seemed, and yet they heard her as plainly as when they had leaned against her knee.

"She sings, 'My Heart's Own Heart,'" Miss Honey called back defiantly.

"And it's printed on the song, 'To Madame Edith Holt!'" shrilled Caroline.

The familiar prelude was played with a firm, elastic touch, the opening chords struck, and a great shining voice, masterful, like a golden trumpet, filled the room. Caroline sat dumb; Miss Honey, instinctively humming the prelude, got up from her foot-stool and followed the music, unconscious that she walked. She had been privileged to hear more good singing in her eight years than most people have in twenty-four, had Miss Honey, and she knew that this was no ordinary occasion. She did not know she was listening to one of the greatest voices her country had ever produced--perhaps in time to be known for the head of them all--but the sensitive little soul swelled in her and her childish jealousy was drowned deep in that river of wonderful sound.

Higher and sweeter and higher yet climbed the melody; one last triumphant leap, and it was over.

"*My heart--my heart--my heart's own heart!*"

The Princess stood before them in the echoes of her glory, her breath quick, her eyes brilliant.

"Well?" she said, looking straight at Miss Honey, "do I sing as well as your mother?"

Miss Honey clenched her fists and caught her breath. Her heart was breaking, but she could not lie.

"You--you--" she motioned blindly to Caroline, and turned away.

"You sing better," Caroline began sullenly; but the lady pointed to Miss Honey.

"No, you tell me," she insisted remorselessly.

Miss Honey faced her.

"You--you sing better than my m-mother," she gulped, "but I *love* her better, and she's nicer than you, and I don't love you at *all*!"

She buried her face in the red velvet throne, and sobbed aloud with excitement and fatigue. Caroline ran to her: how could she have loved that cruel woman? She cast an ugly look at the Princess as she went to comfort Miss Honey, but the Princess was at the throne before her.

"Oh, I am abominable," she cried. "I am too horrid to live! It wasn't kind of me, *cherie*, and I love you for standing up for your mother. There's no one to do as much for me, when *I'm* down and out--no one!" Sorrow swept over her flexible face like a veil, and seizing Miss Honey in her strong nervous arms she wept on her shoulder.

Caroline, worn with the strain of the day, wept, too, and even the General, abandoned in the great chair, burst into a tiny warning wail.

Quick as thought the Princess was upon him, and had raised him against her cheek.

"Hush, hush, don't cry--don't cry, little thing," she whispered, and sank into one of the high carved chairs with him.

"No, no, I'll hold him," she protested, as Delia entered, her arms out. "I'm going to sing to him. May I? He's sleepy."

Delia nodded indulgently. "For half an hour," she said, as one allowing a great privilege, "and then we must go. The children are tired."

"What do you sing to him?" the Princess questioned humbly.

"I generally sing 'Flow Gently, Sweet Afton,'" the nurse answered. "Do you know it?"

"I think so," and the Princess began a sort of glorified humming, like a great drowsy bee, all resonant and tremulous.

"Tell me the words," she said, and Delia recited them, as a mother would, to humor a petted child.

The Princess lifted her voice and pressing the General to her, began the song,

> "Flow gently, sweet Afton, among thy green braes,
> Flow gently, I'll sing thee a song in thy praise."

Soft the great voice was, soft and widely flowing; to Caroline, who had retreated to the further end of the music-room, so that Delia should not see her tears, it seemed as if Delia herself, a wonderful new Delia, were singing her, a baby again, to sleep. She felt soothed, cradled, protected by that lapping sea of melody that drifted her off her moorings, out of the room....

Vaguely she saw Miss Honey, relaxed on the red throne, smile in her sleep, one arm falling over the broad seat. Was it in her dream that some one in a blue and white apron--not Delia, for Delia was singing--leaned back slowly in the long basket chair and closed her tired eyes? Who was it that held the General close in her arms, and smiled as he patted her cheek at the familiar song and mumbled her fingers with happy cooing noises?

"My Mary's asleep by thy murmuring stream,
Flow gently, sweet Afton, disturb not her dream!"

Soft as plush, sweet as honey, the warm voice dipped and rose to the old tune. The General's head was growing heavy, but he smiled confidingly into the dark eyes above him and stretched himself out in full-fed, drowsy content. One hand slipped through the lace under his cheek and rested on the singer's soft breast. She started like a frightened woman, and her voice broke.

Down in the hall the butler and the maid sat on the lower stair.

"Ain't it grand?" she whispered, and Haddock nodded dreamily.

"Mother used to sing us that in the old country," he said. "There was Tom and 'Enry an' me--Lord, Lord!"

The General was asleep. Sometimes a tiny frown drew his eyebrows together. Sometimes she clenched and uncurled his warm hands. Sometimes he sucked softly at nothing, with moist, reminiscent lips. But on and on, over and over, rose and fell the quaint old song,

"My Mary's asleep by thy murmuring stream!"

It flooded the listening house, it spread a net of dreams about the happy people and coaxed them back to childhood and a child's protected sleep. It seemed a song that could not stop, that must return on its simple refrain so long as there were arms to encircle and breasts to lean upon.

Two men came softly up a smaller stair than the grand entrance flight, and paused in amazement at sight of Caroline stretched, full length, across the threshold. The older and smaller of the men had in fact stepped on her, and confused and half awake she listened to his apologies.

"Sh! sh!" he whispered excitedly, "not a vordt! not a vordt! Mein Gott! but it is marvellous! A voice of velvet! Hey? A voice of the heart. My friend, what is this?"

He peeped behind the drawn curtains, and withdrew a face of wonder.

"It is nothing but children--and they sleep!" he whispered. "Oh, but listen, listen! And I offered her fifteen hundred dollars for two hours only of that!"

The other man peeped behind the curtain in his turn, and seizing Caroline by the arm tip-toed with her to a further room.

"What--who--what is the meaning of this?" he whispered hoarsely. "That child--where--"

Caroline rubbed her eyes. The golden voice rose and fell around her.

"General--Delia," she muttered, and stumbled against him. He lifted her limp little body and laid it gently on a leather sofa.

"Another time," he said softly to the other man, "I--we cannot talk with you now. Will you excuse us?"

The man looked longingly at the curtains.

"She will never do more well than that. Never!" he hissed. "Oh, my friend, hear it grow soft! Yes, yes, I am going."

"Sh! sh!" he whispered excitedly, "not a vordt! Not a vordt! Mein Gott! but it is marvellous."

It seemed to Caroline that in a dream some one with a red face and glasses askew, shook her by the shoulder and said to her sternly, "Sh! sh! Listen to me. To-day you hear a great artist--hey? Will you forget it? I must go because they do not vant me, but you will stay and listen. There is here no such voice. Velvet! Honey! Sh! sh!" and he went the way of dreams.

The man who stayed looked long through the curtains.

As a swing droops slow and slower, as the ripples fade from a stone thrown in the stream, the song of the Princess softened and crooned and hushed. Now it was a rich breath, a resonant thread,

"Flow gently, sweet Afton--"

The man stepped across the room and sank below the General at her feet. With her finger on her lips she turned her eyes to his and looked deep into them. He caught his breath with a sob, and wrapping his arm about her as he knelt, hid his face on her lap, against the General. She laid her hand on his head, across the warm little body, and patted it tenderly. Around them lay the sleepers; the General's soft breath was in their ears. The man lifted his head and looked adoringly at the Princess: her hand caressed his cheek, but her eyes looked beyond him into the future.

III

THE PRIZE

CAROLINE sniffed her way luxuriously through the dusky panelled library.

"I think it smells awfully good here, don't you?" she inquired of her hostess.

The lady's wonderful velvet train dragged listlessly behind her. Her neck and arms were dressed in heavy yellowish lace, but all around her slim body waves of deep colored, soft velvet held the light in lustrous pools or darkened into almost black shadows. It was like stained glass in a church, thought Caroline, stroking it surreptitiously, and like stained glass, too, were the lovely books, bloody red, grassy green and brown, like Autumn woods, with edges of gold when the sunlight struck them. They made the walls like a great jewelled cabinet, lined from floor to ceiling: here and there a niche of polished wood held a white, clear-cut head. From the ceiling great opal tinted globes swung on dull brass chains; they swayed ever so slightly when one watched them closely.

"This is my favorite room, Duchess," said Caroline, "isn't it yours?"

"Do you really think I look like one?" returned the lady, "the only duchess I ever saw was fat--horribly fat. It is a very handsome library, of course."

"Then *she* didn't look like a duchess, that's all," Caroline explained. "What I like about this library is, it's so clean. And you can pull the chairs out and show those big, shiny yellow ones on the bottom shelf."

"Of course; why not?" said the Duchess, dropping into a great carved chair with griffins' heads on the top.

"Why, you can't do that at Uncle Joe's," Caroline confided, sitting on a small griffin stool at the lady's feet, "because General gets at the bottom row and smears 'em. You see he's only two, and you can't blame him, but he licks himself dreadfully and then rubs it on the backs. He marks them, too, inside, with a pencil or a hatpin, or even an orange-wood stick that you clean your nails with. Yours is made of pearl, you know, but most--a great many, I mean--people have them wood. And so the chairs have to be all leaned around against the walls to keep him from the books."

The Duchess drew a long breath. "And your uncle objects?" she said, between her teeth.

"Uncle Joe says," Caroline returned, patting the griffin heads on her little stool, "that if the President had General in his library for half an hour he'd feel different about race suicide."

The Duchess laughed shortly.

"That is possible, too," she agreed. "You said Cousin Joe was well--and Edith?"

"Oh, yes, they're well--I mean, they're very well indeed, thank you," said Caroline. "Uncle Joe says they have to be, with the General's shoes two dollars and a half a pair! You see he has quite thick soles, now--he runs about everywhere. Aunt Edith says he needs a mounted policeman 'stead of a nurse."

"Did Edith get rested after the moving?"

"Oh, yes," Caroline answered absently. She was watching the opal globes sway. "Aunt Edith says before she was married she'd have gone South with a trained nurse after such an experience, but now she has to save the nurse for measles, she s'poses, so she just lies down after lunch."

The Duchess moved restlessly half out of the griffin chair, but sank back again.

"And you have a trained nurse all the time," Caroline mused, stroking the glistering velvet, "isn't that funny? Just so in case you *might* be sick...." The sunlight peeped and winked on the gold book-edges.

"It amounts to that," the Duchess said, adding very low, "but she is not likely to be needed for measles."

"No," Caroline assented, "you and cousin Richard are pretty old for measles. It's children that have 'em, mostly. I never did, yet. But you don't seem to ever have any children. And such a big house, too! And you're very fond of children, aren't you? It seems so queer that when you like them you can't manage to have any. And people that don't care about them have them all the time. It was only Christmas time that Norah Mahoney--she does the extra washing in the summer--had another. That makes seven. It's a boy. Joseph Michael, he's named, partly after Uncle Joe. Norah says there don't seem to be any end to your troubles, once you're married to a man."

The Duchess turned aside her head, but Caroline knew from the corner of her mouth that her eyes were full of tears.

She stroked the hands that clenched the griffin's crest.

"Never mind," she urged, "maybe you'll have some. Most everybody has just one, anyway."

The Duchess shook her head mutely; a large round tear dropped on the griffin.

"Well, then," said Caroline briskly, "why don't you adopt one? The Weavers did, and she was quite a nice girl; I used to play with her. She sucked her thumb, though. But prob'ly they don't, all of them."

"I wouldn't mind, if she did," the Duchess declared. Already she spoke more brightly. "I wanted to adopt one--one could take it when it was very little. But Richard won't hear of it."

"Not a bit?" Caroline looked worried; she knew Richard.

"Not a bit," the Duchess repeated, "that is, he says he is willing under certain conditions, but they are simply impossible. Nobody could find such a child."

"There are lots of 'em in the Catholic Foundling," said Caroline thoughtfully, "all kinds. Aunt Edith went there to sing for them and she took Miss Honey and me. They're all dressed differently and they look so sweet. You can take your choice of them; Aunt Edith cried. But you must let them be Catholics."

"Richard wouldn't let me take one from an institution," the Duchess said, "and somehow I wouldn't care to, myself. But there is a woman I know of who is interested in children that--that aren't likely to grow up happily, and she will get one for anybody, only one can't ask any questions about them. You may have all the rights in them, but you will never know where they came from. And Richard won't have that. I suppose he's right."

"But there are plenty of people who would let you have one, if you would give her a good home and be kind to her," Caroline began, lapsing for the moment into her confusing, adult manner.

"Yes, but Richard says that no people nice enough to have a child we could want would ever give us the child, don't you see," the Duchess interrupted eagerly. "He says the father must be a gentleman--and educated--and the mother a good woman. He says there must be good blood behind it. And they must never see it, never ask about it, never want it. He says he doesn't see how I could bear to have a child that any other mother had ever loved."

Caroline sighed.

"Cousin Richard does make up his mind, so!" she muttered.

"He is unreasonable," said the Duchess suddenly, "unreasonable! He must know all about the child, but the parents must not know about us! Not know our name, even! Just give up the child and withdraw--why, the poorest, commonest people would not do that, and does he expect that people of the kind he requires would be so heartless? We shall never be able to get one--never. And yet he wants one so--almost as much as I!"

The Duchess had forgotten Caroline. Staring at the opal globes she sat, and again the tears rose, brimmed and overflowed.

Caroline slipped off the little stool and walked softly out of the beautiful room. The books glowed jewel-like, the four milky moons swayed ever so little on their brass chains, the white busts looked coldly at the Duchess as she sat crying in her big carved chair, and there was nobody that could help at all.

Through the dark, shiny halls she walked--cautiously, for she had had embarrassing lessons in its waxy polish--and paused from force of habit to pat the great white polar bear that made the little reception room such a delightful place. More than the busts in the library even, he set loose the fancy, and whiled one away to the enchanted North where the Snow Queen drove her white sledge through the sparkling glades, and the Water Baby dived beneath the dipping berg.

Miss Grundman, the trained nurse, appeared in the doorway.

"Did you care to go out with the brougham, to-day, dear?" she asked. "Hunt tells me he has to go 'way down town."

"Yes, I'd like to--can you take care of babies, too?" Caroline returned abruptly.

Miss Grundman started.

"What an odd child you are--of course I can!" she said. "All nurses can; it's part of the training. Have you any you're worried about?" she added pointedly. Caroline flushed.

"You're making fun o' me," she muttered, "you know very well only grown people have them! I don't mean if they're

sick, but can you wash them, and cook the milk in that tin thing, and everything like that?"

"Bless the child, of course I can!" Miss Grundman cried, "you bring me one and I'll show you!"

"Oh, I b'lieve you, Miss Grundman, if you say so," Caroline assured her, and slid carefully along the hall for the stairs that led to her hat and coat.

They spun smoothly down the avenue with an almost imperceptible electric whir, Caroline bolt upright on the plum-colored cushion, Hunt and Gleggson bolt upright on the seat outside. It was a matter for congratulation to Caroline that of all the vehicles that glided by them, none boasted a more upright pair than Hunt and Gleggson.

The tall brown houses were gradually changing into bright shops; the carriages grew thicker and thicker; the long procession stopped and waited now almost every moment, so crowded was the brilliant street. Once a massive policeman actually smiled at her as Hunt stopped the brougham close to him, and Caroline's admiring soul crowded to her eyes at the mighty wave of his white, arresting hand. They drew up before a great window filled with broughams and victorias displayed as lavishly as if they had been hats or bonbon boxes--it was like a gigantic toy-shop. Hunt dropped acrobatically to the pavement and was seen describing his mysterious desires to an affable gentleman behind the plate-glass; he measured with his knuckles and illustrated in pantomime the snapping of something over his knee; the clerk shook his head in commiseration and signalled to an attendant, who darted off. Soon Hunt appeared with a small package and they started on again, turning a corner abruptly and winding through less exciting streets. The shops grew smaller and dingier; drays passed lumbering by and street cars jarred along beside them, but vehicles like their own were noticeably lacking. It was plain that they attracted more attention, now, and more than one group of children dancing in the street to the music of the hurdy-gurdy lingered daringly to provoke the thrilling, mellow warning of their horn. At last they stopped at a corner and Hunt dropped again to the pavement, lingering for a short consultation with Gleggson who pointed once or twice behind them to the small occupant of the brougham. On this occasion he took with him a mysterious and powerful handle, and Caroline knew that this was precisely equivalent to running away with the horses. He hurried around an unattractive corner, and Gleggson sat alone in front. Five, ten minutes passed. They seemed very dull to Caroline, and she reached for the plum-colored tube and spoke boldly through it.

"What are we waiting for, please, Gleggson? Where is Hunt?"

"'E just stepped off, Miss, for a minute, like. 'E'll be 'ere directly. Would you wish for me to go and look 'im up, Miss?"

Gleggson spoke very cordially.

"We-ell, I don't know," Caroline said doubtfully. "If you think he'll be right back ... I can wait...."

"Pre'aps I'd better, as you say, Miss," Gleggson continued, "for 'e *'as* been gone some time, and I think I could lay me 'and on 'im. You'll not get out, of course, Miss, and I'll be back before you know it."

He clambered down and took the same general course as Hunt had taken, deflecting, however, to enter a little door made like a window-blind, that failed to reach its own door-sill.

"Hunt didn't go there at all," Caroline muttered resentfully, and deliberately opening the door of the brougham, she stepped out.

She had followed Hunt's track quite accurately till a sudden turn confused her, and she realized that after that corner she had no idea in which direction he had gone. She paused uncertainly; the street was dirty, the few children in sight were playing a game unknown to her and not playing very pleasantly, at that; the women who looked at her seemed more curious than kindly. The atmosphere was not sordid enough to be alarming or even interesting; it was merely slovenly and distasteful, and Caroline had almost decided to go back when a young girl stopped by her and eyed her inquisitively.

"Were you lookin' for any particular party?" she asked.

"I was looking for Hunt," said Caroline, "he went this way, I think."

"There's some Hunts across the street there," the girl suggested, "right hand flat, second floor. I seen the name once. I guess you're lost all right, ain't you?"

"Oh, no," Caroline assured her, "I'm not lost. I can go right back. I'll see if Hunt's there."

The threshold was greasy and worn, the stairs covered with faded oil cloth, the side walls defaced and over-scrawled. At the head of the stairs three dingy doors opened in three different directions, and a soiled card on the middle one

bore the name of Hunt. A man's voice somewhere behind it talked in a strange loud sing-song; he seemed to be telling a long, confusing story. At the moment of Caroline's timid knock he was saying over and over again,

"Isn't that so? Isn't that so? Who wouldn't have done the same? Put your finger on the place where I made the mistake! Will you? Will anybody? I ask it as a favor--"

"Hush, won't you?" a woman's voice interrupted, "wasn't that a knock?"

Caroline knocked again.

There was a hasty shuffling and a key turned in the door.

"Who is it?" the woman's voice asked. "What do you want? The auction's all over--there's nothing left. We're moving out to-morrow."

Surprise held Caroline dumb. How could one have an auction in such a place? At auctions there were red flags, and horses and carriages gathered around the house, and people brought luncheon; they had often driven to auctions out in the country.

The door opened.

"Why it's only a child!" said the woman, thin and fatigued, with dark rings under her not ungentle eyes. "What do you want here?"

"I'm looking for Hunt," Caroline answered, "doesn't he live here?"

"Heavens, no!" the woman said, "that old card's been there long before we moved in, I guess. They were old renters, most likely. What's the party to you, anyway? Is he your--"

She paused, studying Caroline's simple but unmistakeable clothes and manner.

"He drives the automobile," Caroline explained, "I thought he came this way."

"Come in, won't you?" said the woman, "there's no good getting any more lost than you are, I guess. There's not much to sit on, 'specially if you're used to automobiles, but we can find you something, I hope. I try to keep it better looking than this gen'ally, but this is my last day here. I'm going out West to-morrow."

An old table, two worn chairs and an over-turned box furnished the small room; through an open door Caroline spied a tumbled bed. A kitchen, dismantled and dreary, faced her.

"The agent gave me five dollars for all I left," the woman said, "I don't know which of us got the best o' the bargain. Now, about you. Where do you live? I s'pose they're looking for you right now while we're talking. Do you know where you left the automobile?"

"Oh, yes." Caroline stared frankly about her. "Wasn't there a man in here? Where did he go?"

The woman grunted out a sort of laugh. "If you're not the limit!" she murmured. She stepped to the door of the kitchen, looked in, and beckoned to Caroline.

"I suppose you heard him carrying on," she said, "he's in there. Poor fellow, he's all worn out."

Caroline peered into the kitchen. With his rough, unshaven face resting on his arms, his hair all tossed about, his face drawn in misery, even in his heavy sleep, a young man sat before a table, half lying on it, one hand on a soiled plate still grasping a piece of bread.

"Is he sick?" whispered Caroline.

"N--no, I wouldn't say sick, exactly, but I guess he'd be almost as well off if he was," said the woman. "It would take his mind off. He's had a lot of trouble."

The man scowled in his sleep and clenched his hand, so that the bread crumbled in it.

"And so I won the prize," he muttered, "just as I told her I would. Did I have any pull? Was there any favoritism? No--you know it as well as I do--it was good work won that prize!"

"Was it a bridge prize?" Caroline inquired maturely. The woman stared.

"A bridge prize?" she repeated vaguely. "Why, no, I guess not. It was for writing a story for one of those magazines. He won a thousand dollars."

The man opened his eyes suddenly.

"And if you don't believe it," he said, still in that strange sing-song voice, "just read that letter."

He pulled a worn, creased sheet from an inner pocket and thrust it at Caroline.

"It's typewritten," he added, "it's easy enough to see if I'm lying. Just read it out."

Caroline glanced at the engraved letter-heading and began to read in her careful, childish voice:

> MY DEAR MR. WILLISTON:
>
> *It is with great pleasure that I have to announce the fact that your story, "The Renewal," has been selected by the judges as most worthy of the thousand-dollar prize offered by us.*

The woman snatched the paper from her hand.

"The idea!" she cried, "let the child alone, Mr. Williston! Don't you see she's lost?"

The man dropped like a stone on the table.

"Lost!" he whispered, "lost! Oh, that dreadful word! Yes, she's lost. Poor little Lou. It's all over."

The woman drew Caroline back into the sitting room.

"I'm sorry you should see him," she said. "You must excuse him--he don't really know what he's doing. He lost his wife a week ago and he's hardly slept since. It's real sad. I was as sorry as I could be for 'em, and I'd have kept 'em even longer if she'd lived, though they couldn't pay. I'd keep the baby, too, if I could, it's such a cute little thing, but I can't, and I'm to take it to the Foundling to-day. I'll go right out with you, and see that the police--"

"Oh, is there a baby? Let me see it!" Caroline pleaded. "How old is it?"

"Just a week," said the woman. "Yes, you can see him. He's good as gold, and big--! He weighs nine pounds."

In the third room, lying in a roll of blankets on a tumbled cot, a pink, fat baby slept, one fist in his dewy mouth. The red-gold down was thick on his round head; he looked like a wax Christ-child for a Christmas tree.

Caroline sighed ecstatically.

"Isn't he lovely!" she breathed.

"He's a fine child," the woman agreed. "And his mother never saw him, poor little thing. Nor his father either, for that matter."

Caroline looked in amazement toward the kitchen.

"Never laid his eyes on him," the woman went on sadly, "as if it was any good, to blame the poor baby! He's taken a terrible grudge on the little thing. He was awfully fond of his wife, though. He told me he was going to leave him right here, and then, of course, somebody in the house would notify the police, if I didn't take him to the Foundling. And of course he'd get better care, for that matter--there's no doubt about that. It's too bad. There's people that would give their eyes for a fine baby like that, you know."

"I know it," said Caroline simply, "my cousin Richard would be glad to have him--he wants one very much. But he's very particular."

The woman looked at her sharply. "What do you mean?" she asked. "How particular?"

Suddenly she laughed nervously. "I ought to be ashamed of myself," she said, "you ought to be at the police station now. But I'm all worn out, and it does me good to talk to anybody. I don't let the neighbors in much--it's a cheap set of people around here, and Mr. Williston's different from them and I hate to hear him talking to them the way he will. He don't know what he's doing. He tells 'em all about that prize--and it's true, you know, he did get it; that's what they married on, and he thought he could get plenty more that way, and then he never sold another story. It was too bad. He's a real gentleman, though you might not think it to look at him now, not shaved, and all. He thought he could earn a thousand every week, I s'pose, poor fellow. He got work in a department store, fin'ly, and it took all he made to bury her. She was a sweet little thing, but soft. I was real sorry for 'em."

She wiped her eyes hastily.

"Do you know whether he went to Harvard?" Caroline inquired, in a business-like tone.

The woman was heating some milk in a bottle, over a lamp, and did not answer her, but a voice from the door brought her sharply around. The young man stood there. Though still unshaven, he was otherwise quite changed. His hair was parted neatly, his coat brushed, his face no longer flushed, but pale and composed.

"If your extraordinary question refers to me, yes, I went to Harvard," he said in a grating, disagreeable voice. "I have in fact been called a 'typical Harvard man.' But that was some time ago. May I ask who you are?"

The woman lifted the bottle from the tin cup that held it and picked up the baby; the young man shifted his eyes from her immediately and looked persistently over Caroline's head.

"Her family's coachman's name is Hunt," said the woman, "and she thought he lived here, she says. He'd no business to go off and leave her alone. Her family'd be worried to death. When I go out with the baby I'll take her. I suppose you haven't changed your mind about the baby, Mr. Williston?--now you're feeling more like yourself," she added.

"I cannot discuss that subject, Mrs. Ufford," the young man answered, in his rasping, unnatural voice. "When you have disposed of the matter along the lines you yourself suggested, I am at your service till you take the train. After that--after that"--his lips tightened in a disagreeable smile--"I may be able to get to work--and win another prize!"

"There, there!" she cautioned him, "don't talk about that, Mr. Williston, don't, now! Why don't you go out with the little girl and see if you can find her automobile? That'll be less for me to do. Why don't you?"

He turned, muttering something about his hat, but Caroline tugged at his coat.

"Wait, wait!" she urged him, "I want you to tell her to let me take the baby! If you went to Harvard, that's all Cousin Richard said, except about a gentleman"--she paused and scrutinized him a moment. "You *are* a gentleman, aren't you?" she asked.

He looked at her. "My father was," he answered briefly. "In my own case, I have grave doubts. What do you think?" he asked the woman, looking no lower than her eyes.

She fed the baby deftly. "Oh, Mr. Williston, don't talk so--of course you're a gentleman!" she cried, "you couldn't help about the money. You did your best."

His mouth twisted pitifully.

"That'll do," he said, "what does this child mean? Who is your cousin? Where does he live?"

"He lives on Madison Avenue," Caroline began eagerly, "but I mustn't tell you his last name, you know, because he doesn't want you to know. That's just it. But he'd love the baby. I could take it right back in the automobile."

The man felt in under his coat and detached from his waistcoat a small gold pin. He tore a strip of wrapping paper from the open box near him and wrote rapidly on it.

"There," he said, fastening the pin into the folded paper, "I'm glad I never pawned it. If your cousin is a Harvard man, the pin will be enough, but he can look me up from this paper--all he wants. They're all dead but me, though. Here, wait a moment!"

He went back into the sitting room and fumbled in a heap of waste paper on the floor, picked out of it a stiff sheet torn once through, and attached it with the gold pin to the bit of writing.

"That's her marriage certificate," he said to the woman. She stared at him.

"Mr. Williston, do you believe that child?" she burst out, loosening her hold on the bottle in her hand. "Why, she may be making it all up! I--I--you must be crazy! You don't even know her name! I won't allow it--"

He broke into her excited remonstrance gravely.

"I don't believe a child could make up such details, in the first place, Mrs. Ufford," he said, "she is repeating something she's heard, I think. Did your cousin mention anything else?" he said abruptly to Caroline.

She smiled gratefully at him. "The mother must be a good woman," she quoted placidly.

Both of them started.

"Do you think a child would invent that?" he demanded. "Now, see here. You take Mrs. Ufford home with you in the automobile and she can see if there's anything in what you say, really. If there's not, she can go right on with the--with it, and do as--as we arranged before. It's all written on the paper, and my full consent to the adoption, and if there's anything legal to do about it, Mrs. Ufford can attend to it. But nobody'll trouble 'em--they can be sure of that. My people all died long ago and--and hers--hers...."

He stopped short. With eyes filled and lips vaguely moving he fell into a strange revery, a sort of tranced stupor. So intense were his absent thoughts that they impressed the woman and the child; they knew that he was back in the past and waited patiently while for a few kind moments he forgot. At length his eyes shifted and he took up his broken phrase, unconscious, evidently, of the pause. "--her's are back in New England. They never knew.... I had *some* pride. They're the I-told-you-so sort, anyhow. And they told her, all right. Oh yes, they told her! Narrow-minded, God-fearing prigs!" He stared at Mrs. Ufford curiously. "But they paid their debts, all the same," he added with a harsh laugh, "and that's more than I've been able to do, I suppose you're thinking."

But almost before the dark red had flushed her tired, lined face, he leaned forward and touched her shoulder kindly.

"I didn't mean that," he apologized. "I'm half crazy, I think. You've been as good as gold, and even when I've paid you the money I owe you, I'll owe you more than I can ever pay. I know that. And you're New England, too."

His sudden softening encouraged the woman, and she looked appealingly up at him, while she patted the bundle on her lap.

"Folks have hearts in New England, Mr. Williston," she began, "and if you was to go to her folks or write to 'em, I guess you'd find--oh, couldn't you?"

His impatient hand checked her.

"He might grow up to be a real comfort to you," she murmured persistently, "and you could look out for him well enough, once you get started. Just see how smart you are, Mr. Williston--look at that prize you got; she was awful proud of it."

His face twisted painfully.

"I looked out for *her* well, didn't I?" he said coldly, "I was a 'good provider,' as they say up there, wasn't I? Do you think--" his voice rang harshly and he struck the table by his side till it rattled on its unsteady legs--"do you think if I couldn't look out for her, I would look out for *that*? Get it ready."

The woman rose, her lips pressed together, and rolled the blankets tightly about the quiet child. With one gesture she put on a shabby hat and pinned it to her hair.

"I'll leave the bottle with you," she said to Caroline; "it'll help keep him quiet, when I'm gone. Come on."

The man turned away his head as they passed him. At the outer door she paused a moment, and her face softened.

"I know how you feel, Mr. Williston, and I don't judge you," she said gently, "for the Lord knows you've had more than your share of trouble. But won't you kiss it once before--before it's too late? It's your child, you know. Don't you feel--"

"I feel one thing," he cried out, and the bitterness of his voice frightened Caroline; "I feel that it murdered her! Take it away!"

They shrank through the door.

The woman sobbed once or twice on the stairs, but Caroline patted the flannel bundle excitedly.

They had rounded the corner in a moment, and the woman pointed ahead with her free hand.

"Is that the automobile?" she asked.

Caroline nodded. The brougham stood empty and alone where she had left it.

"They're not back yet!" she cried in disgust, "the idea!"

"Maybe they're looking for you," Mrs. Ufford said shortly.

"Aren't you glad we've got it?" Caroline inquired timidly. "I am, awfully. I didn't expect to get such a good one, so soon," she went on more easily, "but I don't like that man much. He's so cross."

"Child, child, you don't know what you're talkin' about!" the woman cried impatiently. "He's not cross--but his heart's

just about broke. He thinks more money would've saved her. And I guess he's right about that. She was a soft little thing. But she stuck to him."

They walked a few steps in silence.

"I don't know as I was actin' right, either, to talk as I did," she continued abruptly. "I s'pose it is better as 'tis, 'specially if your folks will take the baby. They'll do a lot more for it than ever he could, prob'ly. I s'pose they're real rich--regular swells? I can see they've got a fine automobile."

"Oh, yes. Cousin Richard's very rich," Caroline answered, indifferently, "that's only the brougham--there are two more. I have more fun at Aunt Edith's, though."

"'*Twas* queer about all those things your cousin wanted, wasn't it?" the woman said, musingly. "'Seemed like kind of a sign to him, I could see--going to Harvard College and all. I s'pose it was a sign--maybe."

She walked slowly, perhaps because of her burden.

"That's a fine college, I s'pose?" she said, inquiringly.

"It's good enough," Caroline allowed, "of course Yale's the best. We all go to Yale. Uncle Joe says there had to be something for Yale to beat, so they founded Harvard!"

"You don't say," Mrs. Ufford returned, "that's funny."

They were very near the brougham now. It stood as deserted as when Caroline had left it. The baby in the bundled blanket neither cried nor stirred.

"He's the best child," said the woman, with her tired, kindly smile. "He's next to nothing to tend to. If he'd felt to go back to her folks with it, I'd 'a' gone with him to look after it. I've got enough for that--the things sold real well, and he'd never let me lose, anyhow. He isn't that kind. I took a real likin' to both of 'em. I've kept boarders, all over, for fifteen years and I never lost a cent from anybody like him, not one. You get to know all sorts, keepin' boarders, and Mr. Williston's all right--though you mightn't think so," she ended loyally.

Caroline hardly listened. She saw herself in the bearskin reception room, up the stairs, in the library, her baby in her arms; she heard the incredulous joy of the Duchess, she explained importantly with convincing detail, to Cousin Richard the critical. To her eager soul this thin, friendly woman was merely an incident; that irritable, incoherent man less than a dream.

They paused on the curb, and she opened the brougham door hospitably.

"You get in first," she said, "and then I can hold him a little while, can't I?"

"I never was in one o' these," Mrs. Ufford answered doubtfully, "s'pose you go in first. It can't go--or back, or anything, can it?"

"No, no, of course not," said Caroline impatiently. "There's Hunt 'way up the street--he doesn't see us--how he's hurrying!"

The woman paused, her foot on the broad step.

"'Taint Hunt--it's Mr. Williston," she announced. "What's he want, I wonder? Look--he's wavin' at us! I guess he forgot some paper he wants you to take--he's bound to have it legal," she added with a sigh. "No, dear, let me be. I'll see what he wants before I get in."

The young man was running fast; his face was red, his eyes anxious.

"Have you got it? Is it here?" he cried, panting, and as she lifted the bundle high, his face cleared and Caroline saw that he was very handsome.

"Oh, Mrs. Ufford," he gasped, "read this! Just read it! I found it in my pocket-book--I thought you might be gone--she put it there for me--my poor little Lou! My God, what a brute--what a brute!"

The woman, one foot still on the step of the brougham, supported the child on her raised knee and held the paper in her free hand.

"*My dearest husband*," she read aloud, "*if I get well you will never see this, for I will take it out, but I don't believe I will take it out, for I don't believe I will get well. They say everybody thinks they will die, and of course a great many*

don't, but some do, and I think I will, I don't know why, but I am sure. But you will have the little girl. I am sure she will be a girl, and I hope she will look like me and be a comfort to you. You will take good care of her, I know. Think how nicely you took care of me and how hard you worked. You take her to my sister, and when she gets big enough, then you take her. She will not be a burden for you will earn lots of money when you can stop working in that horrid store on my account, and have time to do your writing. You must not get discouraged, for your writing is fine. Remember that prize you took. They will all be proud of you some day. You have been so good to me.
Your loving wife, Lou."

Her voice broke, and with no further word she held the child out to the young man. Without a word he took it and stared eagerly into its face, pushing the wrappings aside.

"He has her eyes," he murmured, "Lou's eyes!"

The baby felt the grip of a stronger arm, wrinkled its features and appeared to scan the dark, trembling face above it.

"He knows me! Mrs. Ufford, he knows me!" cried the man.

"Maybe so, maybe so," she said, soothingly. "You'll keep him, won't you, now?"

"Keep him? Keep him?" he repeated, "why he's all I've got of hers--all! He's Lou's and mine, together! He's--"

"Hush, hush!" she warned him, "here's a crowd already! We're right out in the street, Mr. Williston! Come back with me. Yes, keep him if you want to."

She turned to Caroline, neglected and wide-eyed, in the brougham.

"You see how it is, dear," she said hastily, "he wants it, after all. I can't help bein' glad. It ain't always that money does the most, you know. And he's the baby's father. Don't you mind, will you?"

Caroline gulped.

"I--I guess not," she answered bravely. "But I did want him!"

"I know. You meant all right," the woman assured her. "You're real--there's your coachman runnin'. He saw the crowd gatherin', prob'ly. Good-by, dear."

She slipped through the curious street children after the tall figure that hurried on with his bundle, a block ahead. Gleggson dashed up to the brougham.

"W'ere was you, Miss, for goodness' sake?" he gasped out, "h'I've been h'all over after yer! Don't, don't tell Hunt on me, will you, Miss? He'd fair kill the life out o' me! He's comin' now. 'e 'ad to go, Miss, fer his little boy was took sick last night and callin' for 'im. So 'e made up the errant. But it'll cost us both our place, y' know, Miss!"

The man's voice shook. Hunt was very near them now, walking hard.

"I'd no business to leave, I know--*will* you h'overlook it for once, Miss, and keep mum?" the man pleaded.

"All right, Gleggson--all right," she said wearily, "I won't tell."

Confused, disappointed, and yet with a curious sense of joy in the joy of the two even now rounding the corner, she leaned back in the brougham.

"I'm afraid he'll go to Harvard, anyway," she sighed.

IV

WHERE THIEVES BREAK IN.

One glance at Caroline's shoulders, hunched with caution, the merest profile, indeed, of her tense and noiseless advance up the narrow gravel path, would have convinced the most casual observer that she was bent upon arson, at the least. At the occasional crunch of the gravel she scowled; the well meant effort of a speckled gray hen, escaped from some distant part of the grounds, to bear her company, produced a succession of pantomimic dismissals that alarmed the hen to the point of frenzy, so that her clacks and cackles resounded far beyond the trim hedge that separated the drying-ground from the little kitchen garden.

Caroline scowled, turned to shake her fist at the hen, now lumbering awkwardly through the hedge, and sat down heavily on a little bed of parsley.

"Nasty old thing!" she gulped, "*anybody* could've heard me! And I was creeping up so still...."

She peered out from behind a dwarf evergreen and made a careful survey of the situation. The big square house stood placid and empty in the afternoon sun; not a cat on the kitchen porch, not a curtain fluttering from an open window. All was neat, quiet and deserted. Caroline set her lips with decision.

"We'll pretend there wasn't any hen," she said, in a low voice, "and go on from here, just the same."

Rising with great caution she picked her way, crouching and dodging, from bush to bush; occasionally she took a lightning peep at the silent house, then dipped again and continued her stalking. Following the evergreen hedge around a final corner, she emerged stealthily in the lee of the latticed kitchen porch and drew a breath of relief.

"All right so far," she muttered; "I wonder if that old gray cat with the new kittens is fussing around here?"

But no breath of life stirred under the porch as she stooped to peer through a break in the lattice, and with a final survey of the premises, inserted her plump person into the gap and wriggled, panting, into the darkness below.

It was stuffy and dusty there; the light filtered dimly through the diamond spaces, and the adventurer, crawling on hands and knees, bumped into a shadowy pile of flower-pots, sneezed violently and grovelled wrathfully among the ruins for at least five minutes, helplessly confused. Quite by accident she knocked her cobwebbed head against a narrow, outward swinging window, seized it thankfully, and plunged through it. Hanging a moment by her grimy hands she swayed, a little fearfully, then dropped with a quick breath to the concrete floor beneath, and smiled with relief as the comparative brightness of a well kept cellar revealed her safety. Vegetable bins, a neat pile of kindling wood, a large portable closet of wire netting, with occasional plates and covered dishes suggestively laid away in it, met her eye; on the floor in front of this last rested a little heap of something wet and glistening. Untidy as it looked, it had an eatable appearance to Caroline, whose instinct in these matters was unimpeachable, and bending over it she inserted one finger.

"Current jelly!" she whispered, thoughtfully licking the inquiring member. "The idea!"

She approached the wire closet and peered along the shelves; there was no jelly there.

"'Dropped it getting it out," she pursued, "I wonder why Selma didn't wipe it up."

Suddenly her face brightened.

"We'll keep right on and pretend *'twas* burglars," she announced to the quiet cellar, "and they stole the jelly in a hurry and dropped this and never noticed, and went upstairs to eat it and get the silver! And so I found 'em, after all!"

Still on tiptoe, she left the cellar, stole through the laundry, and crept mysteriously up the back stairs. So absorbed she was that a cracking board stopped her heart for a breath, and a slip on the landing sent her to her knees in terror. The empty quiet seemed to hum around her; strange snappings of the old woodwork dried her throat. With her hand on the swing door that led into the dining-room, she paused in a delicious ecstasy of terror, as the imagined clink of glass and silver, the normal clatter of a cheerful meal, seemed to echo in the air.

It was always difficult for Caroline in such moments of excitement to distinguish between what she saw and heard and what she wished to see and hear, and at this ghost of table music she smiled with pleasure.

"The house is empty," said her common-sense, but she pursed her lips and whispered, "they're up here eating--they've come for the silver!"

By fractions of inches she pushed the door on its well-oiled hinge and slipped noiselessly into the dining-room.

A broad beam of light fell across the dark, wainscoted room, and in the track of it sat a handsome well-dressed man, busily eating. In front of him was a roast chicken, a cut-glass dish of celery and a ruby mound of jelly; a crusty loaf of new bread lay broken at his right; at his left, winking in the sunbeam, stood a decanter half filled with a topaz liquor. He was daintily poising a bit of jelly on some bread, the mouthful was in the air, when his eyes fell on Caroline, an amazed and cobwebbed statue in front of him.

The hand that held the bread grew rigid. As spilled milk spreads over a table, the man's face was flooded with sudden grayish white; against it his thin lips were marked in lavender. While the grandfather clock ticked ten times they stared at each other, and then a wave of deep red poured over his face and his mouth twitched.

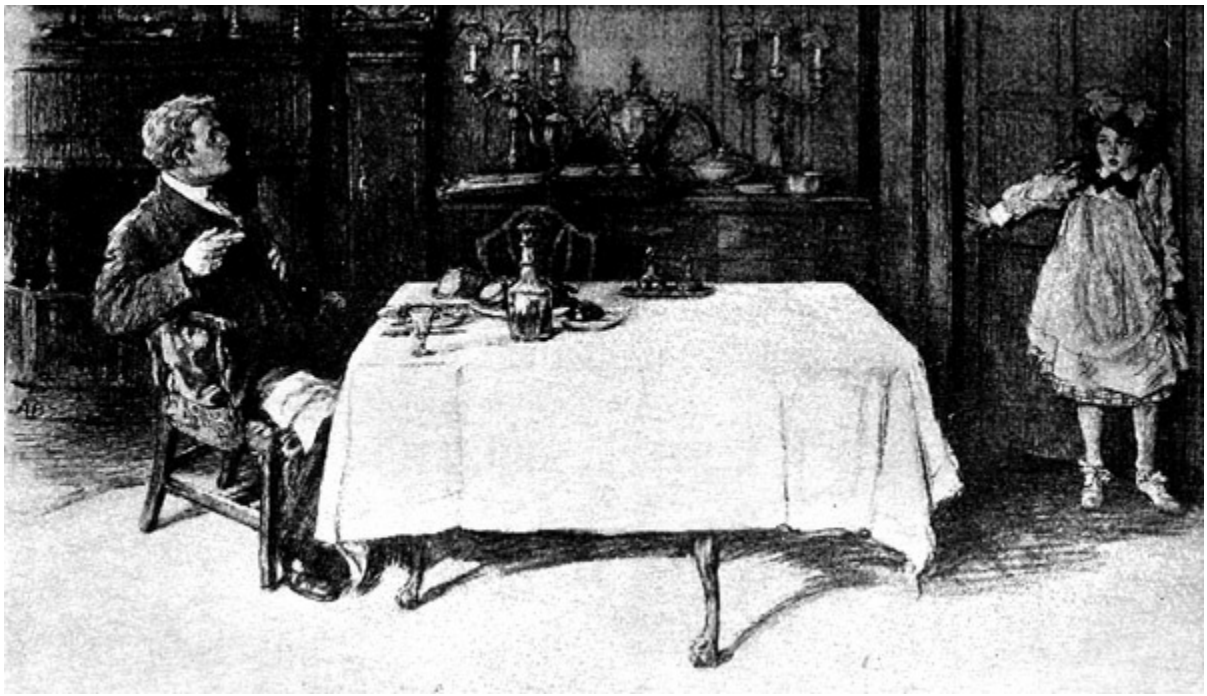
"What are you doing here, little girl?" he demanded sternly, pointedly regarding her dusty rumpled figure.

Caroline gulped and dropped her eyes.

"I--I--nothing particular," she murmured guiltily.

The man laid the piece of bread down carefully and wiped his fingers on the napkin spread across his knees.

"Some time," he said, in a leisurely drawl, "you'll burst into a room like that, where a person with a weak heart may be sitting, and that'll be the last of 'em."



"What are you doing here, little girl?" he demanded sternly.

"The last of 'em?" Caroline repeated vaguely.

"Just so. They'll die on you," he explained briefly.

Caroline stepped nearer.

"Is--is your heart weak?" she inquired fearfully. "I'm so sorry. So is my Uncle Lindsay's."

"What were you sneaking about so soft for?" he demanded.

She flushed.

"I--I was playing burglars," she confessed, "and I got to where they were in here with the silver, and--and I was coming in to--to get them, and I didn't expect anybody would be here, really, you know, and I was surprised when I saw you. I didn't know about your heart."

"Burglars?" said the man, laughing loudly. "Well, that's one on me! I must say you're a nervy young party. So you thought I was a burglar, did you?"

"Oh, no!" Caroline cried, "of course not--I meant I was playing it was burglars; I didn't mean you. I--I didn't know anybody was here."

"Humph!" said he. "What made you play burglars? Anything in that line yourself, ever?"

Caroline stared uncomprehendingly.

"My mother doesn't think it's right for Aunt Edith to go off and leave the house all alone the way she does," she explained; "she's always telling her some one will break in if she doesn't leave Selma or a dog. And she never locks a

thing, you know--she says if they intend to get in, they will, and that's all there is about it. So this time she went for three days, and Miss Honey and the General and Delia; and Selma and Anna went to a wedding and Ed went somewhere about a lawn-mower, and little Ed was going to get the pony shod. I told Aunt Edith I'd--" she coughed importantly--"keep an eye on the house."

"I see," said the man.

He poured himself two inches of the topaz liquor; it rocked in the glass.

Caroline sniffed inquiringly.

"That's the Scotch," she said; "I know by the smell, partly like cologne and partly smoky. Do you like it?"

The man raised the glass to the level of his eyes and watched the light play through it, then made a slight movement of his arm and the whisky disappeared smoothly.

"Your Aunt Edith's taste is as good as her voice," he said, eyeing Caroline carefully.

"Oh, that's not Aunt Edith's--that's Uncle Joe's," she explained. Then, as it flashed across her suddenly.

"Did you want to see him? He's in New York, too. They're going to have pictures taken of Miss Honey and General. But after that, Uncle Joe's going to Chicago. Did you want him?"

"N-no, not exactly," said the man, studying his well-kept finger-nails. "I can't say I do. No, my business is with--is more--"

He stopped suddenly and followed the direction of Caroline's eyes.

There on the sideboard behind him stood a leather suit-case, long and solid looking. It was open and tight rows of forks and spoons filled it.

The room was quite still for a moment. Caroline wanted to show by some intelligent remark that she understood the situation, and could easily imagine what the man was doing with the silver, but she found this difficult.

Strange people came to Aunt Edith's house. Dark, foreign-looking men ate meals there at unusual hours; once Caroline had seen with her own eyes a plump, yellow German fall suddenly on his knees at Aunt Edith's feet, as a hand-organ struck up its brassy music under the window, and burst into passionate singing, waving a whisk-broom in the air and offering it to Aunt Edith with the most extraordinary force of manner. And her aunt, who wore at the time a raincoat and tam o'shanter cap, had leaned forward graciously, gurgled out a most delicious little tune, accepted the whisk-broom, affected to inhale its fragrance rapturously, and whirled into a big and beautiful song in which the plump, yellow gentleman joined, and rising seized her in his arms, at which point they drowned the hand-organ completely, and the hand-organ man and Uncle Joe applauded loudly, and they gave the hand-organ man all he could eat and a dollar.

You may see from this that one did not look for the commonplace in Aunt Edith's house. Moreover, the stranger was not unlike some of her aunt's friends; though he was handsome and assured and noticeably at his ease, Caroline felt that his manner was subtly different from that of the friends of her own family. But even the most unconventional guest had never collected the sideboard silver, and a little feeling was growing in the air ... doubt and a bit of what might have begun to be fear ... when suddenly the man began to laugh. It was abrupt and it rang harshly at first, but grew with every moment warmer and more infectious, so that Caroline, though she felt that she was in some way the cause of it, joined in it finally, in spite of herself.

"If you knew what a sight you were!" he exclaimed, wiping his eyes with the napkin, "with your hair all cobwebs and all that dirt on your knees and those finger-marks on your apron, and being so small and all"--he began to chuckle again.

"Small?" she repeated portentously.

"Oh, I didn't mean small compared with--with anybody else the same size," he assured her quickly.

Catching her mollified glance, he went on more soberly.

"And how did you get in, now? No doors, I'll bet."

"Under the kitchen porch, through the little cellar window and up the back stairs," she explained.

"You mean to say you were out in that little back hall and I never heard you?"

She nodded. "I took pains to be still," she added, "so as to surprise the--so if there had been--"

"I understand," he said gravely, "so as to get them if they had been there. Well, you'd have done it. You're all right. Now, I suppose you're wondering what all this means, aren't you? You haven't got any idea who I am, have you? You don't know one single thing about me, and you may be thinking--"

"I know one thing about you," she interrupted, "I know you went to Yale."

The man's jaw dropped, his hands gripped the arm of the chair.

"And how in--how did you know that?" he cried roughly, with blazing eyes.

Caroline shrank a little but faced him.

"Your pin," she said, pointing to his vest, "I saw it when you held your arm up."

The man sank back in his chair and fingered the little jeweled badge unconsciously.

"Well, of all the cute ones ... so you've seen this before?" he suggested.

"Of course I have--my brother has one, and my Uncle Joe and Uncle Lindsay and Cousin Lindsay and Cousin Joe."

"All went to Yale?" he inquired.

"Lindsay and Joe are there now--they're seniors," she informed him. "The General's going when he grows up. All the Holts go there. Grandfather Holt went."

"You don't say," said the man, bending forward in genuine interest, "I guess it's a pretty good college, eh?"

"The best of them all," she assured him.

"I'll tell you an awful funny thing," she went on abruptly, "you know all the Holts look alike. Well, when Uncle Lindsay first went to Yale, he was walking along the Campus, and right by Old South Middle he met the President. And the President stopped and said, 'Well, well, I see the race of Holts is not yet extinct. Good afternoon, sir!' *The President.* And he never saw him before!"

The man shook his head thoughtfully.

"You don't say," he repeated. "Old South Middle--that's it. That's the one."

Suddenly he shrugged his shoulders and took out his watch. "This'll never pay the rent!" he said briskly. "Now let's get to business. I suppose you were surprised to see all that stuff in the suit-case?"

Caroline nodded and grinned back at him, his own quick smile was so friendly and compelling.

"Well," he continued, rising and bunching the napkin beside his plate, "I don't blame you. Not a bit. I'd have been the same myself. And you'll be even more surprised when you find out what I'm doing--that is," he stopped abruptly, "unless your Uncle Joe has told you already and sent you over to help?"

She shook her head.

"Didn't, eh?" he stepped over to the sideboard, wiping off the knife and fork he had been using, and packed them with the others. Caroline, watching his hands, noticed in the corner of the case a familiar chamois skin bag; she had often seen it on Aunt Edith's bureau.

"Well, now," he continued, "If I had a niece as sharp and smart and quiet as you are, Missy, I'd tell her my plans, I would, and get her to help me. I wonder your uncle didn't. Sure he didn't mention me--Mr. Barker?"

Again she shook her head, her eyes fastened to the bag.

"Well," said the man, shutting down the cover of the suit-case and strapping it tightly, "it's this way. You may have heard your uncle say something about it being kind o' careless, leaving the house so much alone? Anyhow, whether he's talked to you or not about it, he has to me often enough."

"Oh, yes!" Caroline was conscious of a distinct sense of relief. "I've often heard him. Then you *do* know Uncle Joe?"

The man faced her, starting in violent surprise.

"Do I know Uncle Joe?" he repeated; "do I *know* him?" He shook his head feebly and gazed about the room. "She says, do I know Joe Holt! And what should I be doing, eating my lunch here, if I didn't?" he demanded. "What should he tell me about his troubles for, and ask me to help him, if I didn't know him? Is it likely I'd be packing his silver in my

suit-case if I didn't know him?"

Caroline stood abashed.

"I should think you might guess by this time what the joke is," he went on forgivingly, seeing that she was quite overcome with her own stupidity, "but as I have to get away pretty quick now, I'll tell you. You see, Joe isn't coming right back with your aunt; he's going on to Chicago, and that may keep him some time away--"

("I know," Caroline interpolated), "and he wanted your aunt to have somebody stay in the house to look after it--he felt worried. But no, she wouldn't. Wouldn't even get a dog--that is," eyeing Caroline steadily, "unless she's got one lately, but when I last heard--"

"No," she assured him, "she wouldn't. Aunt Edith hates dogs."

"So Joe told me. 'Now what would you do, Henry,' says Joe to me, that's my name, Henry Barker, 'what would you do with a woman like that?'

"'Do, Joe?' says I, 'why, I'll tell you what I'd do, I'd teach her a lesson, that's what. I'd I'd give her one good scare, and then you'd find she'd take your advice, after that.'"

At this point the man reached for his overcoat and began to struggle into it.

"'But I don't know how to, Henry,' says he. 'You don't?' says I, 'nothing easier. Just tip somebody off when the house is empty and they'll run up and slip in, take what silver and jewelry they can find in a hurry, pack it up careful and hide it away wherever you say. Then when your wife gets back and finds 'em gone, there'll be the d— there'll be a row, and when she says it's her fault for not leaving the servants in the house, and she'll never do it again, then you say, 'All right, my dear, I'm glad you've learned your lesson,' and step out and get the bag! How's that?' I said."

He put his hat on, drew a pair of gloves from his pocket, and looked hard at Caroline; her answering glance was troubled and non-committal. He scowled slightly and rested one hand on the bag.

"'All very well, Henry,' says Joe to me, 'but who's to do all this? I don't know anyone that would dare to, let alone be willing,'" he went on, glancing hurriedly around the room. "'You know as well as I do that if they should get caught doing it, anybody would swear 'twas burglary plain and simple, and run' em right in. They'd call the police. It would look bad for whoever did it, you know,' he said."

"He might have asked me. I'd love to do it," Caroline muttered resentfully.

As a matter of fact the scheme was sufficiently like many a practical joke of her irrepressible uncle. Better than anyone, Caroline, his conspirator elect, knew the lengths he was capable of going to confound or scandalize his adjacent relatives.

"Of course," said the man, with relief in his voice, "that's why I asked you if he hadn't. I guess he was afraid you wouldn't dare. I'd have trusted you, though, myself."

She looked gratefully at him.

"Then, I said, 'Why, Joe, if that's the way you feel about it, I'll do it myself,'" he concluded, lifting the suit-case from the sideboard and grimacing at its weight. "'What's the good,' says I, 'of calling yourself a friend, if you can't run a little risk? Just tell me the day to come and where you want 'em put--be sure you pick a good safe place--and I'll 'tend to it for you,' I said, 'and you'll do as much for me some day when I'm in a tight place.'"

He settled his hat firmly and moved to the long window.

"I'll have to hurry if I don't want to lose my train," he explained.

"But where's the place?" Caroline cried excitedly; "what place did Uncle Joe pick out? Won't you tell me? I won't tell--truly, I won't!"

The man paused with one hand on the window button, and looked thoughtfully at her.

"By George," he announced, "I've a good mind to tell you! I'm not supposed to tell a soul, you know, but you've been such a brick, and being his own niece and all, I think you've got a *right* to know, I really do."

Caroline nodded breathlessly.

"Look here!" he cried, "I'll trust you if your uncle won't. I don't like the place he told me, much--it isn't safe enough.

There's two thousand dollars' worth of stuff here, counting the--counting everything, and an old barn's no place for it. See here. You promise me to stay here for an hour--one hour exactly, by the clock--and I'll leave this bag at your house for you. Then you can hide it under your bed, or anywhere you want, till to-morrow, and then you can manage the rest to suit yourself. How's that?"

"Oh, that would be grand!" she gasped.

"You can just tell your uncle that I saw you were game and I trusted you, if he wouldn't," he concluded, opening the window, "and I'll take this to your house in half an hour. Will you promise not to leave for an hour? We mustn't be seen together, you know, or people might suspect and then the game'd be up. And will you lock this window after me and go out the same way you came?"

"Yes, yes! I promise, I promise solemnly!" she assured him, flushed with importance, "and tell 'em not to open it, will you? They might. Say it's private for me, will you?"

"All right," he said soberly. "I'm kind o' sorry they went to Yale," he added abruptly. "I'd rather--sh! what's that?"

He stood rigidly listening; his eyes rolled back, his hand raised in warning.

"I don't hear--" she began, but his angry gesture and the furious whisper that went with it cowed her into a silence as strained as his own.

For a moment it seemed to Caroline that she heard a faint snap as of a board released from pressure, but dead quiet followed; she held her breath with excitement as the man lifted the suit-case over the ledge, and peering over the balcony stepped out. Suddenly he paused, one leg over the sill; his eyes rolled back towards the room, his lips tightened. So terrible, and so despairing his face had turned that Caroline rushed to the window. Even as she started she heard quick soft steps in the hall, and pointed to the freedom outside.

"Jump, oh, jump, Mr. Barker!" she whispered in a glow of terror, "hurry! It *is* somebody!"

He pointed silently to the ground below, and with her heart pounding heavily she peered over the sill. Directly below them crouched a Great Dane, brindled, enormous, one eye fixed sternly on the window.

The soft steps paused: perhaps she had imagined them! Perhaps, if they kept quite still, that quaking pair, perhaps.... The man breathed like a drowning swimmer; it seemed to Caroline she must scream.

The door flew open.

"Look out, there--it's loaded!" the voice came sharp as a cracked whip.

Caroline gave a shriek of joy.

"Why, it's Lindsay!" she cried, "it's just Cousin Lindsay!"

A tall, powerful young man came in behind a leveled revolver.

"Car--what--be still, there!" he gasped, steadying the weapon. The man stood motionless, his eyes on the ground.

"It's all right--I never carried a gun in my life," he said quietly.

"Oh, Lindsay, it's only a joke!"

Caroline ran towards him, stopping in horror at the ugly winking eyes of the revolver.

"Mr. Barker only meant--tell Lin about it!" she entreated, sick with foreboding at the dogged man before her, the scornful flushed boy at her side.

"I guess you better tell him, Missy," said the man in a low empty voice.

"Go home, Caroline; go straight home this moment."

Caroline had never heard her cousin speak in that tone, and it was partly in tears, partly in wrath that she answered,

"I will *not* go straight home, Lindsay Holt, and you needn't talk to me that way, either! Uncle Joe himself asked Mr. Barker--"

She began glibly enough, but even to her simple consciousness the story wavered and rang false, with this stricken, passive man before her. Her voice faltered, she choked.... Had Uncle Joe really asked this man to get the emeralds? Was it possible that--Lindsay laughed disagreeably.

"If you've quite finished, Caroline, will you go home?" he demanded, his eyes still on the revolver.

She gulped painfully; her faith tottered on the last brink.

"Oh, let it go at that; can't you?" the man broke in roughly. "What difference does it make to you, eh, how this part of the job gets done? Have I made you any trouble yet? My goose is cooked, all right, and we'll--we'll talk that over, later, when Missy goes, but--but couldn't you"--he looked almost appealingly at the young fellow,--"couldn't we--it's all there in the suit-case--"

"It was going under my bed Lin--I'd have been careful," Caroline was hoping against hope, now.

"You see, Missy," said the man quickly, in almost his old manner, "you see how it turns out. It was a bad plan, I guess--you can see how your cousin takes it. You'll have to--to tell your uncle how it worked; it's one on me, all right."

"Suppose we put it all back and--oh Lord, what's the use?" he ended suddenly.

"Cut it short--what the hell do I care?"

He dropped suddenly into the chair behind him; his head fell over on his arms, and the stiff hat rolled along the floor.

The young man stared curiously at him, but the weakness was genuine; every muscle was relaxed.

Lindsay's face softened a little. "As far as that goes, you're quite right," he said curtly, "though it's a little late in the day. Look here, Caroline. Mr.--Mr. Barker and I don't agree very well on the best way to teach people to lock their houses. I--it seems to me a pretty poor joke. Uncle Joe never meant it to go quite so far, I'm quite sure," he concluded jerkily. "I--I want to do the best thing all round, but," looking anxiously towards her for a second, "this is a little too--a little too--"

Her face cleared at his change of tone. "I know," she returned eagerly, "I know just what you mean, Lindsay. I think so, too. Anybody would think--"

"That's it," he said briefly.

"You say you thought so yourself at first," she added, looking uncomfortably at the bent figure in the chair, "and that made him feel--"

"Well, well, I understand now," Lindsay interrupted irritably, "it's all right now, Caroline. Hadn't you better go? Mr.--Mr. Barker and I will come along later."

"Oh, I'll wait and go with you, Lin," she returned, almost assured, now, "why do I have to go first?"

The man lifted his head; at sight of the young fellow's nervous perplexity he smiled faintly.

"Suppose you run along, Missy," he suggested; "your cousin and I want to talk business, and--and then I must be hurrying on--hurrying on," he repeated vaguely, with dazed eyes. He raised his hand to his head; Lindsay started forward, the revolver loose in his hand.

"Where did you get that pin?" he cried sharply. "Give that to me."

The man fingered the pin thoughtfully. "You're 'way off there," he said. "That's not--that's not--"

"Not one of your 'jokes'?" Lindsay's voice rang disagreeably. "I happen to know the contrary. I'll trouble you to hand it over. I'll soon know to whom it belongs."

Caroline, hanging over the sill, lost in talkative admiration of the Great Dane, was oblivious for the moment of the room behind her.

"It belongs to my son," said the man. There was a moment of silence. Outside the great hound whined softly.

"His name Barker, too?" Lindsay asked coldly, half rising.

"No, sir. His name is James Wardwell," said the man defiantly.

Lindsay sprang to his feet.

"That's a dirty lie!" he shouted. He stood over the man, careless of the revolver. "And you'll pay for it, too!"

Caroline stared aghast at them.

"Look out for the gun," the man warned him, and, as with a flush of mortification Lindsay mastered his weapon, he added quietly, "you can't be too careful with firearms."

Lindsay gritted his teeth.

"You--you--" he began furiously. The man met his eyes for a second, then with a dark, slow blush, dropped his arm.

The boy drew back uncertainly.

"What's the good of lying like that?" he said, "how's it going to help you?"

The man looked at the floor.

"Don't be a fool--how's it going to?" Lindsay repeated irritably.

The other did not move.

"Is that the truth?" Lindsay's voice was strained and worried.

The man drew a long, uneven breath. "Yes," he answered.

Lindsay glanced at the suit-case, at the man in the chair, at the revolver.

"Jimmy!" he muttered, "Jimmy B.!" For the first time since he had last addressed her, he noticed Caroline. He frowned, then suddenly his face cleared.

"Look here," he said, his eye again on the man, "do you know where all that silver belongs?"

She nodded.

"I help Selma sometimes."

"Could you put it back so nobody would know?"

"Oh, yes," she answered him, "and the--things from the bureau, too?"

His lips curled scornfully and his hold on the revolver tightened.

"A thorough job, wasn't it?" he muttered, then controlling himself he answered evenly, "Oh, yes, might as well get 'em all back. We'll just step in the library a minute."

The man got up and went before him into the library, stumbling as he walked.

Lindsay watched him drop into a seat and stood in front of him.

"What proof have you got that what you said in there is true?" he asked abruptly, "before we leave the house, I must know."

"Proof?" the man repeated, "proof?" He stared almost vacantly at Lindsay.

"Why, yes," the boy answered impatiently.

"You say you're the father of one of the most brilliant men in my class, you wear the pin of his society--a pin I happen to know he lost recently--and I find you stealing my aunt's spoons! For God's sake, what's the meaning of it?"

The man twisted his fingers together and moistened his lips.

"It kind of settled on me all at once," he said in a hollow voice, "I felt it since morning. She scared me so to begin with--she came like a ghost--and then the dog finished me. I had one o' them once and he nearly did me up--turned on me. Jim pulled him off," he added, "but they give me a turn whenever I see 'em."

Lindsay stamped angrily.

"Will you prove what you say? Or shall we discuss it at the station-house?"

The man raised his hand deprecatingly. "No, no;" he said hastily, "no--that's what I don't want. That's why I--that's the reason I don't--good Lord, don't you know you've given me a half a dozen chances, if I'd had the nerve for the risk? Why, I c'd've butted that gun out of your hand twice in the last ten minutes, you young fool! How long d'ye suppose it would take a husky man to back you into one closet and Missy into another and walk off with the stuff? Hey?"

His eyes flashed, he threw back his head and breathed hard, a cornered animal. Lindsay felt a tingle of excitement run down his spine; for a moment there was danger in the air.

"I--I notice you didn't see your way to all this," he said scornfully. But he blushed as he spoke, the man saw it, and Lindsay knew he saw it; he winced and drew himself up in a boyish attempt to save the situation.

"It's quite true--I'm not in the habit of catching house thieves," he said, drawling a little, "and I doubt if many of them are quite such accomplished liars as you appear to be; but my stroke will improve, I've no doubt, as we go on. Would you mind getting up and 'coming along with me' as they call it, I believe?"

The man made no answer, but raised his hands high above his head.

"If you'll look in that left vest pocket, there's a little leather case there," he said, "and--and you'd better take the pin, too, I guess. I'd be obliged if you'd say you found it somewhere; I never should've put it on."

Somewhat clumsily Lindsay extricated the leather case, cursing his awkwardness and the patience of the man.

A worn little photograph of a boy of eight or nine was in his hand; across the bottom was scrawled in a childish hand, "Daddy, from your son James."

He drew a long breath.

"That's Jimmy, all right," he said dully.

"If you'll just tear it up," said the man. "It's all I've got, and nobody'd know but some friend that--that would be lookin' for the likeness."

Lindsay threw the picture on the floor.

"I won't believe it--its too sickening!" he cried, "Jim Wardwell's a gentleman! I--I--why I admired him more than--good God, he's a *friend* of mine!"

The man smiled faintly.

"Oh, Jimmy has fine friends," he said almost complacently, "he's always gone with the best. He's very particular."

Lindsay's forehead was a network of pain and doubt.

"But Jimmy has plenty of money," he insisted, "he always had the--his things--oh, it's idiotic! You're crazy, that's all."

"Oh, yes, he always had plenty," the man said simply.

In the pause that followed they heard the soft chink of silver through the wall; Caroline was evidently busy.

Lindsay twisted his face into an ugly smile.

"And I thought he was the squarest of the lot," he said slowly, "I've said so often. We all did. Pretty easy, weren't we?"

"He is!" The man half rose, but fell back with a grunt of pain.

"Oh, *damn* this heart!" he complained fretfully. "I don't know what's the matter with me. That fortune woman, she knew. Last week it was I went. 'You're making a plan to end up your business,' she says to me, 'and so you will, mister, but not the way you think. There's some trouble coming to you and a child's mixed up in it. Look out for strange dogs,' she says, they all tell me that--'and run no risks this month. I don't just like the looks of your hand,' she says. And when I saw that child, it was all up with me, I thought. I didn't think the machine would ever get started again. And then that infernal dog...."

"We were speaking of--of--did you say that Jim--" Lindsay's voice sounded strange, even to himself.

The man blinked a moment.

"What?" he said vaguely, "what about Jim? Oh--he don't know anything about it, of course. I sh'd think you'd know enough for that. That's what I'm telling you, if you'd keep still a minute."

He stared thoughtfully at the floor and Lindsay waited. Caroline ran up the front stairs, and he had counted each step before the man went on.

"So I sent the money regular every quarter," he muttered, as if continuing some tale, "and I'd go to see him sometimes all dressed up, and I tried to talk like he did. He thought I was traveling and didn't want to be bothered. But I couldn't

see him much--was I going to drag him down, just as I'd got him started right? Not much. 'Go and visit your friends, o' course,' I used to tell him, 'and you can write to me.' The best schools I picked out, the very best. And they came high. But I was good for it."

He shifted in his chair and rubbed his eyes.

"I had a hunch when I bought the ticket," he muttered. "It just come over me--'you ought not to go to a place you got the idea of from Jim,' something seemed to say to me, 'it's unlucky.' And everything so still, and the stuff so easy--'twas like finding it in the road. And the last time, too--the last time."

"But Jim--he thought--" Lindsay prompted. A dreadful curiosity held him.

"So then he wrote, 'of course it's Yale, dad,' he wrote, 'we're all going up together. You don't mind if it costs a little to get settled, do you?' And was I going to go to him--he was head of his class, mind you--and say, the Trust has treated me the way I wouldn't treat a dog--it's all up with me and you? I can go back and be foreman again at the works--we're bought up, chewed up and spit out like a wad o' paper?' Not much, I guess. No. Here's where I quit the honesty game, I said, for it don't pay. You stole my patent, and I shut up because I couldn't afford to fight you, and you raised me and raised me--and let me into the firm when you knew it was going to bust! Now, I says, since my boy's education has been stole from me, I'll steal it back, I says, and only from them that can afford it, too! And I'll use no lawyer to do it, either, and we'll have no trick-work with papers. I'll get it straight from the wives and daughters of the big thieves that pass the plate on Sundays."

Lindsay listened to Caroline moving over their heads; her steps seemed the only reality in this horrid dream.

"It--it will just about kill Jim," he said slowly.

"It would have killed him not to go to college," the man returned sharply, "and he had a right to go."

"But, good heavens, there are ways--he could have earned money--he's clever enough to work his way through a dozen colleges!" Lindsay cried despairingly.

"There wasn't any working his way through for *my* boy," said the man, with a cunning grin; "I've done enough o' that for the family, thank you. So did his mother--she died of it. No, there's money enough for all, and it only needs a little planning. The thing is, never take a risk. Wait for a sure thing. Take from the kind that takes from *your* kind--they'll never miss it. Work alone, and never try to get too much. Who are the ones that get caught? The 'pals'! No, I've just done for myself, and contented to sell at a big loss, and only wanted to get my twenty-five hundred a year for Jim, and something over for his vacations--those camps cost a lot--and enough to dress as I may need to."

Lindsay cleared his throat.

"Do you mean to say that Jim never asked you what your business was?"

"He didn't know I ever changed till last month. He thought I traveled for the Comp'ny. Of course he didn't like that any too well--you know, you wouldn't expect him to, brought up as he's been--and I guess he thought 'twould be kinder to me not to mention it much. He thought I didn't know, but I did. Last month--last month--" the man paused and his mouth worked, though he bit his lips.

"Well, last month?" Lindsay repeated pitilessly.

"I got my hunch to quit. That fortune woman and--and other things. The doctor told me to keep quiet and not get on my nerve. And I sort of fixed it up with Jim in a letter. I told him I'd sold out my interest in the firm and I was going to send him one more thousand for graduatin' with and I was going to let him try for himself after that. I knew that was all right, because he's told me of plenty of rich young swells who had to. Fathers believed in it."

"He was going with Buck Williamson on the ranch," said Lindsay slowly.

"That's it! Buck Williamson. He asked me wouldn't I look 'em up after they got settled and try it out there. It was an awful nice letter," said the man softly, "he's a real gentleman."

Lindsay jerked his head toward the dining-room.

"Was this the 'thousand'?" he asked coldly.

The man nodded.

"I've never been with him more than a day or two, you see, and I thought I'd go up to New Haven this spring--when he graduated, and see him. Just a day or two. And then I was planning to drop out. Of course I never meant to see him

much. I was always deadly afraid something'd happen, and I didn't want to get connected up with Jim. But I've been careful. There's not a line o' writing anywhere, and the man that sold the stuff for me in Jersey City is close as wax."

"But your friends--" Lindsay was wrung with an angry pity.

"I don't care for much of anybody but Jim," said the man.

Caroline was moving restlessly about in the dining-room again. Lindsay shook himself nervously.

"Of course, this is very awkward for me," he began, "I mean--I--oh, the devil! You know what I've got to do, of course?"

The man looked appealingly at him. "You've got it all back," he said quickly, "and you know Jim--"

"Yes, plague take it--I know Jim," the boy muttered, "we all know Jim."

"Known well, isn't he?" the man inquired eagerly, "there's no cleverer scholar there, much cleverer, I mean, is there?"

Lindsay shook his head. "Not that amounts to anything," he said shortly.

"I'll bet there's no better fellow there than Jim--none of the big bugs?"

"There is no better fellow anywhere," said Lindsay.

Caroline tapped fretfully on the door. "Aren't we ever going, Lin?" she begged; "it's all put back."

"Yes, yes, in a minute!" he answered, and turned to the man. "I'm damned sorry to have to do it," he began, "it's a horrible thing to do, but I can't see that there are any two ways about it. I don't want to hear you say any more. If you'll come quietly, well and good. If it was anybody else--but in my uncle's house--and the community--and--well, will you come?"

The man sighed. He looked ten years older. "All right," he said, "I didn't know but--well, never mind. My nerve's gone. I never had a failure, you see. An' I always knew I couldn't stand one. Never even left a trail. I couldn't afford to, workin' as I did. I always knew 'twas bound to come, though, and here it is. But it's hard. Jim was telling me last month about this singer that he'd heard was so careless, and I noted it down for use some day. You have to notice those things. He never said his friends lived here. I--it makes me feel dreadful when I think how he'd feel if he knew I'd been working his *friends* this way--he'd never stand for that, Jim wouldn't. It makes me feel--oh, well, what's the odds? But I wish you didn't belong to Yale College."

Lindsay scowled and motioned to the door.

"Shut up and come on, will you?" he blurted.

The man got up.

"I guess I won't see Jim again, then," he said, "will I? Of course there isn't one chance in a hundred he'll ever know. But I couldn't explain why I didn't go up to New Haven, nor send the thousand, and it'll be five years, anyhow--ten, maybe. And I shan't hold out that. The doctor only gave me two."

"Ten years? Oh, no!" Lindsay cried.

"It's grand larceny," said the man simply.

"Lin, Lin, come *on*!" called Caroline.

"You've got the pin, and I'll tear the picture up," said the man. "I've got it all planned, o' course--I give the name of Barker. And--and *if* Jim ever says anything to you or any of his friends about me being mean about the thousand, when I'd promised it, just kind of give a hint, will you, that things may have happened so's I couldn't? I hope he'll think I died. I wish he was through Yale, though. The thousand won't make any difference with graduatin', will it?"

Lindsay swallowed hard; his nerves were strained to snapping.

"Good God, no!" he shouted. He stepped to the French window, opened it, and threw the revolver over the sill.

"Get out!" he said briefly, turning to the man, "get out of my sight! If Jim ever receives another penny from you, I'll tell him all I know."

The man swayed towards the chair. "Do you mean it?" he gasped, "honest?"

He began to sob and choke a little, and turning half bent over the chair, hunted with his hand for his hat.

"Get out!" Lindsay repeated violently, looking persistently sidewise.

The man leaned over and fumbled for the picture on the floor, found it and straightened himself.

Suddenly he leaped back and fell into the chair again; a dreadful pallor reached the roots of his hair.

"All up, I guess--twice to-day--'Jim good-by," he said very quickly, and rolled against Lindsay, the picture tight in his hand.

"Lin! If you don't come pretty soon"--Caroline pushed open the door a little.

"Hush! Run and bring that whisky!" her cousin whispered, his face drawn and frightened.

She waited outside while he labored mysteriously, breathing hard.

"Is Mr. Barker sick, Lin?" she whispered fearfully when he came back to the door.

"Y--yes. I guess he's pretty sick," he said slowly, stepping out with her and turning the knob carefully. The dining-room reeked with the whisky on his hands and his coat.

"We'll go for the doctor," he went on, "both of us, because we'll have to fix--I'll have to talk to you on the way. You needn't hurry so, Caroline. There's no--we don't have to hurry." He tried the outside door twice, to make sure it was latched, and glanced hastily at the library windows.

"I'd better wire Uncle Joe," he said half to himself; "he'll know what to do--oh, there's the dog. Come on, Hamlet--he's Buck Williams's--gentle as a kitten."

"Yes, he'll know," she repeated, contentedly, reaching for Hamlet's black muzzle.

"But I don't think that was right, do you, Lin, even for a joke?" she queried, following him down the side path. The big hound padded on behind them.

"No," he agreed briefly.

"Wasn't it funny he had one of your pins?" She was trotting rapidly, to keep up with him.

Lindsay stopped short and almost faced her. He looked very young and tired.

"I swear, Caroline, I believe worse men have worn it!" he said.

V

A PILLAR OF SOCIETY

CAROLINE slipped out of the woodshed with Henry D. Thoreau barking under his breath at her heels, and struck across the dusty mountain road into the trail. The advantages of the woodshed were many: it was cool and dark, the stacked wood had a soothing odor and a neat, restful appearance, and one was more or less forgotten there. More important, it lay directly under the long living-room, and sounds carried easily through the primitive plank floor. Up to now the murmur of the company's voices had been a negligible quantity, a background for thought, merely, but suddenly a familiar intonation had risen higher.

"Why, certainly, Caroline can show you--she knows all the trails. Yes, indeed, she'd be delighted, I'm sure.... Oh, any time you prefer. Don't let her dawdle along, though; she's such a strange child--sometimes it will take her ten minutes to get across the road, and then another time she will be as quick as a flash. I'll see where she is."

But even as the boards squeaked above her head, Caroline had fled, and Henry D. Thoreau, smarting from the indignity of her brown, berry-stained hand circling his muzzle, was expressing his feelings to the yellow birches and ground pine.

"Oh shut up, won't you, Henry D.?" she urged him indignantly, "do you want to take that fat old tiresome lady around our nice mountain? I don't b'lieve you do. You can be called 'girlie' if you want to--I don't. She is so hot and she creaks so when she walks! I *had* to hold your nose."

Henry D., who had only wanted an explanation, subsided, and they trudged on in silence, Indian file, along the narrow trail.

The early afternoon sun filtered down through the birch and beech leaves on Caroline's brown head and Henry D.'s brindled back, pine needles crunched under their feet, thick glossy moss twinkled with last night's rain. They sniffed the damp, wholesome mold delightedly; from time to time Caroline kicked the rotten stump of some pithy, crumbling trunk or marked patterns with her finger nail in the thin new moss of some smooth slab. Indian pipes and glowing juniper berries embroidered the way; pale, late anemones, deceived by the cold mountain weather, sprang up between the giant mushrooms. It was as still as eternity.

The wood grew steadily thicker, the light pierced down in golden arrows only, the silence was almost oppressive. Caroline stepped suddenly out of the tiny path, pushed aside a clump of fern, buried her arm up to the elbow in a hollow stump and produced a large crumbling molasses cooky.

"Just where I left it, Henry D., just exactly!" she whispered delightedly. "I wish now I'd left 'em both, but I didn't feel able to spare 'em at the time."

They ate the cooky pleasantly, Henry D. receiving every third bite with scrupulous accuracy.

"I used to think maybe that huckleberry-boy followed us up and discovered our places, but this proves he don't," she announced, as the last crumb disappeared; "he's not so smart as he thinks he is, is he, Henry D.?"

They trotted on, moving more quickly as the faint, regular crash of an axe on wood came nearer and nearer. A barbed-wire fence had sprung up unaccountably in the wood, following a devious course among the thick trees, and as they scrambled carefully under it, Henry D. pausing with accustomed gallantry while his mistress disentangled two petticoats and an unfortunate stocking, a little gray-shingled cottage jumped out suddenly from the gray beeches, and they emerged into its front yard.

It was a ridiculously operatic little cottage, composed chiefly of bulging balconies, scarlet and yellow with geraniums and nasturtiums, casement windows with tiny leaded panes, and double Dutch doors, evidently practicable. It had all the air of having retired from the other scenery to practice for its own act, and it seemed highly probable that a chorus of happy short-skirted peasantry would skip out from behind it and tunefully relate the fortunes of the heroine within.

But the only person in sight was obviously impossible of such classification. Though she was chopping wood, and chopping it very well, though she wore what is sometimes called a Mother Hubbard wrapper and a stiff, clean blue-checked apron, she was not in the least a peasant. Her figure was tall and spare, her hair gray and drawn into an uncompromising knot, her face wrinkled and shrewd, her eyes soft, and full of the experience that middle-age brings to the native American woman who has lived all her life in the sparsely-settled country districts.

Her face relaxed at sight of her visitors. "How d'ye do?" she called cheerfully, "ma want anything?"

"I don't believe so," Caroline returned sociably, "I've just come up, that's all."

"I thought maybe your ma was worried about them shirt-waists, but she needn't be: I'll have 'em back by Friday, sure. It'll be all I can do, though--he's on the rampage these days, and I've got my hands full, I tell you."

"Is Old Grumpy bad to-day?" Caroline inquired.

"Bad? Child, that old fellow is just about the worst I ever saw, and I've seen plenty. What's on his mind the Lord knows, but it's a lesson to us all to keep our tempers and not have secret thoughts preying on us night and day! Just now he told me the truth for once. 'I'm so worried I can't digest, Luella,' he says to me, 'and I digest so damnably that it's enough to worry an archangel!' There--I shouldn't 'a' said that before you, but--"

"Oh, I know 'damn,' Luella," Caroline assured her, "and it isn't as if you said it purposely, anyway; you just repeated it. It makes all the difference."

"I guess it does," Luella assented, "s'long's you understand it. But then, you understand everything, more or less, 'seems to me. Where you picked it all up at your age--"

"What's that, Luella? Who is talking out there? What's going on *now* behind my back?"

A petulant and gray-haired gentleman rushed out at them, very much like a wiry Scotch terrier, and glared fiercely at Caroline and Henry D. Thoreau.

"Nothin's goin' on behind your back that I know of, Mr. Wortley," Luella returned composedly. "This little girl comes up to see me every once 'n a while--I do washing for her mother at one of the cottages--and we were just talkin' back and forth, that's all."

"You fried that liver!" the gentleman burst forth abruptly, "you know you fried it, Luella! I might as well have eaten a

shingle off the cottage--it's killing me! Ugh! As if I hadn't enough to bear without being murdered with fried liver!"

"I do' know what you've got to bear, Mr. Wortley," and Luella gathered her apron full of kindlings, "but you needn't add fried liver to it, 'cause it was broiled."

"Never!" exploded the fiery gentleman.

"I'd ought to know," said Luella firmly, "I had the grid-iron to wash."

"As for children," he veered off again, "you couldn't have poorer company. Think what they'll grow into--think!"

"Some don't turn out so bad," she reminded him, starting toward the house.

"Ah, but when are you going to decide that they *have* 'turned out'?" he demanded, trotting angrily beside her, "tell me that, will you? Perhaps you imagine that when they're of age, legally men and women, and you've managed to keep 'em out of the State Reform School up to then, you're justified in thinking they've 'turned out'? Hey?"

"Oh, now, I wouldn't go on so about the State Reform School, Mr. Wortley," Luella urged pacifically, "that's awful. I always say the young ones mean well, mostly; there ain't many that set out to be bad a-purpose. Only, accordin' to their judgment--"

"Their judgment! *Their* judgment! For God's sake!" he thundered, and darted into the house, slamming the door so that the casements rattled.

"I guess you'd better run on, dear," Luella suggested, "he's bad to-day. Some days I just have my hands full with him, and then again he'll be real pleasant and amusin'--he'll say the cutest things. But he's perturbed to-day, and that's a fact. You stop in 'long in the afternoon, when he takes his nap and I'm at my ironing, and we'll have a good visit."

Caroline nodded soberly and took up her journey again, not a little depressed; he had been such a whirlwind of a gentleman.

Unconsciously she followed a tiny, all-but-overgrown trail that led straight up the hill against which the cottage was built and lost itself, apparently, in the thick wood at the top. A belt of tall beeches half way up blotted out everything behind it, and the dozens of chipmunks and red squirrels that scurried hither and yon, the fat hen-partridge schooling her brood under Caroline's very nose, the flame-colored, translucent lizards slipping under mossy roots at her feet, showed the neglect into which the trail had fallen. She pushed on, hardly certain now that she had not lost it, or that it had ever led anywhere, when she stumbled suddenly over a handsome meerschaum pipe, still warm, and colored to a nicety. She picked it up, poked experimentally at the ashes with a twig, smelled it distastefully and stared about her. No one was in sight, and she had walked at least a quarter of a mile before she encountered a young man sitting in a dejected attitude on the stump of a yellow birch.

He was peering gloomily into the hemlocks opposite him, his hands were deep in his pockets, his feet crossed at an uncomfortable angle. He was a pale young man with dark circles under darker eyes, and an expression of such settled melancholy that Caroline lost no time in assuaging it as far as she could.

"Here it is," she remarked, holding out the pipe, "how do you do?"

The young man started violently.

"Holy Bridget, who are you?" he demanded. "How did you get here? This is private property--didn't you see the sign?"

"There wasn't any sign the way we came," she returned placidly, "we came over the mountain. Don't you want your pipe?"

The young man blushed and scowled. "Thank you very much," he said, extending a thin, brown hand, "I'm afraid I was rather rude. Where did you find it?"

"Oh, down there," she answered vaguely.

He handled the pipe lovingly, knocked it against the birch stump and cleared it further with a curl of the polished, champagne-tinted bark.

"Nice dog," he suggested, "what's his name?"

"Henry D. Thoreau," she replied, studying the green scarab in his necktie and the heavy seal-ring on his left hand.

"For heaven's sake! Who named him?"

"My Uncle Joe," she returned simply, "because he takes to the woods whenever he gets the chance. Was that pin a bug once?"

"Not since I ran across it," said the young man, "before that, I can't say. Has your uncle any other animals?"

"Oh, yes," she assured him. "There's the donkey, his name is Rose-Marie; and the baby's cat, his name is Pharaoh Meneptah, but the baby calls him Coo-coo; and there's Miss Honey's rabbits, they're all named Eleanor, because you can't tell them apart, and one name does just as well; and the canary, his name is Jean and Edouard de Reszke."

The young man burst into laughter and fell off the stump abruptly.

"Those are fine names, all of them," he declared, picking himself up with great solicitude for the pipe, "but why did the canary get two?"

"Because Aunt Edith likes Jean the best, but Uncle Joe says there's more to Edouard," she explained, "so they named him both, because Uncle Joe said anything was better than a divided family."

"That's right," said the young man, "anything is."

His face, which had looked for a moment merry and boyish, darkened again, and his big eyes glowered intently at the shadowy hemlocks.

"Anything," he added, in a low voice, "but a sacrifice of principle, a sacrifice of truth, as it actually is, to the petty conventions of a rotten society!"

With that he sat his teeth hard and pulling a leather pouch out of his pocket, began stuffing the pipe decisively. Caroline waited for him to continue, but as he lit the pipe and puffed at it in silence, she concluded that the interview was at an end, and started up the path.

"You'd better not--" he began, but stopped suddenly and appeared to reconsider. "Oh, I don't know," he added, "it might be better, after all. Go along."

The trail was little more than a worn line in the grass, now; soon it turned sharply to the left, skirted the wood, and led to a tiny, dilapidated cottage. Caroline had more than once passed it by under the impression that it was abandoned, or used perhaps for storing ice or wood; but to-day a thin curl of smoke stained the blue above it and through the open door of the one living-room that formed its ground-floor she saw a scarlet Navajo blanket, on which reposed a magnificent snowy Angora cat. A great green bough covered one of the walls, and a few chairs, a square pine table and a guitar flung against a pile of bright cushions, completed the furniture. At the further end of the room, stretched upon the mate to the Angora's blanket, lay a young woman, sobbing violently.

Caroline hesitated, but Henry D. Thoreau recognized grief, and knew perfectly well what to do. Stepping quietly over to the prostrate figure he encircled it once, looking for a point of vantage, then selecting two little white, pink-tipped fingers, he licked them caressingly.

The sobbing ceased: the girl drew a longer shaking breath.

"Is that you, Mimi?" she said huskily, "I didn't know you cared as much as--oh, what is that?"

Her hand had fallen on the little bull-dog's smooth, stiff coat and she started up in surprise. Caroline smiled shyly into her big, stained gray eyes.

"It's all right--Henry D. never bites--do you feel bad?" she asked.

The girl pushed back a handful of crinkly, chestnut hair from her damp face and rose, shaking out her skirts.

"Y--yes," she said, frankly, "yes, I do. Do you know why?"

"No. Why?" Caroline inquired.

"Because I can't make huckleberry bread," the girl assured her solemnly. "I--I've been trying all the morning. Look in there."

Caroline peered into the little lean-to, filled to over-flowing with a stove, some tin cooking pans, a table full of soiled dishes and a case of kitchen sundries, half unpacked.

"You did get it all over, didn't you?" she observed cheerfully, noting the prints of doughy fingers on oven and chairs and the burned, odorous wreck, resting in soggy isolation in the middle of the floor. "You cooked it a little too much,

maybe."

"Maybe," the girl assented listlessly. "I was going to have it for luncheon. The woman promised to be here by ten o'clock, and I got the breakfast well enough--after a fashion--but she hasn't come, and I'm s-so hungry!"

Her eyes filled again. "It's simply filthy here," she murmured. "Do you know anybody we could depend on--oh, how stupid of me, of course you don't."

"There's Luella," Caroline suggested, "she's right near here, and she makes lovely huckleberry bread. Shall I go get her? Old Gr'--the gentleman that she keeps house for takes his nap now, and I know she could come."

The look of relief on the girl's face was enough, and Caroline hurried out, leaving Henry D. Thoreau, who seemed to feel responsible for his hostess's peace of mind, snuggled in her lap.

She burst into Luella's placid afternoon kitchen, big with her news, bustling about excitedly, while Luella methodically packed a market-basket with half a cold chicken, an untouched loaf of huckleberry bread, a pan of tiny biscuits and a glass of currant jelly.

"Butter I know they've got, and milk, for I see Wilkins stop up there this mornin' as I come down, and I wondered who on earth had taken that God-forsaken little cottage. 'Twasn't occupied last season. Cryin' right out loud, was she? She must 'a been all tired out to make such a fuss over a tin o' huckleberry bread. I s'pose she hasn't got many breakfasts in her life. Ten to one 'twas Myra Tenny that disappointed her: it sounds like her. Always undertakin' more 'n any one woman c'd possibly attend to, and then goin' back on you. Pretty cross himself, was he? Well, they'd had words, most likely. They take it hard at first. They ain't long married, of course, if they're young as you say. Poor things. There, I guess that's about all."

Luella closed the kitchen door softly and they hurried along the trail.

"He's off as sound as a baby," she confided to Caroline, "sometimes he'll sleep two hours, he's up so much in the night."

As the relief expedition neared the cottage, Henry D. Thoreau bounded out to greet them, the girl behind him, still flushed and swollen-eyed, but with her thick, reddish hair newly braided in a crown around her head.

"Good afternoon," Luella called cheerily, "I hear you're in trouble up here! You ought to let me known--I'm the one for jobs like this. Just let me into the kitchen, Miss—" She paused, but as the girl made no attempt to help her, continued easily, "well, I should say so! Got a little burnt, didn't it? Never mind, you ought to a' seen my first corn-meal muffins! Now you just step out and rest a minute, dear, and by the time you've called your husband I'll have a little lunch scratched up and you'll feel so different you won't know yourself. It's surprisin' how distressed you c'n get on an empty stomach. 'Tis your husband, isn't it, or is it your brother?"

"No, it's not--yes. It--it's not my brother," the girl said in a low voice.

"No," Luella repeated soothingly, "no, I see. That's a fine cat, ain't it? I've read of 'em--Angora, ain't it?--but I never saw one. They say they're mostly deaf. Is that one?"

"Yes. No--I don't know. I don't believe she is," the girl murmured, brokenly. She seemed newly distressed; her lips, very red against her white cheeks, quivered, her full breast strained against her white linen blouse.

Luella strode lightly about the disorderly little kitchen; she had forgotten the very presence of the girl, it seemed, for as she gathered the soiled dishes, coaxed the fire, filled the kettle and hastily removed the traces of the ill-fated huckleberry bread, she hummed a tune and appeared to see only her work.

Caroline was on her knees before the Angora and knew nothing of the flight of time, though it was really hardly more than a quarter of an hour before the kitchen rivalled Luella's in neatness and the pine table in the living-room, covered with a fresh cloth, and shiny plated silver, only waited its host.

"Now if you'll step out and call your husband, Miss--I didn't just get the name?" said Luella invitingly.

The girl rose from the chair where she had been sitting, motionless, except for her eyes, which had followed every movement of the older woman. She stood very straight and threw her head back with a gesture almost defiant.

"My name is Dorothy Hartley," she declared, and ran abruptly out of the cottage.

"Well, well," Luella shook her head whimsically, "she's pretty well wrought up, isn't she? Sweet little thing, too--real loveable, I sh'd say. It don't seem possible he'd be mean to her. But o' course he wants his breakfast fit to eat, just the

same. I put a place for you, Car'line, 'cause I know you c'n eat, no matter what time 'tis--you're 's empty's a bag. There he comes--my, but he's haughty! He looks like somebody in one o' those novels, don't he, now?"

They came slowly up the path, hand in hand, like children, her gray eyes on the ground, his black ones challenging the world. The clear mountain air carried his words easily to the two in the door:

"Now, dearest, be brave! Remember, we are right, and we know we are right."

She clutched his hand nervously, but made no reply.

"Come right in," Luella urged them hospitably, "you must be 'most starved."

"Oh, no," he assured her, with a loyal glance at the girl, "I--I had a good breakfast, didn't I, dear?"

But his eyes brightened at sight of the half chicken and the omelet, glowing in a parsley wreath, and he had broken one of the puffy rolls and plunged into a great cup of coffee before he addressed Caroline.

"You seem to be a valuable person to know," he observed, "you and Matthew Arnold or John Greenleaf Whittier or what-ever-his-name-is."

Caroline looked embarrassed and helped herself to jelly.

"You have helped my--we are very much obliged to you, I am sure," he turned to address Luella, who was passing from stove to table, "aren't we, dearest?"

The girl sat with her hands in her lap, staring at her plate.

"Yes, of course," she agreed, "certainly."

"If you could come every day--they told me I could find some one to do that--it would be a great accommodation," he went on, with a worried look at the sad face opposite him, "and anything it might be worth, I am sure, Mrs.—"

"Judd, Luella Judd," she supplied, briskly. "Now, dear, try to eat a little, do! That omelet'll do you good. And that's a lovely piece o' breast I cut you off. It was all right my bringin' it, for the old gentleman never touches cold meat and the jelly's my own. There, that's right. I thought you'd like it, once you began. There's no need to tempt Car'line and your husband, is there? But that's all right: young folks ought to eat--I never grudged mine a crumb, and the Lord knows they eat me out of house and home."

The young man, indeed, ate voraciously, and under Luella's kindly domineering the hostess herself cleared her plate. The hot coffee brought the color to her cheeks, and she had even smiled at Henry D. Thoreau. Caroline had never seen anyone prettier. She had a great dimple in either cheek, and her gray eyes smiled with the sweetest confidence into the black eyes opposite: any one could see that they loved each other very much, even if they had "had words."

"Just a little more o' the huckleberry bread, dear?" Luella urged her. "I've been sort o' plannin' out how I c'd manage to get here every day, and I guess I can, if you'll be content to wait a little for your breakfast. My old gentleman don't have anything but a cup o' coffee in the morning, an' I c'd be over here by ha' past eight, easy enough, Mr. Hartley, if that suited you--"

"Wortley, my name is Wortley," the young man interrupted, hastily.

Luella looked puzzled.

"Wortley?" she repeated, "why, that's--well, never mind, it's none o' my business. I cert'nly thought she said Hartley, though. Well, if you'n Mrs. Wortley *can* wait till ha' past eight--"

"Frank, dear," the girl broke in appealingly, but the young man shook his head.

"No, darling," he said firmly, and then looking straight at Luella, he went on: "This lady's name is Hartley. We are not--we are not related."

Luella stared blankly at him a moment, then turned to the girl. But she, though she got up from her seat and going over to the young man seized his hand and pressed it between her own, did not lift her eyes to the woman's troubled and accusing gaze.

Luella drew a long breath, took off her checked apron and rolled it mechanically into a bundle. Her face had hardened; only the shrewdness was left in her eyes.

"You might 'a told me so before," she said briefly, and turned on her heel.

The girl was crying on his shoulder. "Tell her, Frank, please tell her why," she begged, through her sobs.

Luella faced her sternly. "He needn't trouble to tell me why," she said, "I know more'n you think, maybe. I know who your father is, Mr. Wortley, an' I guess I understand pretty well by now what his troubles are. If he forbade you marryin' each other, he had his reasons, I don't doubt, for he's a good man, if he is quick-tempered, an'--"

"He *didn't* forbid our marrying," the young man broke in sharply, glaring with ill-suppressed irritation at Luella, while he softly patted the girl's shoulder. "He begged us on his bended knees to marry, though I don't know how you know him."

Luella paused with her hand on the door.

"What!" she exclaimed sharply. "Then it was your folks?" She looked at the girl.

"No, it wasn't!" Dorothy lifted her head. "They b-begged us on *their* b-bended knees, too," she sobbed and disappeared again.

"For the Lord's sake!" Luella muttered. Then turning fiercely on him she took a step forward.

"Do you mean to tell me you're scoundrel enough--" she began, but the young man--he was really only a boy--shook his head angrily.

"Not at all, not at all," he burst out with a curious likeness to his father, "I'm no more a scoundrel than you are, Mrs. Judd, and you'll oblige me by acting accordingly."

It was so evident that he meant what he said, he appeared so righteously indignant, that Luella paused, dumbfounded, twisting the apron in her hands.

"Wh-why ain't you married, then?" she demanded.

The young man surveyed her calmly. "Because I--we disapprove of marriage," he said.

Luella turned a brick-red; her mouth opened vaguely. Though she spoke not a word, he answered her amazed face.

"The conditions of marriage at the present day," he stated loftily, "are not such as to lead me--to lead us to suppose that as an institution it has accomplished its purpose. Where it is not merely legalized--"

"Oh, Frank!" the girl moaned softly, putting her little hand over his opened lips. He kissed it gently, but removed it.

"To say nothing of the absolute misery you can see all about you as a result of a chain that ought long ago to have been broken, or better still, never--"

"And before that child, too!" Luella burst out. "Caroline, you get right up and come home. I never heard anything like it in my life. Come this minute, now!"

Caroline rose unwillingly; she thought Luella unnecessarily severe.

"As to that," young Mr. Wortley announced composedly, "we differ again. The sooner these matters are discussed frankly before children, the sooner we shall have fewer unhappy men and women. There is nothing whatever in my intentions or Miss--or Dorothy's, to shock or affront the youngest child. I have no children myself, but--"

"Humph!" Luella sniffed furiously, "I sh'd hope not!"

"--but *if* I had," he pursued evenly, "I should teach them precisely--"

"Look here," Luella interrupted roughly, "look me in the face, both of you!"

They turned their eyes full on her, the boy's dilated to fanaticism, glowing with obstinacy; the girl's, wet and pleading, miserable, but full of love. Luella, with narrowed lids, bored into those clear young eyes: no shadow of deceit, no hint of shuffling or double-dealing could withstand that relentless scrutiny.

Slowly her face softened, her eyebrows relaxed, her hold on the twisted apron loosened.

"I guess we better talk this over," she said decisively, closing the door and seating herself squarely in the chair nearest it. "How old did you say you was, Mr. Wortley?"

The forensic expression faded helplessly from the boy's face. He clutched at it, but it failed him, and with the air of a pupil addressing his teacher, he replied: "I didn't say, but I'm twenty-one."

Luella nodded. "An' you can't be a day over nineteen, can you?" she demanded of the girl. The braided chestnut head shook sadly.

"I thought not. I s'pose you've found out that your views ain't shared by most o' the world," she proceeded, with a fine air of impartiality.

"I--we have been very much misunderstood," said the boy stiffly, "but I have never been in the habit of allowing other people's ideas to affect my actions."

"You been spoiled, you mean," Luella interpolated, "I thought so. Spoiled to death, prob'ly."

He bit his lip. "But I hope I--we are prepared for anything--*anything*," he repeated with emphasis, "that may result from the course we have taken. I expect the results will be unpleasant--I expect it fully."

"I guess your expectations 'll be fulfilled right enough," she responded promptly. "And as for bein' prepared--you remind me o' my father, Mr. Wortley. He used to say he'd been prepared for death since the age o' seven years, but he did hope the Lord wouldn't take advantage of it. Is--is she prepared, too?"

He looked lovingly at the girl who crouched on the floor beside him. "Dorothy and I think precisely the same in everything," he said proudly, "don't we, my dearest one?"

Luella's lips twitched; she looked at the flushed arrogant young face with irrepressible admiration.

"I reely b'lieve you think so!" she declared, and as his hand clinched and his eyes flashed dangerously, she raised her hand with a warning gesture.

"There, there now, I get enough o' that from your father!" she admonished him, adding quickly, "Does he know you're here?"

"I don't know," he answered irritably, "I never supposed *he'd* be here. I came up here because I'd made all my plans to--and I never let my plans be interfered with, if I can possibly avoid it. I told the man to get it ready for me, but just before we started he telegraphed that it was engaged for the season. But I came all the same, because I knew this little one would be empty. Father bought it up to protect himself. Does he know I'm here?"

Luella looked thoughtful. "I reely don't know," she said slowly.

"It'll come pretty hard on her, doin' her own work, won't it?" she went on, watching him curiously. Then, as he started angrily, "Oh, there ain't nobody here will come, by the day, or any other way--I sh'd s'pose you'd known that. And as for any o' the cottage people--heavens an' earth, Car'line, will you get up an' go home? I don't know what's come over me to forget that child--she sits so still--"

But as Caroline got sulkily from her seat, cowed by Luella's stern face, Dorothy put out her hand and caught the child's dress.

"Oh! Oh!" she cried hysterically, "don't send her away--don't, Frank! L-let me have somebody!"

"There, you see!" said Luella sadly, "you see how 'tis, Mr. Wortley. Do you mean to say you have the heart--"

"Dorothy, I don't understand you at all," said the young man, with evident self restraint.

"You probably do not realize the very trying position you put me in. I hope it is not necessary to explain to you, Mrs. Judd, that if Miss Hartley *wishes* to marry me, she has but to say the word, and it shall be done instantly--instantly!" he repeated with emphasis, "as if," Luella said later, "he'd had a minister in his side pocket."

"There, my dear, hear that!" she cried triumphantly, "now just tell him what you want--"

"You horrid woman, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" the girl broke in furiously. "How dare you intimate--as if I didn't know that Frank would do anything in the world I asked him to!"

"Oh, no, dearest," he broke in satirically, "that's a poor basis for action in this beautiful world of ours! Catch your man and tie him tight before he has time to change his mind. Then he'll be obliged to stay by you--you've got him hand and foot! That is love!"

"It's just as well, sometimes, though," Luella inserted placidly.

"Do you suppose I would ever," the girl stormed, "unless I--oh, dear, will somebody understand? Don't you know that my--that Frank has studied this question very deeply, that it's a matter of principle with us? If you had read all the

dreadful things--"

"I am afraid, darling," he interrupted, with cold dignity, "that if your people and mine cannot understand the position I take, if we are actually obliged to take the matter into our own hands, and--and run away, in fact, in order to prove our sincerity, you can hardly expect people of a different--of less--with fewer--"

"I know what you mean, Mr. Wortley," Luella said gravely. She rose to her feet, beckoning to Caroline, whose waist the girl still clasped.

"I haven't got your education," she went on, with a simple humility that became her very touchingly, "we're poor people up here, us 'natives,' and we don't get much time for books, or when we do, we're too tired to read 'em much. I don't doubt you've been to college, yourself, and you've prob'ly learnt a lot about the mistakes that's been made in the world--a lot that I wouldn't understand. But I want to tell you one thing. I'm old enough to 'a been your mother, Mr. Wortley, my oldest boy'd 'a been twenty if he'd lived--and I've buried two besides him. You'll know I've seen trouble when I tell you that I've always thought we'd saved him and Annie if we could 'a had another doctor that'd had more experience with typhoid, and that's an awful thing to feel."

She paused a moment with somber eyes.

"I've worked hard since I was ten years old, and for the last five years there's been nothin' but me between the children and the poor house. You don't know much about that kind o' worry, Mr. Wortley, an' 'taint likely you ever will. I was married when I was nineteen--" Her eyes fell on the girl and softened lovingly, "'an what that means in the country with seven children an' no help, an' the winters what they are here, maybe you can guess a little. But I tell you this: I ain't had the sorrow, all told, that's preparin' for that girl, if you keep on like this. An' I wouldn't change my lot for hers, nor would she, if she knew."

There was a dead silence in the room. Only the short, grunting breaths of the sleeping dog stirred the air. The girl sat as if turned to stone, her arm hard about Caroline; the boy stared doubtfully at the woman, studying her plain, wrinkled face.

"I--I have plenty of money," he said, in a hollow thin little voice, "she will always--"

"Money!" Luella's voice shook with scorn, "what's money? The Lord knows, Mr. Wortley, I need money more'n you ever will, but let me tell you there's things money can't buy. Can you buy children--nice children like this one--to play with your children? Tell me that!"

"I shall never have any children," the girl's voice came in a husky, strained whisper, "I shall be too--too miserable," she concluded softly, and utterly to herself; she had absolutely forgotten the others, even the boy, whose eyes turned incessantly from her face to the older woman's.

Luella's shrewd glance enveloped the strong young figure. "I never heard 't misery prevented 'em," she said dryly.

The boy seemed unable to move, so intense was the concentration of his thoughts; his fingers stuck out stiffly in a purposeless, set gesture.

"If it is true, all that we thought," he said slowly, "then no hardship, no merely personal suffering should prevent ... the experiment must be made ... must inevitably, *sometime*...."

"But not with her, not *her*, Mr. Wortley!" Luella cried. Her expression turned quickly whimsical.

"You remind me o' me an' my mother one time, when I was a girl," she cried. "I wanted to prove that you c'd raise biscuits without the bakin' powder--I was terrible headstrong; I know what 'tis well 'nough, an' how hard 'tis to give 'way--an' she was tryin' to persuade me.

"'I think 't least you might let me make th' experiment,' I says, an' she turned to me--I c'n see her now an',

"'Luella,' says she, 'it's all very well for you to make th' experiment, but I'm the one that'll have to pay the bill!' she says.

"It'll be like that with you, Mr. Wortley--you'll make th' experiment, but *she'll* pay!"

There was another silence.

"We always pay," Luella added thoughtfully, "it don't seem just fair, but we do."

The young man shook himself suddenly, like a dog fresh from the water.

"I didn't mean to--God knows I wouldn't hurt a hair of her head," he said, in a low voice. His hands relaxed, his

shoulders drooped. "It seemed the best thing only this morning--is that what you meant this morning, Dorothy, when we--when we--when I went away?" he asked gently.

She held out her hand to him, still clasping Caroline, and he knelt beside her, one arm around her neck.

"I--I don't want you ever--to do--what you--think--is--is wrong," she said brokenly, but with a brave effort at steadiness. "I'll--I'll never--leave you--Frank."

She gazed adoringly into his eyes, her hand tight in his. Luella's mouth twitched and she choked as she spoke.

"Oh, Mr. Wortley," she urged, "it isn't that I don't see what you mean--partly. You think I don't, but I do. There's awful mistakes made in marryin', we all see 'em; even 'way back here in the country dreadful things happen, an' the papers--we c'n read 'em, that's enough an' more'n enough. There's things that ought to be changed, I know, but not the way you want to change 'em--oh, not that way! It can't help any, not marryin', don't you see--folks must just take pains and marry more careful, 'cause we've begun this way and now we can't stop without somebody gettin' hurt--and that won't be you, nor any other man. Marryin's all we've got to tie to, Mr. Wortley, us women, an' we can't quit now!"

The boy looked thoughtfully at her: "I--I think perhaps you are right," he said slowly. He appeared unaccountably older; small, worried lines were cutting themselves deep around his eyes and mouth.

He threw back his head in an attempt to regain the old, masterful manner.

"I hope I am too sincere not to state honorably that I--I feel sure you are right!" he announced, "that is, in this particular instance. I have no desire to establish any point at the expense--at the expense...."

He frowned into space; his lips tightened obstinately.

"But it will *have* to be at somebody's expense!" he cried irritably. "Shall we *always* go on like this, putting off, putting off, letting this shameful, unsatisfactory state of things continue, just because it would be *our* wives that would suffer...."

"I guess that's about it," Luella answered, seriously.

"Then all I have to say is, we're damned cowards, all of us!" he cried, with the old flash of rage.

But it was the last time. Beaten, yet triumphant, he stooped for his harness and himself assumed it, with set teeth.

"I--I shouldn't have said that," he said, gravely. "It's--it's a very difficult thing ... a man has so many responsibilities...."

They waited patiently.

"It seems one must compromise--something--anyway," he went on, thinking his way painfully along. "I don't know why it seems so difficult to me now; ... they talked enough, all the others, and of course I shall never speak to your Aunt Ethel again--you may use your own judgment, Dorothy--because there are some insults...."

He shook himself again and drew the girl to her feet.

"Dearest," he said, and there was a sad little ring in his voice, but a strangely kind one, "I--we have been mistaken. It wouldn't do. I think--" he looked anxiously at Luella--"the sooner we get some one--to--to--a clergyman, you know, or a--a legal person of some kind--"

"I'll get Mr. Andrews right away," Luella assured him briskly. "He's Cong'ational, and he's a real pleasant young man--new here. Car'line, you run right down cross-lots to that first white house an' there he'll be, callin' this minute on the Wilkinses, 'cause she told me he would. You say Luella Judd wants him right away, an' he'll come."

"Yes, Luella, I will," said Caroline but her eyes were fastened on the girl.

She was in the boy's arms, her head on his shoulder; she clung to him tightly, shivering a little, hiding her face.

"You don't mind, darling?" he begged her earnestly, "you believe I am doing it for the best? You won't blame me for changing, after all I've said?"

She lifted her head and through her loving gray eyes looked out at him the woman she would be in ten years. A little tender smile curved her lips; she patted his shoulder as a mother caresses her headstrong, dearest son.

"Whatever you think is best, Frank dear," she said, "let's do that."

"I only hope to heaven she don't understand!" Luella muttered nervously, glancing unguardedly at Caroline.

Caroline stamped her foot angrily. Her sensitive little body had thrilled in the girl's arm; she had felt all the pathos and dignity of Luella's appeal, the young man seemed to her mysterious and noble. And now she was distrusted, grudged her free part in this exciting afternoon! She scowled at Luella.

"You must think I'm a baby, Luella Judd!" she cried irritably. "I understand all about it, just as well as you do! Didn't we have just the same thing in the family, ourselves?"

Luella gasped.

"For heaven's sakes, Car'line, wha' do you mean?" she demanded; "it's perfectly awful the things you city children know! I do declare, I don't think it's right!"

"Pooh!" said Caroline grandly. "I should hope I knew more'n that! Why, my Uncle Joe's own sister, her man that she was engaged to, he didn't believe in church weddings, either, and he told my mother if he had to stand up in gray trousers with those six girls in pink hats and the bishop all togged out and the whole town glaring at 'em he'd run away with Cousin Elizabeth, and he didn't know whether he'd marry her at all! And they cried and they begged 'em, and I was to be a flower girl and wear my white silk stockings, but still they wouldn't. And Cousin Elizabeth cried, too, and she said she'd never feel married in a travelling dress, but Cousin Richard said he guessed she would. And everybody was terribly angry with them, but they just had it in her aunt's house that was paralyzed and couldn't ever go out, and it was right next door to Cousin Richard's father's house, too, just like this! Not one bridesmaid and nobody had any cake in a box to take away. It was awful, just like Luella says, but afterwards we all forgave 'em. They ran off and did it in the afternoon--there was only her father and that paralyzed aunt."

She drew a long breath and smiled importantly at them.

Dorothy put an arm over her fat little shoulders.

"You must be my bridesmaid and my flower girl, too," she said softly.

"You'll go get your father, o' course, Mr. Wortley?" Luella appeared unconscious of the possibility of any refusal, and though he started, scowled, and shook his head, her warning glance in Caroline's direction checked him, and he plunged out of the door.

"And may God bless you both," the Reverend Mr. Andrews concluded unofficially, noting with a certain curiosity, the impeccable riding breeches of the groom, and the bride's looped-up linen habit--he had never married a couple attired in precisely that manner, and he scented romance.

"Your generosity, Mr. Wortley, to say nothing of your father--" He paused helplessly. "Mrs. Judd knows what this will mean to us this winter," he finished. "No, I thank you, Mr. Wortley, I thank you sir, but I never touch liquor in any form. But I drink their health in this excellent iced coffee, I do indeed."

Caroline slipped around to Luella, who sat mopping her eyes behind the kitchen door.

"I wish Mr. Wortley--Mr. Grumpy Wortley--wouldn't kiss me any more, Luella," she complained, "it prickles my face dreadfully. I don't see why I can't go with 'em as far as the Mountain Road--I'd love to ride on his horse. I was bridesmaid--why can't I? Do you think my mother'll let me keep this pin? What did you cry for, Luella? What was it he said to you? He's going to drive me down to the village to write some telegrams to New York with him, after they've started. And then he'll speak to mother about the pin, but we have to get the telegrams written first. Why do they always put it into the papers the first thing, Luella? When you were married, were there telegrams about it in the papers, up here?"

Luella tied on her checked apron and attacked the soiled dishes heaped on the kitchen table; her cheeks were deeply flushed and her hands trembled a little. She smiled affectionately at Caroline.

"I'll drive down with you, I guess, an' stop off at your ma's," she answered.

"No, it wasn't telegraphed 'round much when I was married, but then," with a humorous twinkling of her deep-set eyes, "I hadn't never studied into the marryin' question so thorough as some!"

VI

HIS FATHER'S HOUSE

CAROLINE stopped abruptly at the edge of the little pine-encircled glade that edged the pond-lily pond and waved her hand in warning.

"Hist! there are human creatures there!" she whispered loudly.

It would be evident to anyone not absolutely stone blind that she was a fairy. A lace-edged, snowy nightgown was caught up by a sky blue ribbon about her hips, trailing gloriously behind her over the grass; two large wings artfully constructed of wrapping-paper flopped behind her surprisingly bare shoulders--the nightgown was decidedly *decollete*, and had been made for a person several sizes larger than Caroline.

"Hooma keecha da!" crooned the General. His conversation was evidently based on the theory that the English language is a dark mystery, insoluble by system, but likely to be blundered into fortuitously, at any moment, if the searcher gabble with sufficient steadiness and persistence. His costume, consisting merely of the ordinary blue denim overalls of commerce, would have been positively commonplace were it not for the wings of bright pink tissue paper, which he wore with a somewhat confusing obstinacy, pinned firmly to his chest. Miss Honey assisted his wavering footsteps rather sulkily; she longed for the white and lacy draperies in front of her and regarded her ballet skirts of stitched newspaper with bare tolerance. It is true she wore a crown of tinfoil and carried a wand made of half a brass curtain rod; but her laced tan boots, stubbed and stained, showed with disgusting plainness, and nobody would take the trouble to make her a newspaper bodice.

"If you don't stop tickling me with that arrow, Brother Washburn, I'll go back!" she declared, snappishly.

The fourth member of the crew, whose bathing trunks and jersey, fitted with surprisingly life-like muslin wings, pointed to Puck, though the quiver slung across his shoulder woke conflicting memories of Diana, chuckled guiltily and took a flying leap from the big boulder into the center of the glade. His wings stiffened realistically, and as he landed, poised on one classically sandalled foot with arms outspread, the picnic party before him started violently, and one of them clutched the other's sleeve with a little cry.

"What the--oh, it's all right! He's the real thing, isn't he, now?"

The young man patted the girl's shoulder reassuringly and chuckled as the rest of the crew emerged from the pines and peered over the boulder.

"They're only children," he said.

She dropped her eyes and tightened her fingers around the shining drinking cup.

"Why, yes, they're only children," she repeated carelessly.

Now, each of these picnic people had said the same words, but it was entirely obvious to their fascinated audience that the words meant very different things. For this reason they sidled around the young lady impersonally, avoiding with care the edges of her pale-tinted billowy skirts, and lined up confidently beside the young gentleman.

Not that he controlled the picnic. It was spread out in front of her, bewitching, intimate, in its suggestion of you--and--I; two shiny plates, two knives, two forks, two fringed and glossy napkins. A dark red bottle was propped upright between two stones, a pile of thin, triangular sandwiches balanced daintily on some cool lettuce leaves, and a fascinating object that glistened mysteriously in the sun, held the platter of honor in the middle.

"The Honorable Mr. Puck," suggested the young man, in the tone of one continuing an interrupted conversation, "is figuring out how the chicken got into the jelly without busting it--am I not right?"

Brother grinned, and Caroline moved a little nearer. Miss Honey stared at the young lady's fluted skirts and glistening yellow waves of hair, at the sweeping plume in her hat, and her tiny high-heeled buckled slippers.

"I am obliged to admit," the young man went on, slicing into the quivering aspic, "that I don't know myself. I never could find out. Perhaps the young person in the--the not-too-long skirts, waved her wand over the bird and he jumped in and the hole closed up?" He slipped a section of the bird in question upon the lady's plate and held the red bottle over her cup.

"There was hard-boiled eggs stuck on those jelly things at our wedding," Brother remarked, "on the outside, all around. But they were bigger than yours."

"I don't doubt it for a moment," the young man assured him politely. "Have you been married long, may I ask? And which of these ladies--"

"Brother doesn't mean that *he* was married," Miss Honey explained, "it was his oldest sister. She married a lawyer. I was flower girl."

"Ima fow guh," murmured the General, thrusting out a fat and unexpected hand and snatching from a hitherto unperceived box a tiny cake encased in green frosting.

"Oh, dear, it's got the pistache!" said the yellow-haired lady disgustedly.

Miss Honey fled after the General, who, though he was obliged to wear whalebone braces in his shoes on account of youth and a waddling and undeveloped gait, scattered over the ground with the elusive clumsiness of a young duckling. Brother blushed, but scorned to desert his troop.

"He's awfully little, you know--he doesn't mean to steal," he explained.

"Twenty-two months," Caroline added, "and he does go so fast." She smiled doubtfully at the lady, who selected a cake covered with chocolate and looked at the young man.

"Don't forget that Mr. Walbridge wants to use the car at six," she said, "and you have to allow for that bad hill."

He looked a little uncomfortable. "Don't you want to speak to the children, Tina, dear?" he asked, dropping his voice; he sat very close to her.

"They have both spoken directly to you, you see, and children feel that so--not being noticed. They're trying to apologize to you for the cake."

She bit her lip and turned to Miss Honey, who arrived panting, with the General firmly secured by the band of his overalls. An oozy green paste dripped from his hand; one of the pink wings intermittently concealed his injured expression.

"That's all right," she said, "don't bother about the cake, little girl, the baby can have it."

Miss Honey sniffed.

"I guess you don't know much about babies if you think they can eat cake like that," she answered informingly.

"Hush, now, General, don't begin to hold your breath? Do you want a nice graham cracker! It's *so* nice!"

"*So* nice!" Caroline repeated mechanically, with a business-like smile at the General, helpfully champing her teeth.

The General wavered. He allowed one sticky paw to be cleaned with a handful of grass, but his expression was most undecided, and he was evidently in a position to hold his breath immediately if necessary.

Miss Honey nodded to Caroline. "You've got 'em, haven't you?" she asked.

Caroline fumbled at the interior of the nightgown and produced a somewhat defaced brown wafer.

"General want it?" she said invitingly. There was another moment of disheartening suspense. Brother assisted gallantly.

"They're fine, General!" he urged, "try one!" And he, too, nodded and chewed the empty air. Instinctively the strange young gentleman did the same.

The General looked around at them cautiously, noted the strained interest of the circle, smiled forgivingly, and reached out for the brown wafer. Peace was assured.

"If you could only see how ridiculous you looked," the young lady remarked, wiping her shining pink finger nails carefully, "you'd never do that again, Rob. Have a cake?"

He laughed, but blushed a little at her tone.

"I suppose so," he admitted. "No, thanks, I'll pass up the cake. Isn't there enough to go 'round, perhaps?"

He examined the box.

"By George, there are exactly three left!" he said delightedly. "Will the fairy queen hand one to her brother--the big brother--and one to--to the angel?"

Caroline moved firmly to the front. "I am the Queen," she explained, "but I let Miss Honey take the crown and the wand, or she wouldn't be anything. Brother isn't her brother--that's just his name. Brother Washburn. The General's her brother. I'll take that strawberry one. We're much obliged, thank you."

The cakes vanished unostentatiously and the young gentleman filled his cup and disposed of it before anyone spoke.

"We were such a big family, you see," he explained to the pursed red mouth beside him, "and I know just how it is. You never get enough cake, and never that dressy kind. It's molasses cake and cookies, mostly."

Brother moved nearer and nodded.

"Well, but you can have all the cake you want, now, thank goodness," said the lady, glancing contentedly at the tea basket, complete with its polished fittings, at the big box of bonbons beside her, and the handsome silk motor coat that was spread as a carpet under her light dress.

"Oh, yes, but now I don't want it," he assured her, "I want--other things." He flashed a daring glance from two masterful brown eyes, and she smiled indulgently at him for a handsome, spoiled boy.

"Am I going to get them?" he persisted.

She laughed the light little laugh of the triumphant woman.

"My dear Bob," she said, "anybody who can buy all the cake he wants can usually get the--other things!"

His face clouded slightly.

"I hate to hear you talk like that, Christine," he began, "it's not fair to yourself--"

"How'd you know I was Puck?" Brother inquired genially. He made no pretense of including the lady in the conversation; for him she was simply not there.

"Oh, I'm not so ignorant as I look," the young man replied. "I don't believe you could stump me on anything you'd be likely to be--I've probably been 'em all myself. We were always rigging up at home. Didn't you use to do that, Tina?"

The lady shook her head decidedly.

"If I'd ever got hold of a--well, if I'd had a chance of things as nice as that biggest one's dragging through the dirt there, I'd have been doing something very different with it, I can assure you, Mr. Armstrong! I'd have been saving it."

"But at that age--" he protested.

"Oh, I knew real lace from imitation at that age, all right," she insisted.

"But you don't think of those things--you go in for the fun," he urged.

"It wasn't exactly my idea of fun."

"No?" he queried, "why, I thought all children did this sort of thing. We had a regular property room in the attic. We used to be rigged out as something-or-other all day Saturday, usually."

"What were you?" Brother demanded eagerly. Unconsciously he dropped, hugging his knees, by the side of the young man, and Caroline, observing the motion, came over a little shyly and stood behind them. The young lady raised her eyebrows and shot a side glance at her host, but he smiled back at her brightly.

"Well, we did quite a little in the pirate line," he replied. "I had an old Mexican sword and Ridgeway--that was my cousin--owned a pair of handcuffs."

"Handcuffs!" Brother's jaw dropped.

"Yes, sir, handcuffs. It was rather unusual, of course, and he was awfully proud of them. An uncle of his was a sheriff out in Pennsylvania somewhere, and when he died he left 'em to Ridge in his will. That was pretty grand, too, having it left in a will."

Caroline nodded and sat down on an old log behind the young man. A long smear of brown, wet bark appeared on the nightgown, and one end of the blue ribbon dribbled into a tiny pool of last night's shower, caught in a hollow stone.

"It was a toss-up who'd be pirate king," the young man went on, smiling over his shoulder at Caroline, "because I was older than he was, handcuffs or not, and after all, a sword is something. This one was hacked on the edge and every hack may have meant--probably did--a life."

He paused dramatically.

"I bet you they did!" Brother declared, clapping his hands on his knees.

"Weren't there any girls?"

Caroline slipped from the log and sprawled on the pine needles.

"Dear me, yes," said the young man, "I should say so. Four of them. Winifred and Ethel and Dorothea and the Babe--about as big as your General, there, and dreadfully greedy, the Babe was. Winifred had the brains and she made up most of the games; I tell you, that girl had a head!"

"Just like Caroline," Brother inserted eagerly.

"Probably," the young man agreed. "She was pretty certain to be Fairy Queen, too, I remember. But Thea sewed the clothes and begged the things we needed and looked after the Babe."

"And what did Ethel do?"

"Why, now you speak of it, I don't remember that Ethel did much of anything but look pretty and eat most of the luncheon," he said. "She used to be Pocahontas a good deal--she's very dark--and I usually was Captain John Smith. Ridge was Powhatan. And Ethel's married now. Good Lord! She has twins--of all things!--and they're named for Ridge and me."

"I'm glad General isn't twins," said Miss Honey thoughtfully, pulling her brother back from the fascinations of the tea basket and comforting him with the curtain-rod wand.

"Still, we could do the Princes in the Tower with him--them, I mean," Caroline reminded her, "and then, when they got bigger, the Corsican Brothers--don't you remember that play Uncle Joe told about?"

The young man laughed softly.

"If that's not Win all over!" he exclaimed. "She always planned for Ridge to be Mazeppa on one of the carriage horses, when he got the right size, but somehow, when you *do* get that size, you don't pull it off."

"I did Mazeppa," said Brother modestly, "but of course it was only a donkey. It wasn't much."

"We never had one," the young man explained. "Nothing but Ridge's goat, and she was pretty old. But she could carry a lot of lunch."

He turned suddenly on his elbow and smiled whimsically at the lady.

"Come on, Tina, what did *you* play?" he asked.

"Is it possible you have remembered that I still exist?" she answered, half mockingly, half seriously vexed. "I'm afraid I'm out of this, really. I never pretended to be anything, that I remember."

"But what *did* you do when you were a youngster?" he persisted, "you must have played something!"

She shook her head.

"We played jackstones," she said indulgently, after a moment of thought, "and then I went to school, of course, and--oh, I guess we cut out paper dolls."

Caroline looked aghast.

"Didn't you have any dog?" she demanded.

"I hope not, in a four-room flat," the lady returned with feeling. "One family kept one, though, and the nasty little thing jumped up on a lovely checked silk aunty had just given me, and ruined it. I tried to take it out with gasolene, but it made a dreadful spot, and I cried myself sick. Of course I didn't understand about rubbing the gasolene dry then; I was only eleven."

The children looked uncomfortably at the ground, conscious of a distinct lack of sympathy for the tragedy that even at this distance deepened the lovely rose of the lady's cheek and softened her dark blue eyes.

"But in the summer," the young man said, "surely it was different then! In the country--"

"Oh, mercy, we didn't get to the country very much," she interrupted. "You know July and August are bargain times in

the stores and a dressmaker can't afford to leave. Aunty did all her buying then and I went with her. Dear me," as something in his face struck her, "you needn't look so horrified! It's not bad in New York a bit--there's something going on all the while; and then we went to Rockaway and Coney Island evenings, and had grand times. To tell you the truth, I never cared for the country--I don't sleep a bit well there. Of course, to come out this way, with everything nice, it's all very fine, but to stay in--no, thanks."

"I know what you mean, of course," he said, "but the city's no place for children. I'm mighty glad I didn't grow up there. And I've always had the idea the country would be the best place to settle down in, finally. You can potter around better there when you're old, don't you think so? I remember old Uncle Robert and his chrysanthemums--"

"Dear me, we all seem to be remembering a good deal this afternoon!" she broke in. "Since we're neither of us children and neither of us ready to settle down on account of old age, suppose we stick to town, Bob?"

There was a practical brightness in her voice, and her even white teeth, as she smiled persuasively at him, were very pretty. He smiled back at her.

"That seems a fair proposition," he agreed. He reached for her hand and for a moment her soft, bright coloring, her dainty completeness, framed in the green of the little glade, were all he saw. Then, as his eyes lingered on the cool little pond and the waving pine boughs dark against the blue sky, he sighed.

"But I'm sorry you don't like the country, Tina, I am, truly," he said boyishly. "I've had such bully times in it. And I--I rather had the idea that we liked the same things."

"Gracious!" the young lady murmured, "after the arguments we've had over plays and actors!"

"Oh well, I suppose girls are all alike. But I mean other things--"

"Where did you do the Pirates?" Brother inquired, politely.

"What? Where did I--oh to be sure," he returned good-naturedly. "We had an enormous cellar, all full of pillars, to hold it up, and queer little rooms and compartments in it; a milk room and vegetable bins and a workshop. You could ride on a wheel all round, dodging the pillars. There were all kinds of places to lie in wait there, and spring out. Win told us an awful thing out of Poe that happened in a cellar, and Thea would never go there after four in the afternoon.

"It was a jolly old place," he went on dreamily, "I can't keep my mind off it this afternoon, somehow, since I've seen you fellows rigged out the way we used to. And there was a pond back in the Christmas Tree Lot like this one. Ridge and I built a raft out there and stayed all day on it. It was something out of Clark Russell's books, and Win pushed a barrel out and rescued us. She was a wonder, that girl."

He chuckled softly to himself.

"We tried to stock that pond with oysters once, and Ridge and I printed invitations for a clambake on our handpress, on the strength of them, but it was a dreadful waste of money. When we found it wasn't working, Ridge nearly killed himself diving for 'em, so we could get some good out of 'em. There they lay at the bottom, showing just as plain as possible, but it was no use--Poor fellow, he'll never dive any more."

"Is he--did he--" Caroline had crawled along till her head lay almost on the young man's knee; her eyes were big with sympathy.

"Lost his leg," he told her briefly. "Philippines. Above the knee. He ran away from college to go. He had the fever badly, too, and he'll never be fit for much again, I'm afraid. But he's just as brave about it--"

"Oh, yes," Brother burst out eagerly, "I bet you he is!"

"We had such plans," he said softly, "all of us, you know, for coming back to the old place and ending up there. Win says her kids shall stay there if she can't."

"Where is she?"

"Oh, she's 'most anywhere. Her husband's in the Navy--Asiatic Squadron--and she hangs about where he's likely to strike the country next. She was in Honolulu the last I heard. So she's not likely to do much for the place, you see."

"Where's Thea?" Miss Honey inquired.

"Wha tee?" mimicked the General, with an astounding similarity of inflection.

The young man threw his light cap at the baby's head; it landed grotesquely cocked over one eye, and the General,

promptly sitting upon it to protect himself from further attacks, fell into convulsions of laughter as the young man threatened him.

"Thea's out West, on a ranch just out of Denver. She was married first, and her boys have ponies now--broncos. Of course it's fine for them out there, but she says she won't be happy till they can get East for a year or two. She wants them to see the place and grow up a little in it. She wants 'em to see the attic and poke about the barn and the stable and climb over the rocks. You see they're on the ranch all summer and in school in Denver all winter, and Thea says they don't know the look of an old stone wall with an apple tree in the corner. She says the fruit's not nearly so nice out there."

"Where is the place? Near here?"

"No, not so very. It's in the Berkshires, just out of Great Barrington. Father's practice was there, and grandfather's, too. Grandfather built it."

"That's where Lenox is, the Berkshires, isn't it?" the lady inquired with a yawn.

"Heavens, its nothing like Lenox!" he assured her hastily.

"No?" she moved slightly and scowled.

"My foot's asleep! That comes of sitting here forever!"

She got up slowly and with little tentative gasps and cries stamped her prickled feet.

"Aunty has several customers who go to Lenox"--a vicious stamp--"it must be grand there, I think. One of them, a regular swell, too--she thinks nothing of a hundred and fifty for a dress"--a faint stamp and a squeal of anguish--"told her that property was going up like everything around there. You could probably"--a determined little jump--"sell your old place and buy a nice house right in Lenox."

The young man sat up suddenly. "Sell the place!" he repeated, "sell the place!"

He had been watching her pretty, vexed contortions with lazy pleasure, noticing through rings of cigarette smoke her dainty ankles, white through the mesh of the thin silk stockings, her straight, slim back, and the clear flush that deepened her eyes. But now his face changed, and he stared at her in frank irritation.

"Sell the place!" echoed Brother and Miss Honey in horror, and Caroline's lower lip pushed out scornfully.

The lady stamped again, but not wholly as a therapeutic measure.

"Well, really!" she cried, "any one would think that these children were your friends, and I was the stranger, from the way you all talk. What is the matter with you, anyway? What are you quarreling about, Rob?"

He looked at her thoughtfully, appraisingly.

"I don't think we're quarreling, Tina," he said, "its only that we look at things differently. And--and looking at things in the same way rather makes people friends, you know."

He glanced down at the children, close about him now, and then over appealingly at her. But she had moved to a rock a little away from them and now sat on it, her face turned toward the road, leaning on her pale pink parasol: she did not catch the glance.

"What became of the Babe?" Caroline suggested suddenly.

"Babe? She's--her name's Margaret--at school now. She's growing awfully pretty."

"And is she going to live at the place, too?" queried the young lady sharply.

"Babe's going to capture a corporation or trust or something, and have oceans of money and build on a wing and a conservatory and make Italian gardens, I believe," he answered, pleasantly enough.

"But I'd just as soon she left the gardens alone," he went on, "the rest of us like 'em the way they are. There was one separate one on the west side, just for Uncle Robert's chrysanthemums. He used to work all the morning there and then read in the afternoon. He'd sit on the side porch with his pipe and Bismarck--he was an old collie--and he did tell the bulliest yarns. He helped us with lessons, too. I don't know what we'd have done without Uncle Rob. Father was so busy--he had a big country practice and he used to get terribly tired--and we went to Uncle Rob for everything. He got us out of more scrapes, Ridge and me--

"There were tiger lillies in the south garden and lots of clumps of peonies. Grandmother put those there. And fennel and mint. Mother used to like dahlias--it seems as if she must have had a quarter of a mile of dahlias, but of course she didn't--all colors. That garden ran right up against the house, and directly next to the bricks was a row of white geraniums. They looked awfully well against the red. It's a brick house and the date is in bricks over the door--1840. Of course it's been rented for ten years now, but we have our things stored in the attic and the people are careful and--well they love the old place, you know, and they keep up the gardens. They wanted to buy when father died and again after mother--

"But Ridge and I just hung on and leased it from year to year. We always hoped to get it back. And now to think that I should be the one to do it!"

"How are you the one?" Brother inquired practically.

"Why Uncle Wesley that ran away to sea--I used to have his room, just over the kitchen, and many a time I've climbed down the side porch just as he did, and run away fishing--Uncle Wesley died in England, last year, and left me considerably more than he'd ever have made if he'd minded grandmother and studied to be a parson. It seems Uncle Rob knew where he was all the time, and wrote him, before he was sick himself, to leave the money to the family, and by George, he did.

"Lots of the old stuff is there--the sideboard and the library table and grandfather's old desk mother kept the preserves in.

"I used to lie on an old sofa in the dining-room on hot afternoons, waiting for it to get cool, reading some travel book, eating summer apples, and listening to Win and Thea practicing duets in the parlor. Lord, I can hear 'em now! I'd look out at the brick walls, hot, you know, in the sun, and the pear tree, with the nurse rocking Babe under it, and old Annie shelling peas by the kitchen door, and it all seemed so comfortable--"

His eyes were half closed. The children listened dreamily, huddled against him; low red rays crept down from the west-bound sun and struck the little pond to copper, the nickel dishes to silver, the lady's skirt to a peach-colored glory; a little sudden breeze set the red bottle tinkling between the stones. But to the group entranced with memories so vivid that reality blurred before them, the peach and copper glories were ripe fruit against an old brick wall, the tinkle echoed from an old piano in a dim, green-shuttered parlor, and the soft snoring of the General, asleep on the silk motor coat, was the drowsy breathing of a contented little fellow in knickerbockers dreaming in a window seat.

"Did you ever go to Atlantic City?"

The lady's voice woke them as a gong wakes a sleeper. "Now that's my idea of the country!"

He stared at her vaguely.

"But--but that's no place for children," he protested. He had hardly grown up at that moment, himself.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"It's not exactly necessary to have six children, you know," she said, "and then you needn't be worried over a place for them, and can afford to think a little about the place you'd like for yourself."

The sun was in her eyes and she missed the look in his as he jumped up from the astonished group and seized her wrist.

"Christine, you simply shan't talk that way!" he said. "I don't know what's the matter with you to-day--why are you so different? Are you trying to tease me? Because I might as well tell you right now that you're succeeding a little too well."

The pink parasol dropped between them. Her eyes met his squarely, though her voice shook a little.

"Let my wrist go, Mr. Armstrong," she said, "you hurt me. I assure you I'm not different at all. If you really want to know what the matter with me is, let me ask you if you saw anything out of the way before your friends there interfered?" she pointed to the little group he had left. "We seemed to be getting on very well then."

His face fell, and she went on more quickly and with less controlled tones.

"You are the one that is different! I have always been just the same--just exactly the same! Ask anybody if I've changed--ask aunty! 'Tina has the best temper of any girl I know,' aunty always says. But its just as she warned me. Aunty always knows--she's seen lots and lots of people and plenty of swells, too--it isn't as if you were the only one, Mr. Armstrong!"

He looked curiously at the flushed, lovely face; curiously, as though he had never really studied it before.

"Perhaps--perhaps it *is* I," he said slowly, "I--maybe you're right. And of course I know--" he smiled oddly at the pretty picture she made--"that I'm not the only one."

Something in his tone irritated her; she unfurled the rosy parasol angrily.

"Aunty said from the beginning you'd be hard to get on with," she flashed out. "She said the second time you came to the house with Mr. Walbridge for his sister's fitting and asked Kitty and I for a ride in the machine, 'I'm perfectly willing you girls should go, for they're both all right and I think the dark one's serious, but--"

"You discussed me with your aunt, then?"

She looked at him in amazement.

"Discussed you with aunty? Why certainly I did. Why shouldn't I? How do you suppose I'm to get anywhere, placed as I am, Mr. Armstrong, unless I'm pretty careful? I've nothing but my looks--I know that perfectly well--and I can't afford to make any mistakes. And aunty said, 'I think the dark one's serious, Tina, but I don't know, somehow, I'd keep in with Walbridge. He may not have so much money, but he'll be easier to manage. Armstrong seems like any other gay young fellow, and for all I know he is--he's certainly generous--but I'd rather have you Mrs. Walter Walbridge and lose the family custom, than have you tied up to an obstinate man."

"And--excuse me, but I'm really interested," he asked, "could you be Mrs. Walter Walbridge?"

"Yes, I could," she answered, "he asked me when he lent you the machine. I suppose he thought you might," she added simply.

He drew a long breath.

"And you answered--"

"I said I'd think it over," she said softly. "I--are you really angry with me, Rob? We're friends, aren't we? Friends--"

Her eyes lifted to his. "You see, Rob," she went on, still softly, "a girl like me has to be awfully straight and pretty careful. It's not easy to go to theaters and suppers and out with the machines and keep your head--you can't always tell about men. And I've cost aunty quite a lot, though of course, my clothes were the cheapest, really, all made in the house. I had two good offers to go on the stage, but she wouldn't have it. And even if Mr. Walbridge's mother did make a fuss, she can't help his getting the money. Of course I told him I'd think it over, but I always liked--"

"And now you've thought it over," he interrupted quickly, "and you've found out that your remarkably able aunt was right. You're a wise little girl, Tina, for if I know Walter, he *will* be easier to manage! He's a lucky fellow--always was. But he'll never get his car at six to-night."

He plucked out his watch and strapping up the tea basket began to push the things hastily into it.

She stared ahead of her, her chin shaking a little, her eyes a little dim and most beautiful.

"I--you don't--you're not angry, Rob?" She leaned over him.

"Tina, if you look like that I'll kiss you, and Walter will call me out!" he said lightly. "Of course I'm not angry--we're as chummy as you'll let me be. Come on and find the choo-choo car!"

He slipped his arm through the basket handle and made for his coat. The children scrambled off it apologetically; they were not quite certain where they stood in the present crisis. But he smiled at them reassuringly.

"We'll have to meet again," he called, already beyond them, "and have some more of those little cakes! Good-by till next time!"

"Good-by! Good-by!" they called, and Miss Honey, eyeing the pink parasol longingly, ventured, "Good-by, Miss Tina!"

The lady did not answer, but walked slowly after the young man, shaking out her billowy skirts. Soon he was behind the big boulder; soon she had followed him.

"Yady go!" the General announced.

"They had a quarrel, didn't they?" Miss Honey queried. "But they made up, so it was all right."

Caroline shook her head wisely.

"We--ell," she mused, "they made it up, but I don't believe he changed his mind, just the same."

Something puffed loudly in the road, whirred down to a steady growl, and grew fainter and fainter.

"There they go!" Brother cried.

He picked up a bit of bark and tossed it into the little pool.

"I bet you Ridge will be glad to get back to the Place," he said.

VII

THE PRETENDERS

MIDSUMMER dust lay ankle-deep in the road, white and hot. The asphalt sidewalk baked in the noon sun, the leaves hung motionless from the full trees; only the breathless nasturtiums flickered like flames along the fences, for the other flowers wilted in the glare. Caroline, hatless and happy as a lizard in the relentless heat, spun along on her bicycle, the only bit of movement on all the long stretch of the road. The householders had all retired behind their green blinds; even New England yielded to August's imperious *siesta*, and it might have been a deserted village, empty and mysterious, through which she glided.

By little and little she grew to feel this; her feet moved more and more slowly on the pedals, her brows knitted as the great idea grew. Her lips moved, inaudibly at first, but soon began the sing-song murmur so well known to those who crept upon her unawares.

"I am all alone; the rest have gone--where have they gone!--where *could* they go? Oh, they're dead. Murdered! No, the town was besieged, and we made ropes with our hair, and bowstrings.... And they all marched out, and they closed the city gates...." Slower and slower the pedals moved: Caroline was pushing uphill. "So then the Mayor said: 'No, this sacrifice is too great--I can not allow you to make it, my brave children. Death--and worse--await you beyond these walls. Let us die here together.'" Her chin quivered. At the summit of the hill she paused.

"'Then *die*! Die like the dogs you are!' cried the Captain"--with feet perched high she swooped down the slope, her heart pounding with excitement, narrowly escaping collision at the bottom with an empty van, crawling through the heat, manned by a somnolent, huddled driver. Its hollow, cumbrous rattling pointed sharply the loneliness of the silent road, almost bare now of houses, for they were on the very outskirts of the village, and in a flash Caroline knew it for what it was, and shuddered.

"It's the Tumbrel!" she murmured softly, and to her awed fancy the graceful, slim-necked figures in flowered gowns drooped dreadfully or stiffened in a last pathetic defiance as they rolled by.

"Courage, my sister, courage!" whispered the brave gentleman, while the hoarse crowd shouted.... "*And I am Marie Antoinette!*" cried Caroline in a burst of inspiration.

Dismounting, she walked proudly beside her wheel; scornfully she held her head above that vulgar, cruel mob; the driver, poor in illusions, drowsed stupidly in front of the baleful wagon-load he knew not of, and clattered down the hill. To the ill-fated Queen, who followed the curving line of the twelve-foot iron fence that had sprung up at her side, ten minutes seemed but one. Lost in tragic musing, she wandered swiftly on; had you, meeting her suddenly, asked her where she was going, there is little doubt that she would have told you she was escaping to her palace. And all at once, as she halted a moment opposite a clear space in the shrubbery and thickly planted trees that followed the inside line Of the iron fence, she beheld the palace, high on a terraced knoll. It was of clean-cut gray stone, rising into a square tower at one corner, from which the flag drooped in bright folds of red and blue. The windows shone like mirrors; trim, striped awnings broke the severe angles of the long building; brilliant flower-beds gleamed from the smooth turf and bordered the neat walks of crushed gray stone. It stood massively above its terraces, a very castle of romance to Caroline, who had never before seen it so polished and beflagged. Wonderingly she tried the great wrought-iron gate, but it was securely locked, and a new sign was attached to it:

PRIVATE PROPERTY!

ALL TRESPASSERS ARE WARNED

FROM THE PREMISES!

VISITORS PLEASE RING AT THE LODGE.

Caroline stared at it vaguely. So delicate are the oscillations of the imaginative imp, that it is hard to say just where he swings his slaves into determined self-delusion. If you had shaken Caroline severely and demanded of her in the character of an impatient adult the name of her castle, she would undoubtedly have informed you that it was Graystone Tower, a long deserted mansion, too expensive hitherto for any occupants but the children who roamed every inch of it for the first spring flowers and coasted down its terraces in winter. But no one was there to shake her, and so with parted lips and dreamy eyes she speculated as to whether they would fire the cannon on her arrival and whether she would scatter coins among her loyal servants or merely order an ox roasted whole in honor of her safe return.

Soon she reached the smaller gate, but before she tried the handle the sign warned her that it would be useless. She frowned: no one could keep up the spirit of a royal home-coming under these disadvantages. Suddenly her eyes brightened, she tossed her head, and following what was apparently a little blind alley of shrubbery, she plunged into a tangle of undergrowth and disappeared. Only her bicycle, resting against the fence, showed that some one had passed that way. Working herself through the screen of leaves, she emerged into a fairly cleared path that her accustomed feet followed to its logical climax--a deep depression scooped out under the sharp, down-pointed iron prongs, worn smooth by the frequent pressure of small bodies. The fence had lost its shiny blackness by now and the grass grew rank and untended around the mouth of the gap. Wriggling through, Caroline straightened herself and strolled unconcerned toward the castle, not so near her now. Soon she reached a newly rolled tennis court; farther on two saddled horses pawed beside a little summer-house, impatient for the start; an iridescent fountain tossed two gleaming balls high into the air. Caroline moved like one in a dream; her fancy, grown so overwhelmingly real, dazzled her, fairly. But it was like the court of the Sleeping Beauty--no one came or called.

At length, wandering on, she came upon a gardener in a neat gray livery, clipping with a large, distorted pair of scissors the velvet edge of a flower-bed. He resembled so undeniably the gardeners in that ageless chronicle of Alice that Caroline smiled approvingly upon him.

"You are one of my gardeners, I suppose," she said regally.

"Yes, Miss," he replied, respectfully, touching his banded cap, "I am that."

"You garden very well," said Marie Antoinette, dizzy with delight at his manner.

"Yes, Miss; thank you, Miss, I'm sure," and the cap came off.

She walked on superbly. At last it had happened, and she, Caroline in the flesh, had fought her way through the prickly hedge of every-day appearance and won into the garden of romance, where dreams were true and anything might happen.

At that moment there came to meet her from behind a great beech tree a slender little lady. She had gray hair puffed daintily and fancifully about her small, pale face, and knots of pale blue ribbon, woven in and out of her lacy, trailing gown, repeated the color of her mild, round eyes. Half consciously Caroline muttered: "Here is one of my ladies-in-waiting," when the little lady rushed at her, smiling delightedly.

"Are you a queen, then?" she cried in a high, sweet voice. "How very pleasant. Dear me, how *very* pleasant!"

Caroline smiled with equal delight. Very few persons of this little lady's age had such quick sense; mostly they had to be taught the game.

"Yes," she answered, "I am. I am Queen Marie Antoinette."

The little lady fell back a step. Her blue eyes clouded and she pouted like a big baby.

"Why--why, how *can* you be?" she demanded, fretfully, "when that is who I am, myself!"

For a moment Caroline scowled; such flexibility was almost disconcerting. Then her natural good-humor and the training resulting from many summers with Miss Honey, who claimed all the best roles at once and shifted often, prompted her generous reply:

"All right. I'll be Mary Queen of Scots, then--I like it about as well."

The little lady beamed again.

"That will be very pleasant," she said, "I trust your majesty is quite well?"

"Yes, indeed," Caroline assured her, adding airily; "How well the castle is looking this morning! I think I'll have the flag out every day, now that I'm back."

Marie Antoinette flushed angrily and pouted once more.

"You! *You!*" she mimicked. "What have you to do with my flag? That goes up by my orders, let me inform you! Here, gardener--" and she waved her little parasol at the man in gray, who was already walking rapidly towards them--"is that flag in my honor or not?"

"Yes, Miss," he said promptly. "Sure it is, Miss," and he nodded politely at them both. For a moment the rival queens confronted each other fiercely, then her Majesty of France smiled at Scottish Mary.

"You see," she said, in her high, bright voice; "you see, I was right. But then, I always am. I shall have to leave your Royal Highness now, for I see one of my subjects coming whom I don't care for at all--she is not very pleasant."

Sweeping a low courtesy, the little lady glided away with a graceful, dipping motion; the white hand that lifted her trailing skirts was covered with turquoises.

Caroline looked where her royal sister had pointed, and saw a tall, handsome young woman hurrying toward her. She was dressed plainly in black, but with a rich plainness that could not have escaped the youngest of womankind. Opposite Caroline she paused, her hand on her heart.

"John! Oh, John! This--this is a child!"

"Yes, Miss; sure it is," said the gardener politely.

"But how did she get here? Surely no children come here?" Her hands were trembling.

"Yes, Miss, many of 'em--sure they do," he said pleasantly, with a good Irish smile.

But it was plain that his good-nature did not please the handsome lady. She bit her lip angrily.

"You know very well, John, that you are not to talk to me in that idiotic way," she said decidedly. "You know that there is no necessity for it as well as I do."

"All right, Miss," he replied, soothingly.

"And you are lying when you say that children come here," she went on, controlling herself with a great effort, "for they do not."

The gardener scratched his head doubtfully and walked away, muttering to himself. The girl turned to Caroline.

"Tell me," she demanded eagerly, her voice low and hurried, "how did you come here? Are you with friends? Where are they? What were you saying to that queen woman?"

"I--I--we were--I was Mary Queen of Scots," Caroline stammered, struggling, as the happy dreamer struggles, not to wake.

The girl started back from her, pale with an emotion that left her handsome face drawn and old.

"Good Heavens!--it can't be--a child! A *child*!" she cried. Tears stood in her dark eyes.

"How pitiful!" she said, softly, to herself. Then, forcing a smile, she leaned coaxingly over Caroline.

"I am only too delighted to make your Majesty's acquaintance," she said, her voice a little husky, but very sweet. "I have read of you often. But surely your Majesty has not been here long? I do not recall having seen you before to-day."

"N--no, you haven't," Caroline answered, a little grudgingly, "I only just came."

"Ah!" said the girl, "and how did you come? Not through the house surely?"

"I came under the fence," said Caroline, "the gates were locked. I was Marie Antoinette then, but I changed after she said she was."

"Oh! Oh!" the girl groaned, covering her face with slender, ringless hands.

"But I'd just as soon," Caroline assured her--"honestly I would. Only you need a Bothwell for her. I only thought of Marie Antoinette after the tumbrel went by. I suppose she's used to Marie Antoinette, prob'ly, and so you can't get her to change."

She nodded in the direction of the little lady, now far from them, white against the shrubbery.

The girl drew in her breath in little gasps, as if she had been running.

"Y--yes," she assented, "she's used to being Marie Antoinette. Where is the hole you got through? Is it big enough for--for anybody?"

"Oh, yes," said Caroline indifferently, "but nobody knows about it but me and a few other k--prisoners, I mean; I've used it when I was escaping before. I think it was a rabbit-hole first, and then we made it bigger. Isn't that funny--Alice got in by a rabbit-hole, too, didn't she? I thought of her as soon as I saw the gardener. He's very polite, isn't he?"

The girl pressed her lips together. "They are all polite here," she said briefly. "Do you mean that you go in and out of this hole as you like? Do they know of it? Is it far from here?"

"It's over there," Caroline waved, vaguely. "Why? Do you want to escape, too? Are you a queen?"

"No." The girl said it with a slight shudder. "No, I'm not. I'm--I'm--Oh, I'm Joan of Arc! You know about her, don't you, dear?"

Caroline nodded. "Are you trying to escape?" she repeated, interested at last.

"Yes," said the girl, "I am. But don't tell any one, will you? Don't tell that gardener, for instance."

"Oh, no," Caroline assured her, "I won't tell. Wouldn't he help you?"

The girl laughed, an excited, sobbing laugh.

"No, he wouldn't help me at all," she said. "Come on, walk a little. He is watching us. Don't tell him about the hole, will you? Promise me faithfully." She turned and seized the child's wrist. "Can you keep a promise?" she panted.

"Of course I can."

"And if any one should ask you, could you--oh, *could* you say you came in by the gate?"

Caroline wriggled free.

"Of course," she said scornfully. "Do you think I'm a baby?"

"Don't be angry--don't," the girl pleaded. "I don't mean to frighten you--your Majesty, I mean--but I am so excited, and--and I don't quite do what I intend to do or say just what I mean. I am quite all right now. You see, that gardener--he isn't really a gardener." She watched Caroline narrowly, quite unprepared for the sudden delight in her eyes.

"Oh, *he's* pretending, too!" cried Mary of Scots joyfully. "What is he, really?"

"He's--he's one of my jailers," said the girl somberly. "And the first thing he would do would be to stop up your hole under the fence."

"Oh!" Caroline stared respectfully at the gardener, not far from them now.

"Were you ever in chains?" she said, in an awed voice.

"No," said Joan of Arc, "I never was. I wouldn't be in this--this fortress if I had to be in chains. This is for well-behaved prisoners."

"Is Marie Antoinette a prisoner, too?"

"Yes," said the girl, wearily, "she is. And she has kept me one. I should not be here now but for her. She prevented my escape."

"The mean old thing!" Caroline cried, indignantly, "did she tell?"

"She called that gardener," said the girl, "just as I was walking out of the little gate. Of course I had to walk slowly. She is very malicious--poor thing," she added quickly.

They were close to a little arbor now, and not so far from the castle. Caroline could see figures here and there strolling on the upper terraces and sitting on the piazzas. The tinkle of a mandolin cut the soft air and the new-mown grass smelled sweet.

"I think this castle is lovely, though, don't you, Joan of Arc?" she burst out.

"It is an abominable castle," said the girl, in a muffled voice. "Abominable!"

"Well, then," said Caroline, practically, "if you feel that way, you'd *better* escape."

The girl stared at her.

"Tell me," she said, earnestly, "have you ever been in this place before? Where do you live?"

Caroline shrugged her shoulders impishly.

"I am Mary Queen of Scots," she replied, obstinately, "and I live in Scotland. Of course, I've been here before. Who are all those other people in the castle?"

The girl drew a long, worried breath. "I believe I should go mad if I stayed here much longer," she said, to herself. She drew Caroline down beside her behind the arbor.

"Listen to me, Mary Queen of Scots," she murmured, very low, with anxious glances all about her.

"I don't know who you are nor where you come from, but I believe you will help me--I believe you're sorry for me. You know how badly Joan of Arc's friends felt when she was in prison? I'm sure you do. Well I have a--a dear friend who would die for me, if it would help me. He has no idea where I am. He thinks I don't want to see him. He thinks--he must think--I'm no longer his--his--his friend. If I could only get to him, I should be safe."

"Why don't you write to him?" Caroline suggested.

The girl laughed bitterly.

"If *you* had prisoners in *your* fortress, and they wrote letters to their friends to come and get them out, would *you* mail the letters?" she demanded.

"I s'pose not," said Caroline gravely. Joan of Arc gulped.

"My letters never went," she said. "Now listen: I must go up to my room and get some money--I can't do anything without money. Will you wait here till I come back and not let anyone see you if you can help it? And if they do, will you say that you slipped in at the gate with a party that came in an automobile? One was here lately. Ask if you mayn't stay and see the flowers. And then I will meet you."

She looked hard in Caroline's eyes. "You're only playing," she said, suddenly. "You aren't--you aren't--What is your real name, dear?"

Caroline scowled.

"You better hurry up," she said, "or that gardener'll catch us. You're just like Marie Antoinette," she added irritably. "You think nobody can be anything but only yourself!"

Without a word the girl turned and left her, half running. Caroline heard her sobs.

At the same moment she caught the crunch of footsteps on the stone path that led to the arbor and crouched low behind it. Two men, talking idly, entered the spot of shade and sank down on the rustic bench.

"Look here, Ferris," said one voice, "is she really dippy--that one?"

"What do you mean?" This was a deeper voice, attached evidently to blue serge legs, for the speaker leaned to Caroline's eye level to scratch a match on one of them.

"Oh, I mean what I say." A gray striped coat sleeve poked through the lattice work, as the first speaker leaned hard on it. "If she is, then I am, that's all. It looks queer to me."

The blue legs crossed themselves tightly under the seat.

"Look here yourself, Riggs," said the second voice. "If you're curious in this matter, I advise you to ask the doctor. He's boss here, not I--thank God! I obey orders and draw my forty per, as per contract. The same to you, only it's hardly forty, I suppose."

"No, it's not," grunted Graycoat. "Not by a good sight. I see myself asking the old man. I only asked your private opinion, Ferris,--you needn't get sore about it."

"My young friend," said Bluelegs, slowly, "there's only one thing you can ask me in this place that I won't tell you, and that's my private opinion!"

There was a little pause. Caroline, reveling in conspiracy, lay quiet, wondering who these people were and what they were talking about.

"You are perfectly welcome to anything I know about Miss Aitken," Bluelegs continued, puffing at a fresh cigarette and throwing the old one through the lattice at Caroline's feet.

"Her brother was a pronounced epileptic--died in a fit. I have seen the doctor's certificate. She was greatly worried over his death, and the manner of it, and showed signs of incipient melancholia."

"As how?" interrupted Graycoat.

"Don't know," said Bluelegs briefly. "Uncle said so. Wouldn't speak to anybody; cried all day; off her feed--that sort of thing. Very obstinate."

"Um," Graycoat muttered thoughtfully, "so am I. But I'd hate to be shut up on that account."

"So her uncle," proceeded Bluelegs, "wishing to save her, if possible, from her brother's fate, decided to--er--take steps in that direction and--and here she is."

"So I see," said Graycoat. "Was the brother's epilepsy hereditary?"

"I believe not," Bluelegs returned. "I believe the young gentlemen inherited a little too much a little too soon for his best good, and hit up a rather fast pace; his constitution wasn't the best."

"Did she know about all this?"

"I believe she did. Thought she might have saved him if she'd known sooner, her uncle said."

"Ah," said Graycoat. "Why didn't this kind uncle put his nephew with the doctor?"

"He wasn't his trustee," Bluelegs answered, quietly.

"Dear me," said Graycoat gently, "how fortunate for the nephew!"

"That's as you look at it," responded Bluelegs.

Caroline dozed in the warm shade; in dreams she chased the French Queen around the iridescent fountain.

"Uncle any business--besides trusteeship?" asked Graycoat.

"You can search me," said Bluelegs.

"Niece about twenty-one, I take it?" asked Graycoat.

"Search me again," said Bluelegs.

"Should you think," Graycoat demanded, after a pause, "that this incipient melancholia was likely to last long--speaking, of course, professionally?"

"Really, Dr. Riggs, I don't know." Bluelegs replied. "I am not at all in touch with the case. The doctor has entire charge of it. He mentioned to me last week that he was sorry to see both in her and young Dahl evidences of clearly formed delusions--"

"Young Dahl!" cried Graycoat, "why, the boy is an admitted paranoiac!"

"Really?" said Bluelegs, "you know I don't do much but cocaine and morphia, these days. Did you know the doctor was going to print my pamphlet?"

"He can afford it, I judge," growled Graycoat. "He gets a hundred a week from Miss Aitken."

Bluelegs got up and sent a second cigarette after the first.

"Riggs," he said gravely, "if you're aiming to succeed as a magazine writer, you're beginning well; if it's your ambition to succeed in this business, and succeed right here, you're beginning badly. You were keen enough to get this place. If

you talk much this way, you won't keep it long--you can take it from me. Let's come in to lunch."

Their tread on the arbor floor roused the sleeping conspirator; she sat up, rubbing her eyes half afraid that the clipped terraces, the floating, flag, the inhabited castle, were only parts of her dream. But even as she peered around the arbor, Joan of Arc rushed toward her. She wore a black shade hat and carried a fluffy black parasol under her arm.

"Be careful!" she panted. "We can't go yet--I was stopped. I had to talk. You say yes to whatever I say, will you? Then you can escape with me--" she smiled sweetly at Caroline--"a real escape, as they do in story books! Won't that be fine?" Her hand was at her heart again; a red circle burned in either cheek.

Caroline nodded eagerly.

"That will be grand!" she said. She had forgotten till that moment that she wanted to escape.

"Ah, Miss Aitken! Late for lunch again!"

Caroline started guiltily, for it was the voice of Bluelegs.

Joan threw her arm over Caroline's shoulder carelessly.

"Yes, Dr. Ferris, I'm afraid I am," she said. "I was delayed by this little visitor."

He looked suspiciously at them. "Who is she?" he asked.

"I don't know." Joan led Caroline along quickly. "She *says* she is Mary Queen of Scots."

He stared blankly.

"I found her conversing with Marie Antoinette," she went on easily, "and she seems to have slipped in with an automobile party--was there one? Children are so secretive, you know. She is trying to get out, but she says all the gates are locked."

"Oh, yes, that was the Dahls--they came to see Frederick," he explained.

"I see. You were left with the chauffeur, Mademoiselle, and it's easy to imagine the rest," he added with a smile. He had a very attractive smile, and Caroline slipped her hand into his offered one readily.

"You are fond of children?" said Joan, abruptly.

"Very," he answered simply. "Why not! And they are fond of me, as you see. My dear young lady, did you think we are all brutes because we must obey orders?"

She set her teeth and walked swiftly forward.

"I know you think us cruel," he went on frankly, "because we can not do for you the one thing that you want; but, except for that, have you anything to complain of?"

She smiled scornfully.

"'Except for that'?" she echoed, "no, Dr. Ferris, nothing in the world--but 'that'!"

"And you must remember," he continued, in his pleasant, soothing voice, "that it may not be for long, after all. If you continue to improve as you have--" She flung away impatiently. "Oh, yes, you have improved, you know; you eat better, you sleep better, your nerves are quieter. We get good reports of you. Many are ill longer than you. Do you like the new masseuse?"

She did not answer.

"Now, this little lady must have some lunch with us, and then, no doubt, we shall see that careless chauffeur again," he said easily. "Would you like to stay?" he asked Caroline.

"Yes, I would."

"Mary was always fickle, you know," he laughed, glancing at her clinging hand.

And, indeed, Caroline found him far more winning than the sulky, silent Joan, and leaned confidingly against him as they climbed the stone steps and passed through the rich, dark-paneled hall, hung with bright pictures, filled with bowls of flowers. Several men, uniformed like the gardener, stood about the steps and terraces; two stood by the door of a large, airy dining-room filled with hurrying waiters. About a long silver-laden table some twenty men and women,

cool in lawn and lace and white flannel, were seated, eating and talking gaily. At the head was a large, tall man in a snowy vest; evidently the host, by his smiling, interested attention to everybody's wants. At his right was a vacant chair, and toward this Joan of Arc directed her steps. She had caught Caroline's hand in hers, and, as Bluelegs bent and whispered in the tall man's ear, she added:

"I think, doctor, if the little girl stays by me she will feel less shy, perhaps."

"Certainly, certainly--by all means. A good thought, Miss Aitken, a good thought," he answered in a rich, kind voice. He shook hands with Caroline warmly.

"So you find our grounds attractive?" he asked politely.

She nodded, a little shyly. All this company, so freshly dressed, so ceremoniously served, so utterly unconscious of her presence, embarrassed her a little. For not one of the ladies and gentlemen--there were no children--paid the slightest attention to her arrival, even when a place was made for her by Joan and a mug of milk procured. They talked, or, as she noticed now, sat, many of them, listless and silent, playing with their rings and bracelets, answering only with monosyllables the questions of the large, cordial doctor.

"Where is Marie Antoinette?" she whispered to her friend, who seemed nearer, suddenly, than these cold table-mates.

"She does not eat with us," said Joan, helping her to chicken and green peas, and beginning her own meal.

The doctor turned to them, having recommended some asparagus to the stolid lady at his left.

"I am glad to see your appetite so good, Miss Aitken," he observed, lowering his voice a little, "at this rate we shall have no excuse for keeping you much longer."

"You have had none for six months," she replied curtly.

"I am sorry you feel so bitterly," he said, "but you know I can not agree with you there. You will think more kindly of me some day, I hope, when time has freed your mind of its prejudice."

"When will that be?" she asked, meeting his eyes full for a moment.

"I wrote only this morning to your uncle, stating your gradual but steady improvement, and assuring him that in my opinion--subject, of course, to circumstances--it would be a matter of a few months more only," he said. "Does not that make your feelings a little--only a little more tender--"

"What did you say?" a shrill voice interrupted, "say that again, please."

Caroline had beguiled the woman next her, a frail, anemic little creature with pathetic eyes, into a halting conversation.

"I said," she repeated, buttering her roll thickly and appreciatively with fresh, clover-scented butter, "I said that no weather was too hot for me. I love it."

("Now, really, I *am* pleased," the big doctor murmured to the girl beside him. "Mrs. Du Long hasn't seemed so interested for days. In fact, she's been quite silent; I was alarmed about her. It's the child's influence.")

"--Uncle Joe said," Caroline went on, the roll at her mouth, "and he said I was a regular little snake."

She heard a guttural, growling sound beside her, lifted her eyes innocently, and for one flashing, doubtful second beheld the swollen, distorted face, the bulging eyes, the back-drawn snarling lips beside her. She did not see the plunging fork above her head, so quickly did Joan's arm intervene between her and it; she did not hear its impact against the big doctor's plate nor the gurgling voice of what had been the sad-eyed little woman beside her, for her head was buried in Joan's stifling skirt.

"Kill the snake! Kill the snake!" some one--or something--yelled, and then a grip of iron caught her arm and the voice of Bluelegs said sternly:

"Look straight ahead of you--don't turn your head! Don't turn, Miss Aitken--you can do nothing--they have her safe. The guards are here."

The room, indeed, seemed full of gardeners; a bell rang noisily near by.

"But the others--the others!" Joan gasped.

"They are all right--it won't trouble them," he answered quietly; and as Caroline and the girl looked fearfully where they were bidden, they saw the men and women eating placidly, talking with each other or sitting listless, staring idly at four

liveried men who fought furiously with one small, snarling creature. Like the cruel witnesses in dreams, they sat, and the waiters served them swiftly and handed the dishes between their shoulders, as deaf as they. And suddenly they became terrible to Caroline, and the castle menacing, a thing to flee from.

"Step out this way," said Bluelegs, when the sounds of struggle had died away, "and take the child through the grounds, will you, please? Try to occupy her thoughts, and your own, too, if you can. This is one of the unfortunate things that rarely happen, but when they do--Yes, indeed, Mr. Ogden, it was certainly fine asparagus--I am glad you enjoyed it. No, she was only a little indisposed--she'll soon be well again. The heat of the sun, undoubtedly. Don't be alarmed, Miss Arliss, she will have every attention."

The gardeners had vanished from the steps where they went down, and none were seen in the grounds. Joan of Arc clutched Caroline's waist.

"Now--now!" she said, between her teeth; "now is the time not to faint! I never fainted--never. Come and show me that hole in the fence. There is no one about. But don't run."

They hurried across the sunlit, smiling terrace.

"What was the matter?" Caroline queried fearfully, "was she--was she--"

"Yes," said Joan brusquely. "Yes. Don't think about it. Don't run and don't think. Only find the hole."

They stood beside it. No one was near them; no one called to them. Silently Caroline slid under the sharp prongs. Joan of Arc put her hands under her skirt a moment and a white ruffled petticoat slipped around her feet. She adjusted it over her dress and pulled herself with difficulty through. As she stood erect in the soiled, stained petticoat, Caroline saw her knees, tremble under it, and she drooped against the fence, white-cheeked.

"Don't faint," she said severely to Caroline.

With shaking hands she tied the petticoat under her dress again and they crouched through the underbrush to the outer walk. Caroline reached for her wheel and the two peered fearfully up and down the empty road.

"I can't--I can't," the girl moaned, "my dress is so black--they can see it from the hill. Oh, what shall I do? I thought I could, and I can't!"

The measured trot of a pair of horses sounded on the road. An empty station wagon came rapidly toward them; groom and driver regarded them curiously.

The girl straightened herself and raised her hand with a pretty, imperious gesture.

"One moment, please," she said, "but are you going to the village?"

"Yes, Miss," said the driver, "to the station. Was there anything--"

She opened a bag at her side and took out carelessly a small gold piece.

"My little friend here," she said, in an even, low voice, "was showing me this beautiful building and grounds and I utterly neglected to note the time. I fear I have lost my train, if we try to walk back. If you could take us--"

"Certainly, Miss," said the driver. "William, put the young lady's wheel on top. Was it the express you wanted, Miss? I'm to meet it--the 2.08. Party from Boston."

They climbed in, the bicycle settled noisily into the trunk-rack on top, and the big chestnuts pounded down the hill.

Joan stared straight before her. Presently she drew a pair of black gloves from her little bag and put them on. Her lips moved steadily, and Caroline knew from her closed eyes that she was praying.

They drew into the neat station as the train Snorted itself in. The girl handed the gold piece to the driver.

"Divide it, please," she said calmly. "I am much obliged."

She walked to the drawing-room car, and signaled the black porter.

"I shall be safe to-night," she said softly, to the child by her side, "and I won't tell you my name, because it will not be mine much longer. But what is yours? Tell me quick!"

"All *aboard*! Next stop One Hund' Twent'-*fifth* Street!" some one called, hoarsely.

Caroline looked dazed. She tried to speak sensibly, but her tongue played tricks with her, and the tension of her feelings

was too much for her. As the girl paused a second on the platform, and the train shuddered for its start, Caroline called above the escaping steam:

"I'm Mary Queen of Scots--I am! I am!"

The white face of Joan of Arc broke into a wavering smile.

"You dear little idiot," she called, chokingly, "I'll find you out yet! You'll see! Good-by--God bless your Majesty."

And while she might, Caroline ran beside the window, waving her hand at that tearful, happy face.

VIII

A WATCH IN THE NIGHT

THE village clock boomed out the first strokes of eleven. Solemn and mellow, the waves of sound flowed over the sleeping streets; the aftertones vibrated plaintively. Caroline stirred restlessly, tossing off the sheet and muttering in her dreams. The tears had dried on her hot cheeks; her brows were still knitted.

"Four! Five! Six!" the big bell tolled.

Caroline sat up in bed and dropped her bare, pink legs over the edge. Her eyes were open now, but set in a fixed, unseeing stare.

"Seven! Eight!"

She fumbled with her toes for her leather barefoot sandals and slipped her feet under the ankle straps.

"Nine! Ten!" moaned the bell.

She moved forward, vaguely, in the broad path of moonlight that poured through the wide-open window, and ran her hands like a blind girl over the warm sill, lifting her knee to its level.

"Eleven!"

Before the murmuring aftertones had lost themselves in the night, Caroline was out of the window. She stole lightly along the tin roof, warm yet with the first intense heat of June, dropped easily to the level of the kitchen-ell, and, slipping down onto the massive trunk of the old wistaria, fitted accustomed feet into its curled niches and clambered down among the warm, fragrant clusters. Steeped in the full moon, it sent out its cloying perfume like a visible cloud; her white nightgown glistened ghostlike through the leaves.

She paused a moment in the shadow of the vine, and a great tawny cat, his orange markings distinct in the moonlight, stole to her, brushing against her bare ankles caressingly. As he curled and uncurled his soft tail about her little feet, a sudden impulse caught her, and she started swiftly through the wide backyard, bending to a broken gap in the privet hedge, cutting diagonally across the neighboring grounds, and emerging into a pleasant country road on the outskirts of the little village, with sleeping houses sprinkled along its length, well back, mostly, from its edge, showing here and there a light.

She struck into the soft, dusty road at a quick, swinging pace, the fruit of much walking, and the big yellow cat pattered at her side.

The night was almost windless; sweet, nameless odors poured up from the heated summer soil; the shadows of the grasses were outlined like Japanese pictures on the white roadway. Except for the child and the cat, no living being moved, as far as the eye could see; only the burdocks and mulleins swayed almost imperceptibly with breezes so delicate that the leaf tips of the trees could not feel them.

A great white moth, blundering against a heavy thistle head, tumbled against Caroline's elbow and fluttered clumsily into her face. She started, blinked, drew a long breath, and woke with a frightened gasp. Before her stretched the pale, curving road; above her the spangled sky throbbed and glittered; the earth, drenched in moonlight, beautiful as all lovely creatures caught sleeping, breathed softly into her face and with every breath put courage into her heart.

She looked down and saw the yellow cat, stopping, with one lifted paw, his green, lamplike eyes fixed unwaveringly on hers.

"Why, it's you, Red Rufus!" she whispered, "when did we come here? I don't remember--"

A bat whirred by: the cat pricked his ears.

"I don't believe we're here at all, Red Rufus," she whispered again. "We're just dreaming--at least, I am. I s'pose you're only in my dream. If I was really here, I'd be frightened to death, prob'ly, but if it's just a dream, I think it's lovely. Let's go on. I never had a dream like this--it seems so real, doesn't it, Rufus?"

They went on aimlessly up the road. Quaint little night sounds began now to make themselves heard: now and then a drowsy twitter from the sleeping nests, now and then a distant owl hoot. A sudden gust of honeysuckle, so strong that it was like a friendly, fragrant body flung against her, halted her for a moment, and while she paused, sniffing ecstatically, the low murmur of voices caught her ear.

The honeysuckle ran riot over an old stone wall, followed an arching gateway at the foot of a winding path that led to a lighted house on a knoll above, and flung screening tendrils over an entwined pair that paused just inside the gate. The girl's white, loose sleeves fell back from her round arms as she flung them up about her tall lover's neck; his dark head bent low over hers, their lips met, and they hung entranced in the bowery archway.

For a moment Caroline watched them with frank curiosity. Then something woke and stirred in her, faint and vague, but alive now, and she turned away her eyes, blushing hot in the cool moonlight.

The soft tones of their good-night died into broken whispers; parted from his white lady, he started on for a few, irresolute steps, then flung about suddenly and walked back toward the house, after a low, happy protest. The cooing of some drowsy pigeons in the stable on the other side of the road carried on the lovers' language long after they were out of earshot, and confused itself with them in Caroline's mind.

She wandered on, intoxicated with the mild, spacious night, the dewy freedom of the fields, the delicious pressure of the warm, velvet air against her body. Red Rufus purred as he went, rejoicing with his vagabond comrade. Just how or when she began to know that she was not asleep, just why the knowledge did not alarm her, it would be hard to say. But when the truth came to her, the friendly, powdered stars had been above her long enough to accustom her to their winking; the tiny, tentative noises of the night had sounded in her ears till they comforted and reassured her; the vast and empty field stretches meant only freedom and exhilaration. In a sudden delirium of joy she slipped between the bars of a rolling meadow and ran at full speed down its long, grassy slope, her nightgown streaming behind her, her slender, childish legs white as ivory against the greenish-black all around her. Beside her bounded the great cat with shining, gemlike eyes. They rolled down the last reaches of the slope, and all the Milky Way wondered at them, but never a sound broke the solemn quiet of the night: the ecstasy was noiseless.

Caroline danced, bowing and posturing in a bewitched abandon, around the tinkling, glistening fountain.

Her face buried in sweet clover, she panted, prone on the grass.

"Let's go right on, Rufus, and run away, and do just as we please!" she whispered to the nestling cat. "If I can't do like the boys do, I don't want to stay home--the fellows laugh at me! I'd rather be whipped than sent to bed like a girl. I *won't* be a young lady--I *won't*!"

Rufus purred approvingly.

"If I only had some trousers!" she mourned, softly; "a boy can do *anything*!"

Across the quiet night there cut a thin, shrill cry: a little, fretful pipe that brought instantly before the mind some hushed, white room with a shaded light and a tiny basket bed. Caroline sat up and stared about her: such cries did not come from open fields. Hardly a stone's throw from her there was a small knoll, and behind it what might have been a large, projecting boulder suddenly flashed into red light and showed itself for a dormer window; a cottage had evidently hidden behind the little hill. Curiously Caroline approached it and walked softly up the knoll.

Almost on the top she paused and peered into the unshaded window. These householders had no fear of peeping neighbors, for only the moon and the night moths found them out, and the simple bedroom was framed like some old naive interior, realistic with the tremendous realism of the Great Artist.

The high, old-fashioned footboard of the bed faced the dormer window, and Caroline could see only the upper portion of the woman's figure as she leaned over a small crib beside her, her heavy dark hair falling across her cheek, and lifted up with careful slowness the tiny creature that wailed in it. Beside her, as he supported himself anxiously on his elbow, the broad chest and shoulders of her young husband rose above the screening footboard. The mother gazed hungrily

at the doll-like, writhing object, passed her hand over its downy forehead, smiled with relief into its opening eyes, and gave it her breast.

Instantly the wail ceased. A slow, placid smile--and yet, not quite a smile--it was rather an elemental content, a gratified drifting into the warm current of the stream of this world's being--spread over the woman's face; the man's long arm wrapped around his wealth, at once protecting and defiant; his head flung back against the world, while his eyes studied humbly the mystery that he grasped. The night lamp behind them threw a halo around the mother and her child, and the great trinity of all times and all faiths gleamed immortal upon the canvas of the simple room--its only spectator a child.

In her, malleable to all the influences of the revealing night, fairly disembodied, in her detached and flitting presence, the scene woke dim, coiled memories of an infancy that stirred and pained her even as it left her forever, and frightened longing for the motherhood that life was holding for her. No longer an infant, not yet a woman, this creature that was both felt the helplessness of one, the yearning of the other, and as she pressed the nestling cat tightly to her little breast two great, eager tears slipped down her hot cheeks, and a gulping sob, half loneliness, half pure excitement, broke into the gentle stillness of the lighted room.

"Who's there?"

The man's voice rang like a sudden pistol shot in the night; before Caroline's fascinated gaze the gleaming, softly colored picture faded and vanished into the engulfing darkness, as the lamp went out and a dark, scudding mackerel cloud flew over the moon. Instinctively she fled softly down the knoll, instinctively she dropped behind a bush at the bottom. She heard the rattle of the window pane as the man pushed himself half out of the window; she heard him call back to the waiting room behind him!

"It's a cat, dear--I saw it, plain. It's pretty bright out here. But I thought I saw something white beside it, too. I guess I'll take a look around outside."

There was a sound of movement behind the window, and, caught in an ecstasy of terror, Caroline turned at right angles from the fields and ran to the road that gleamed white, far on the other side of the cottage. Panting, she won it, crossed it, and fairly safe behind the low growth of wayside brushes that fringed its other side, she dashed along, farther and farther from the cottage, more and more frightened with every gasping breath.

On and on she flew, light as a skimming leaf in the wind, the cat bounding in easy, flexible curves beside her. Now a little brown cottage in its plot of land sent them into the road for a moment; now some tiny pond, a mirror for the sprinkled heavens, broke into their course, and they skirted it more slowly, peering continuously into its jeweled depths. With them their hurrying shadows, black on the road, fainter on the grass, fled ceaselessly, hardly more quiet than they. A very intoxication of fear, a panic terror almost delicious, drove Caroline through the night, though after a while she ran more slowly. Utterly ignorant of where she was, reckless of where she might go, she swung along under the streaming moon, no white moth or whispering leaf more wholly a part of the night than she.

Whatever idea of going back she might have had was lost long ago; however little she might have meant to range so far, she was now beyond any turning. No wood creature, no skipping faun or startled dryad dancing under the moon could have belonged more utterly than she to the fragrant, mysterious world around her. The bright, bustling life of every day, its clatter of food and drink, its smarts and fatigues, its settled routine of work and play, all seemed as far behind her as some old tale of another life, half forgotten now.

Just as her pace subsided into a little skipping trot, a thick hedge sprang up across their path, driving them into the road, and continued, stiff and tall, along its edge. The pure pleasure of conquering its prickly stiffness sent Caroline through it, tearing one sleeve from her nightgown and dragging a great rent in one side of it. Emerging into a magnificent sweep of clipped turf, where wide, leafy boughs spread dappled moon shadows, they made for a whispering, clucking fountain that threw a diamond column straight toward the stars, only to break at the top into a beaded mist and clink musically back to its marble basin. Its rhythmic tinkle, the four ball-shaped box trees at either corner, the carved whiteness of the marble basin, and the massive pillar-fronted stone house beyond it, all spread a glamour of fairyland and foreign courts. Caroline bowed gravely to the cat, and, seizing his feathery paws, danced, bowing and posturing, in a bewitched abandon around the tinkling, glistening fountain. The plumy tail of Red Rufus flew behind him as he twirled, his little feet pattered furiously after Caroline's twinkling sandals. Stooping over the fountain, she threw a silvery handful high in the air and ran to catch it on her head.

As she stood at last, panting and dazed with her mad circling, she was aware of the low murmur of a voice, rising and falling in a steady measure, reaching out of the dim bulk of the great house, dark and sunk in sleep before her. For a moment a chill fear struck to the bottom of her little heart: was some weird spell aimed at her, some malignant eye spying on her? She stood frozen to the spot, the tiny drops of sweat cooling on her forehead, while the droning

sounded in her ears. Then, out of the very core of her terror, some inexplicable impulse urged her on to face it, and she crept, step by step, the cat tight in her nervous grasp, around the corner of the great house, toward the sound.

This corner was a wing, set at right angles to the main building, and as she rounded it she found herself at the edge of an inner court. In the opposite wing, looking straight across the court, was a lighted room with a long French window opening directly on the shaven turf, and in the center of this window there sat in a high, carved chair a very old woman. She was carefully dressed in deep black, with pure white ruffles at her neck and around her shrunken wrists, and a lace cap on her thin, white hair. Her feet were on a carved foot-stool, and a quaint silver lamp, set on a slender table at her side, threw a stream of light across the court. Her face, lined with countless wrinkles, was bent upon a large book in her lap; from its pages she read in a low, steady voice--the passionless, almost terrifying voice of great and weary age:

> "*Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.*
>
> "*Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hast formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.*"

Caroline stared, fascinated, down the path of lamplight. It marked a bed of yellow tulips with a broad band; they stood motionless, as if carved in ivory.

Across the court was a lighted room with a long French window, and in the center of this window there sat in a high, carved chair a very old woman.

"*For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.*"

The grave, steady voice flowed out and mingled with the silver lamplight; the marble sill of the long window was white like the sill of a tomb.

"*We spend our years as a tale that is told.*

"*The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.*"

The hot excitement of this magic night cooled slowly; over Caroline's bubbling spirit there fell a mild, strange calm. A breath from the very caverns of the infinite stole out along the path of that silver lamp, and in the grave, surrendered voice there sounded for the child upon life's threshold echoes of the final tolling.

Entranced by the measured cadences, Caroline stepped forward unconsciously and stood, white against the gray stone, full in the path of the lamp. The heavy, wrinkled lids raised themselves from the deep-set eyes, and the aged reader gazed calmly at the little figure across the court. The withered old hands clasped each other.

"Jemmy! O *Jemmy*!"

Caroline never moved.

"It *is* you, Jemmy!"

The faded eyes devoured the little white figure.

"I thought you'd never come, Jemmy--but I knew they'd send you. I'm all ready. Don't you think I'm afraid, Jemmy: I'm eighty-four years old, and I want to go."

Caroline hardly breathed; a nameless awe held her motionless and silent.

"You see, I don't sleep much any more, Jemmy," the old, toneless voice went on, "and hardly any at night. They're very kind, all of them, but I'm--I'm eighty-four years old, and I want to go."

The ivory tulips gleamed under the stars; the silver lamp, burned lower and lower: its oil was nearly gone.

"And you brought your yellow kitty, too, Jemmy! To think of that! Did they think I wouldn't know my baby? It's only fifty years, ... shall I come now, Jemmy?"

The silver lamp went out. In the starlight Caroline saw the lace cap droop forward, as the the old woman's head settled gently on her breast. Her hands lay clasped on the great volume; her deep-set eyes were closed. She read no more from the book, and the child, awed and sober, stole like a shadow behind the gray wall and left the quiet figure in the carved chair.

Her feet fell into a tiny graveled path, and she drifted aimlessly along it, musing on the meaning of what she had heard. Almost she had persuaded herself that the gray stone building was an enchanted palace, and herself a fairy messenger sent to break the spell, when the delight of pushing through a tiny turnstile and finding a running brook with a waterfall in it close at hand, drove everything else from her mind. The grounds had completely changed their character by now: the turnstile marked the end of cultivation, and the little path, no longer graveled, wound through the wild woodland. Here and there a boulder blocked the way; the undergrowth became dense; great clumps of fern and rhododendron sent out their heavy, rank odors. Now and again the spicy scent of warm pines and cedars prepared the ear for the gentle, ceaseless rustle of their stiff foliage; little scufflings and chitterings at the ground level told of wood-people wakened by the presence of Red Rufus.

A strange whitish bulk that glimmered through the thinning foreground, too big for even a big boulder, too symmetrical and quiet for a waterfall, tempted Caroline on, and she pressed forward hastily, lost in speculation, when a sudden odor foreign to the woods stopped her short at the very edge of a little glade, and she paused, sniffing curiously.

A man, bareheaded, with grizzled curly hair, turned suddenly, not ten feet from her, and stared dumfounded at her, his twisted, brown cigar an inch from his lips.

The torn-out sleeve of her nightgown had bared one side to her waist: the great rent that slit the lower half of the garment left one slender leg uncovered above her white knee. A spray of wild azalea wreathed her dark tumbled hair, and Rufus, his plumy tail curled around her feet in the shadow, and his green eyes flaming, might have been a baby panther. She leaned one hand on the rough bark of a chestnut and gazed with startled eyes at the man; it seemed that the forest must swallow her at a breath from a human throat.

He lifted one hand and pinched the back of the other with it till his face contorted with the pain.

"Then there *are* such things!" he said softly; "well, why not?"

He moved forward almost imperceptibly.

"If I were younger, I should know you were not possible," he muttered, "but now I know that I have never doubted you--really."

Again he took a small step. Caroline, paralyzed with fear and embarrassment, for she thought he was merely teasing her a little before he punished her--his pleasant, low voice and whimsical manners brought her back suddenly to the ordinary world and the stern facts of her escapade--shivered slightly, but did not attempt flight.

"It was this extraordinary night that brought you out, of course," he went on, again slightly shortening the distance between them, "you and the little cub. It was a moon out of five thousand, I admit. Do you live in that chestnut?"

With a sudden agile bound he covered the space between them and seized her by the shoulder.

"Aha!" he cried, "I have--good heavens, it *is* a child!"

"Of course I am--I'm Caroline," she murmured writhing under his grasp.

He pulled her out into the little glade.

"Oh! you're Caroline, are you?" he repeated, thoughtfully; "dear me, you gave me quite a turn, Caroline. Where did you come from--the big house?"

"I came from a long way," she said briefly. "I was--I was taking a walk. Where do you live? Don't you ever to go bed?"

The man chuckled.

"I have been feeling adventures in my bones all day," he said, "and here they are; a child and a cat. If you will come with me, Mademoiselle, I will show you where I live."

He led the way gravely to the dim, white object, and Caroline perceived it to be a tent, pitched by the side of a spring that poured through a tiny pipe set into the rock. The tent flap was tied back, and she saw inside it a narrow cot, covered with a coarse blue blanket, a roughly made table, spread with a game of solitaire, and a small leather trunk. On the further side of the tent there smoked, in a rude, improvised oven of stones, a dying fire. Above it, under a shelf nailed to the tree, hung a few simple utensils; two or three large stumps had been hacked into the semblance of seats.

To one of these stumps the man led Caroline, and, seating her, he turned to the shelf above the fire and fumbled among the pots and pans there, producing finally a buttered roll, a piece of maple sugar, and a small fruit tart.

"You must be hungry," he said simply, and Caroline ate greedily. After he had brought her a tin cup of the spring water, he selected a brown pipe from a half dozen on the shelf and began filling it from a leather pouch that hung on the tree.

"Now let's hear all about it," he said easily.

"I am running away," said Caroline abruptly. At that moment it really seemed that she had planned her flight from the hour that left her, tear-stained and disgraced, in her little bed.

"They didn't treat you well?" he suggested, picking out a red ember from the coals on the point of a knife and applying it to the pipe.

"I'm not to wear my knickers any more," Caroline said, with a gulp, "and my bathing suit has to have a skirt. I've got to stop p-playing with the b-boys--so much, that is," she added, honestly.

The man turned his head slightly.

"That seems hard," he said; "what's the reason?"

"I'm 'most twelve," said Caroline; "you have to be a young lady, then."

"I see," the man said. He looked at her thoughtfully. "I suppose you *would* look larger in more clothes," he added.

"That's it," she assured him, "I do. That's just it."

"And so you expect to avoid all this by running away?" he asked, settling into his own stump seat. "I am afraid you can't do it."

Caroline set her teeth. He regarded her quizzically.

"See here," he went on, "I wish you'd take my advice in this matter."

They confronted each other in the starlight, a strange pair before the dying fire. The moon had gone, and the stars, though bright, seemed less solid and less certainly gold than before. A cool breeze swept through the wood and Caroline shivered in her torn nightdress. The man stepped into the tent and returned with a long army cloak. This he wrapped round her and resumed his seat, with Rufus on his knee.

"My name," he said, "is Peter. Everybody calls me that--just Peter. I don't know exactly why it is, but a lot of people--all over--have got into the way of taking my advice. Perhaps because I've knocked about all over the world more or less, and haven't got any wife or children or brothers and sisters of my own to advise, so I take it out on everybody else. Perhaps because I try to put myself in the other fellow's place before I advise him. Perhaps because I've had a little trouble of my own, here and there, and haven't forgotten it. Anyhow, I get used to talking things over."

A gentle stirring seemed to pass through the woods: the birds spoke softly back and forth, a squirrel chattered. Again that cool wind swept over the trees.

"Now, take it this week," the man went on, puffing steadily; "you wouldn't believe the people just about here who've asked for my advice. I usually camp up here for a week or so in the summer--the people who own the property like to have me here--and the first day I unpacked, up comes a nice girl--I used to make birch whistles for her mother--to tell me all about her young man. She brought me that spray of honeysuckle over the pipes--grows over the front gate. She wants to marry him before her father gets to like him, but she hates to run away. 'Would you advise me to, Peter?' she says. And I advised her to wait.

"Then there's my friend the blacksmith. He lives in a queer little house with dormer windows under a hill, just off the county road. He's got a new baby, and he was afraid it wouldn't pull through. He knew I'd seen a lot of babies--black and red and yellow--and *he* wanted my advice. 'Peter, what'll I do?' he says, 'what'll I do?'

"'Why, just wait, Harvey. He'll live. Just wait,' I told him."

Caroline listened with interest. He might have been talking to his equal in years, from his tone.

"Then, oddly enough," he continued, "here's my old friend in the big house up yonder--and she *is* old--and what do you think she's worried about? She's afraid she *won't* die! 'Oh, Peter,' she says to me--she's fond of me because I'm the same age as a little boy of hers that died--'it seems to me that I can't wait, Peter! What shall I do?' she says. And I tell *her* to wait. 'Dear old friend,' said I to her last night, 'it will come. It's bound to come. Just be patient.'"

He paused and knocked his pipe empty.

"Now, as to your case," he said, "I know how you feel. I'm sorry for you--by the Lord, I'm sorry for you! But what's the use of running away? You'll keep on growing up, you know. It's one of the things that doesn't stop. You can't beat the game by wearing knickers, you know. And then, there'd come a time when you'd want to quit, anyhow."

She shook her head.

"Really, you would," he assured her, persuasively. "They all do."

"That's what Uncle Joe says," she admitted, "and Aunt Edith. She changed her mind, she says--"

"Are you talking about Joe Holt?" Peter demanded.

"Yes--do you know him? He lives in a big white house with wistaria on the side," Caroline cried joyfully.

"I was a senior when he was a freshman," said Peter. "Then he's taken the Washburn house."

"Do you know Aunt Edith, too?" asked Caroline.

"Yes," said Peter, after a pause, "yes, I know Aunt Edith--or used to. But I didn't know she--they were up in this country. I haven't seen her--them for a good while. Does--does she sing yet?"

"Oh, yes, but not on the stage any more, you know," Caroline explained.

"I see. Does she sing, I wonder, a song about--Oh, something about 'my heart'?"

"'My heart's own heart,' you mean," Caroline said importantly; "yes, indeed. It's her encore song."

"I see," said Peter again.

He looked into the fire, and there was a long silence. After a while he shook his shoulders like a water-dog.

"Now, Caroline," he said briskly, "here's the way of this business. You can't wear knickers until you're one of the boys, and you can't be one of the boys until you wear knickers. Do you see? So you don't get anywhere."

Caroline looked puzzled. She was suddenly overcome with sleep, and the old familiar names and ways tasted of home and comfort to her soul.

"You're too nice to be a boy, Caroline," said Peter, leaning over her and brushing her azalea-crowned hair tenderly with his lips. "If you persist in this plan of running away to be a boy, some boy, growing up anxiously, somewhere, will never forgive you! Take my advice, and wait--will you? Say 'Yes, Peter.'"

"Yes, Peter," Caroline murmured, drowsily.

"Good girl! Then I'll take you home with my little donkey. I don't believe they've missed you yet. You've come four miles, though, you little gypsy!"

He disappeared behind the trees, and Caroline nodded. Later she woke sufficiently to find herself and Rufus on the blue blanket on the bottom of a little donkey cart; Peter stood by the gentle, long-eared head.

"Thank you, Peter," she murmured, half asleep, "and you'll see Aunt Edith, won't you?"

"I don't believe so," he said, very low. "Not yet. Tell her Peter brought you back. Just Peter. But he can't come yet. Get up, Jenny!"

They wound out by an old wood road. A cool spiciness flowed though the green aisles, and as the tiny donkey struck into a dog trot, the man striding easily at her head, a far-away cock crowed shrilly and the dawn gleamed white.

IX

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

"CAROLINE!" Henry D. Thoreau cocked one brindled ear cannily and rapped sharply with his tail on the piazza floor, but there was no other answer to the call. "Caroline!" The insistent voice rang louder; it was a very determined voice. A sleepy Angora cat scowled reprovingly at its violence; a gray and pink parrot mimicked its hortatory note, but after that the midsummer silence settled down again. Only the bees droned heavily among the heavy August roses.

"Don't nag her, dear; it doesn't do any good," a sleepy contralto, rich as creamy chocolate, crooned out of a scarlet-fringed hammock.

"That's all very well for you, Edith, you don't have the responsibility of her. Her father wants her to read a little history every day, and this is the best time--it's too hot for anything else."

"Rather hot for history, dear?"

"It's not too hot for the Moonstone, I notice! She's been at that since breakfast, steadily. Not a word for any one."

"'Moonstone' sounds cool, anyhow," drawled the contralto appeasingly.

"Oh, Edith! You're as bad as the child herself!"

"She's fourteen, dear."

"Fourteen! What is that?"

"Anything but a child, when it's you, Sis. You talk to her as if she were ten."

"You'd think she was, if you saw her riding that donkey--a great girl like her!"

"There it is, dear! One moment she's a baby, the next she's a great girl! It's hard on her, Sis."

"But, Edith--that donkey!"

"Poor Rose-Marie! I rode him myself--bareback and standing up!--when I was fifteen--at a circus. Do you remember?"

The voice chuckled unwillingly. "You always were a tomboy, Deedee! Do you remember Joe's bull fight?"

Caroline was not a hundred yards away, sheltering under a heavy arbor vitae, flat on her stomach.

"And the lemonade stand!" Contralto cried, with a rich swoop of laughter. Their voices took up a happy canon of gold memories; there were no more cries for Caroline.

She was not a hundred yards away from the sister aunts, sheltering under a heavy arbor vitae, flat on her stomach, her nose glued to the reprehensible Moonstone: that she had heard the calls and resented them the scowl between her eyebrows exhibited. Behind her, patiently at graze, a small, mouse-colored donkey stood, shifting a pair of quaint panniers from side to side and wagging his scarlet ear tassels thoughtfully.

The chapter ended, Caroline rose, peered across to the piazza, nodded to herself at the flow of voices and shrugged her shoulders.

"Good old Aunt Deedee!" she muttered, "she choked her off! Now, for heaven's sake, don't bray, Rose-Marie, and perhaps we can get away. I wouldn't dare get over to the house for a luncheon; we'll have to get along with sweet-boughs."

She slipped the book into one pannier, a cushion into the other and threw a worn steamer rug over the little beast's back; Caroline was a luxurious lounger and rarely traveled without her sumpter mule and his impedimenta. She led him with practiced quiet away from the house and paused under the gnarled old sweet-bough tree: the greenish-yellow, almost translucent globes dotted the lush, warm grass, their languorous sweet filled the air. Selecting a dozen thoughtfully, she added them to the donkey's load, and they went on at a foot pace, through the slowly reddening Baldwins and seek-no-furthers, the tiny lady-apples and the king-of-Tompkins-counties, through the belt of dead, warped fruit trees, blighted and gray--"like those Dore pictures," she murmured to Rose-Marie--down three, crumbling brick steps, where the little fellow picked his way as daintily as a careful lady, and across the dusty road into a pasture trail that led to a wood stretch, sparse at first, thicker as one plunged in deeper. The sun filtered through in delicious diamonds; here and there a resinous pine, steeped in heat, threw out a cloud of balmy odor; a chipmunk scuttered across their path, clicking nervously, only to squat on his haunches and stare beadily at Rose-Marie, taut with quivering curiosity. Caroline scowled at him.

"Rise of the Dutch Republic!" she muttered angrily. "I think not!"

The chipmunk winked sympathetically.

"Your father says it's as interesting as any novel" (with startling mimicry of the piazza voice). "I notice *they* don't read it!"

The chipmunk's place was empty; only a slight stir among the leaves marked his path.

Caroline's eyes widened, grew dreamy. She leaned her sharp elbows on Rose-Marie's hairy back and threw her weight on him thoughtfully: he checked and stood like a table.

"Do you suppose there really are regular roads through the trees, like the monkeys took Mowgli on?" she queried.

Rose-Marie waved his long, hairy ears meditatively, but said nothing.

"I don't mean in any fairy way," she explained hastily, "but just scientifically. It might be. Corners and turns and short-cuts--why not? they all know them. He may be running home by a back way, now, to call his children to look at Rose-Marie; it's as good as a whole circus parade to them, I suppose. And they talk to each other...."

Held in a muse, she leaned against the donkey; the moments slipped by. She lost all count of time. Her eyes stared emptily at some sunny flicker, some dappled pattern of leaf work; her ears were filled with the forest drone, the mysterious murmur made up of so many nameless instruments that only the Great Conductor can classify and number them. Time ceased to be.

At length she woke with a start, shook herself coltishly, and they pushed on. The wood grew thicker; now and then Rose-Marie had to force his way along the tiny trail; his red tassels caught on the twigs.

"I'll tell you what," Caroline began, suddenly, "I'm going to try that wood track to-day and see where it goes, to the very end. It must go somewhere. Where do they haul the wood from, if there isn't some place at the end? Come on, Rose-Marie!"

At a point where the trail forked she led the donkey along the wider and less interesting way. It was ridged and rutty, and Rose-Marie sniffed disgustedly as he slipped among the gnarled roots; the apples bumped and slid in the pannier. After a while Caroline stopped under a tree, ate three of the apples, gave the donkey two, and resting in an artfully constructed nest of rug and pillow, dipped refreshingly into the Moonstone.

"That's a kind of luncheon," she remarked philosophically, "and now we'll start again. I'll go to the end of this, if it takes all day!"

They settled down to a dogged pace and after an hour, during which the wood grew thinner by imperceptible degrees, found themselves on a relatively easy track that forked suddenly into a genuine country road, stretching far to left and right of them. It was a new country to Caroline; she found no landmarks whatever. The road glared with heat, the dust was powdery, the shade nowhere, once they had cleared the wood. She sighed with fatigue and emptiness; it seemed a long pull, and the harbor far from worth the voyage, when all was said and done.

"What *did* we want to get to this nasty hot road for, Rose-Marie?" she cried pettishly, shifting from one long leg to the other, shrugging a nervous, bony shoulder. "Oh, what's the sense of anything, anyway?"

Rose-Marie turned a patient, clear brown eye toward her and shook his head vaguely. Gnats buzzed about his flexible ears, and with a swishing fanning motion he displaced them.

"If my back aches," she warned him callously, "you'll have to take me home, you know! Tired or not. It feels as if it might, any minute. I never used to get tired, this way."

A half mile along the road, set off to the left, among cool trees and behind a great well sweep, she perceived suddenly a white farm house. It stood alone, neighborless and well up on a drained, southerly slope; smoke rose languidly from one of its chimneys.

"Perhaps they'll give us some milk, Rose-Marie," said Caroline, "and farms usually have cookies. If there are any children there, you can give 'em rides to pay for it!"

Rose-Marie nodded and they went on with some spirit. As they turned into the deep front yard Caroline almost wept with comfort and a pathetic sense of the wayworn wanderer on the edge of home and rest, so the place breathed of these. Clear and white with the faded whiteness of old New England white shingles, it drowsed under its elms; a fire of nasturtiums smoldered along the broken, flagged path that led to it; phlox and "Bouncing Bets" crowded up among the once formal bed of larkspur on each side the sagging flagstone steps, beneath the simple entrance porch. Old-fashioned green paper shades hung evenly half way down the clean windows; the door stood hospitably ajar.

"Just wait there, Rose-Marie, till I find out about things," said Caroline, tapping lightly on the door. The house was perfectly silent. She tapped again, and it seemed that something heavy moved across the floor in a farther room, but there was no answer. Pushing the door open gently, she stepped in and stood surprised, for she found herself not in the stiff, unused country "parlor" she had expected, but a neat bedroom. A quaint four-poster with a fluted valance, a polished mahogany chest of drawers, a stand by the bed with a Bible worn to a soft gray and a night lamp on it, some faded photographs tacked to the white walls--this was an odd reception room. She hesitated, and again the faint rumbling sound pointed to some person stirring and she went into the next room.

Here was a clean, kindly kitchen of the best; a swept floor, a freshly blackened cooking stove, a row of bright tins. It was carpeted with faded oilcloth, but rag rugs, washed dim and soft-toned, lay here and there, and the room was so large that the spread table, standing in an ell, made only a pleasant episode in it, a certainty of restoring food at needful times.

It was evidently a sitting room as well, in the primitive, clear fashion that groups all domestic life about the central fire that feeds it; a stand with books, a sewing basket, oil lamps for evening reading, all not too far from brick-shaped pans where unmistakable bread rose under a clean, folded, red cloth. The whole place seemed waiting, quietly, hospitably waiting, for just such an empty, discouraged pilgrim as Caroline.

She sank gratefully into a high-backed arm-chair, stuffed to just the hollow of her tired back, covered with a clean, homely patchwork, and drew out the faithful Moonstone from under her elbow.

"Someone'll come soon," she assured herself, and slipped into the story as a hot swimmer slips off his sunny rock into the waiting blue. Another world, a delicious, smooth element--Romance itself--received her, and of hunger and heat, thirst and the fatigue of the road, she knew no more than the blessed dead themselves....

A sharp tap at the farther door disturbed her, and instinctively she called, "Come in!"

A swift, swishing step brushed across the bedroom and a slender, angry-eyed young woman poised like a gull before her.

"Can I get something to eat here?"

Her voice was at once imperious, irritated, unsure of itself. It could not be that the owner of this voice, dressed with that insolent simplicity that need not consider the costly patience of the work-women, ringed like a dowager with great audacious squares of ruby and white diamond, booted and hatted as one who wears and throws away, with a bag of golden mesh on her wrist to pay the price of any whim--it could not be that she doubted what answer she should receive. And yet she did--did, and had before this: so much was evident at first sight. She was a curious gypsyish type, for all her *Rue de la Paix* curvings and slim, inevitable folds and pleats; a full, drooping mouth in a slender dark face, great brown eyes and heavy waves of black hair. She looked discontented and ready to make some one suffer for it.

"Well--can I?" she repeated, as Caroline stared. "I'm ready to pay, of course."

"I don't know--I don't live here," said Caroline shortly. She felt untidy and badly dressed beside this graceful thing standing in a faint cloud of subtle perfume of her own; her sleeves were too short and her heavy shoes knobby and worn. She wanted furiously to smell sweet like that; and the golden bag--oh, to feel it, powerful and careless, on her wrist!

"Can you find out?" said the girl, eyeing the room attentively; "my car broke down--the man left it in the road and went

to Ogdenville for gasoline. I've got to rest somewhere."

"I don't know anything about it," Caroline said coldly. "I'm waiting for someone to come, myself. There's nobody here. I don't live here at all."

With that, and because she was embarrassed and cross and hungry, she opened her book ostentatiously and affected to read busily. The girl frowned angrily a moment, then gave a foreign little shrug of her shoulder and settled herself in a low rocking chair near the bread, her hands loose in her lap. The old clock ticked reprovingly through the hot and conscious silence of the room, but there was no other sound. Caroline could not have lifted her eyes to save her life, and the older girl's lips curled scornfully: her eyelids were sullen.

After a few moments of this intolerable stillness the same low rumbling sound was heard again, this time moving nearer. Something was advancing to the kitchen from a farther room, and as they looked instinctively at the door it pushed open slowly and a sort of foot rest upon wheels appeared; two large wheels followed, and a woman pushed her chair into the kitchen. She was a large, good-looking woman, middle-aged, and not weak, evidently, for she managed her chair easily with one hand; the other held a slice of pink ham on a white platter in her lap. Her face, under a placid parting of grayish fair hair, was rather high colored than of an invalid pallor, her chest broad and deep, her blue eyes at once kind and keen. She wore a neat dress of dark-blue print with a prim, old-fashioned linen collar and a blue bow, a white apron around her plump waist almost covered the patchwork quilt that wrapped her from the hips down: a shell comb showed slightly above her crisp hair. As she faced her two angry guests a smile of unmistakable sincerity and delight greeted them.

"Well, of all things!" she cried eagerly; "how long, 'you been here?"

Caroline waited sulkily for her social superior; the girl was undoubtedly a "young lady." Her errand was soon explained, her question asked.

"Something to eat?" echoed their delighted hostess. "Well, I should think so! I'm just getting my dinner. Of course I'm all alone, this time o' day, but I always say if I'm good enough to cook it well, I'm good enough to eat it comfortable, and I sit down to table just's if the family was all here. There's some that believe in a bite and a bit, when the men folks are out, but I never did. And then--" she blushed shyly like a girl--"I always want to feel ready in case anyone should come. Just in case. He says it's foolishness, but look at you two, now! How'd I feel if I wasn't prepared! And once--in April, 'twas--a sewing-machine man came. I had ham then, too."

She beamed on them, frankly overjoyed in their company, and in the mellow warmth of that honest pleasure the fog and anger in the room rolled back like mist under a noon sun, and Caroline unbent, named herself, and mentioned her donkey and their woodland journey.

"You don't say!"

Quick as a flash their hostess was across the room and peering through the window.

"Well, of all the funny little fellows! I never saw one before, that I remember. Aren't those red tossels neat, though! I s'pose he's tame?"

Caroline put him through his paces, as he came like a dog at her call, and she of the wheel chair applauded like a child at a Punch and Judy.

"We saw so many of those in Italy," said the older girl. "I rode one in the Alps."

The woman's face flushed a deep, quick red; she gripped the arms of her chair and stared at the nervous little jeweled creature before her as if she were a vision of the night.

"Have you been to Italy?" she cried eagerly, "not really!"

"Me? Oh, yes, I've been all over Europe," said the girl indifferently. "Why? Do you like it?"

Now it was the woman who echoed, "Me?"

She flashed a whimsical look at Caroline; instinct taught her that they were two to one, here.

"Why, dear, I've never been out of Lockwood's Corners in my life!"

Simple, rude incredulity pushed out the girl's lip.

"Nonsense!" she said brusquely, "that's ridiculous!"

"Maybe it is," her hostess answered quietly, "but it's true, all the same. I never have." Gold-bag did not blush for her rudeness, for the simple reason that she did not realize it, and Caroline suddenly felt less embarrassed by her. Girls of that age were too old to talk so pettishly to people not in their own families, and she twiddled her fingers too much, anyway, and stared too much, or else, again, she didn't look at one enough.

"You've been to New York, haven't you?" she asked abruptly.

"Never," said the woman. "I've been this way since I was seventeen. I'm a pretty heavy woman, you know, and they couldn't put me on a train very well. So--"

"There's plenty of room in a drawing-room car."

"I guess we couldn't afford that," said the woman simply.

There was an awkward pause; Caroline blushed furiously. How horrid it all was! But their hostess brushed it away in a moment.

"And here you are hungry!" she cried; "the idea! I'll get this ham right on and fry up some potatoes--I'll do them French! I've got some fresh raised-doughnuts--I got the prize for them at the county fair, years ago, so I know they're all right--and some summer apple sauce; 'tain't much, with summer apples, but I put in lemon peel and a taste o' last year's cider--it makes a relish, anyhow; and I've got some fine sweet-pickled watermelon rind. I could have had sponge cakes, if I'd only known! Would you care to try a cut pie? The sewing-machine man said he hadn't tasted anything like my squash pie in years. It was cut, too."

With incredible swiftness she rolled from table to buttery, from stove to larder. As the pink ham curled and sputtered in its savory juices, she turned an earnest face to the girl who watched her curiously.

"Can't you tell us a little about Italy, while we're waiting?" she begged.

"It's full of fleas," said the traveler carelessly, "and moldy old places--it's awfully cold, too. I wore my furs a lot of the time. It smells bad nearly everywhere. Do you stay here in the winter, too?"

"I've stayed here forty-five winters"--she turned the ham capably--"and I expect to stay as many more as the Lord spares my life! I was born here. So was father. Grandfather was born right in the Corners. In eighty-eight we were snowed up a week here. Mr. Winterpine--that's my husband--had bronchitis, and he couldn't get out to tend to the stock. Edgar--that was the hired man's name--was only twenty, and I had to help with one of the cows; I went out in my chair through a snow tunnel!"

She chuckled reminiscently and her guests listened, fascinated.

"We were caught in a bad storm outside of St. Petersburg, once," Gold-bag volunteered. "If it hadn't been for J. G. we'd have gone out, probably. As it was, the driver lost a finger."

"St. Petersburg, Russia?" the woman inquired respectfully, her skillet full of potatoes colored like autumn beech leaves.

The girl nodded. "J. G. swore at the man, so he didn't *dare* die," she continued, with a hard little grin; "and we just about pulled through."

"Who is J. G.?" asked Caroline abruptly.

"J. G. Terwilliger," she answered simply. It was as if one had said "Edward Seventh" or "Adelina Patti" or "P. T. Barnum."

"Who's he?"

"He's my father, for one thing. I suppose you know who he is as well as anybody else."

"I never heard of him," Caroline said carelessly, "are you all ready, now, Mrs. Winterpine?"

"He is the greatest mining expert in the world," the girl declared emphatically, "and I don't know where you've lived not to know it. You--" with a look at the woman, "you know him, of course?"

"I don't know anybody of that name, no," the woman admitted; "but then, you know, we don't know much, 'way off here, about city people."

"There hasn't been a daily paper for ten days that hasn't had his name in it," the girl remarked dryly.

Mrs. Winterpine wiped her face, flanked the ham with the potatoes, assembled an incredible array of sweets and

relishes in odd, thick little glass dishes, and with a wave of her hand indicated her guests' places.

"We take the *Lockwood's Corners Clarion*," she explained pacifically.

They addressed themselves to the meal, a strange trio. Caroline, usually a hopeless chatterbox, fell somehow and inevitably into the listener's seat. Their hostess could no longer be denied: her thirst gleamed in her eyes, and flesh and blood could not have withstood her plea for tidings of those distant, rosy lands whose laden wharves she could never see, nor ever glimpse their tiled roofs under foreign sunsets, their white spires beneath mysterious moons. Their clothes: was it true that the French wore wooden shoes? She had read that men in Italy walked in gay capes, colored like birds. Was there water in the streets, and were boats really their carriages? Did soldiers, red-coated, demand passports? Had her guest seen the snow tops of green slopes? Did dogs drag milk carts for white-capped women?

The girl, sulky at first, yielded finally, and in quick, nervous phrases poured out of her full budget. Taken from her convent school in California at fifteen, she had roamed the world with the tireless "J. G." From Panama to Alaska, from Cairo to Christiania, with her uncreased Paris frocks and the discontented line between her dark eyes, she had steamed and sailed and ridden; she had ridden a camel in Algeria, a gelding in Hyde Park, a broncho on the Western plains.

"Why do you call your father 'J. G.'?" Caroline demanded suddenly.

"Do you like 'Klondike Jim' any better? That's his other name," Gold-bag shot at her defiantly.

Then came strange tales of a flaring, glaring mining camp: lights and liquor and bared knives, rough men and rougher words, and in the midst a thin, big-eyed little creature in the hand of a burly, red-shirted miner, with the very gift of gold under his matted hair, the scent for it in his blunt nostrils, the feel for it in his callous finger tips. Klondike Jim! He had made for his Klondike as a bloodhound makes for the quarry; he could not be mistaken. Night and day she had been with him, his first claim named for her--the Madeline--his first earnings a gold belt for her childish waist!

And then, money and money and more money. Rivers of it, ponds of it.

"If J. G. said there was copper under Fifth Avenue, they'd dig it up to-morrow!"

"You must be real proud of him," said Mrs. Winterpine genially.

"I used to be," the girl answered, with her mouth a little awry.

"My dear, my dear!"

"Oh, yes," she cried angrily, pushing back her chair and facing them; "all very well, but who are we? Who was my mother? Who was my grandfather? Where did we come from? Will a sapphire bracelet answer me that, do you think? Who knows us? 'Miss Maddy Money Bags'! How long do you think I'd stay in that convent? Who does J. G. know? Hotelmen and barkeeps and presidents of things! If you could see the counts he wanted me to marry! If you could hear the couriers laugh at him!"

"But think of all the traveling you've done, dear! What things to remember! How happy--"

"Happy! I hate it. As J. G. says, I hate it like--well, I just hate it," she concluded, with propriety, if a little lamely.

Something in the look she cast around the warm, clean kitchen struck the woman suddenly. "You don't mean you'd rather live here--*here*?" she exclaimed amazedly.

"Don't you like it?" queried Madeline sharply.

Mrs. Winterpine considered a moment. "You see, it's my home," she began. The girl's dry laugh interrupted her.

"That's just it. It's your home," she repeated. "We haven't any. That's the idea. What's the use of traveling if you can't come home? And we can't, ever. Unless we go back to the Klondike," she added satirically.

There was a long pause. It seemed that the girl was slowly undressing herself before them: travel and money and gold bag and scented linings slipped from her like so many petticoats and left her thin and cold between them, warm as they were in their solid homespun of kin and hearth. Lean and empty, a houseless, flitting, little shadow, she had scoured the world and sat now, envious, by a kitchen fire. How strange!

Mrs. Winterpine gathered the dishes with accustomed hands and piled them by a pan of hot, soapy water. Caroline, sobered, rose to help her with the instinctive courtesy of the home-trained child, but drew back at her shaken head and waving finger, and followed her glance toward her other guest, who stared morosely into the dooryard, her chin in her ringed, brown hand. She was evidently not far from tears--in a nervous crisis.

"I wonder if you'd help me with these dishes, Madeline?" said the woman quietly, and with a start the girl rose, stood meekly while a checked apron was tied about her waist and received the moist, shining ware from the plump hands without a word. She appeared to have utterly forgotten Caroline.

After a few moments of rhythmical click and splash, a few journeys from sink to dresser, the tension broke quietly and the air was aware of it, as when a threatened thunderstorm goes by above and dissipates in wind. Feeling this, Mrs. Winterpine began to talk softly, half to herself it seemed, for her voice took on the tone of one who is much alone and thinks aloud.

"All my life I've been crazy for travel. I used to read my geography book till I wore it out nearly; the exports and the imports, you know? And the pictures of those Arabian men with white turbans, and the South Sea Islanders riding on surf boards--I can see 'em now. There was a castle for Germany, with the moon behind it and the Rhine--do you know 'Bingen on the Rhine'? I love the sound of that. And the Black Forest! Think of it!"

She paused with a platter dripping in her hand, her eyes fixed; and so strong was the compulsion of her vision that to Caroline, vibrant as a wind harp to such suggestion, the splash of the water in the tin was the very tinkle of Undine's mystic stream and *Kuhleborn*, that wicked uncle-brook dashed in cold floods over the belated knight in the dark German wood!

"I dreamed once about an Indian temple," the woman went on, "and you'd really think I'd been there, I saw it so plain. Fat priests and that big idol that sits cross-legged, all made of brass, and smiling; and such funny drums and pipes--creepy music. The heathens brought wreaths and stretched out on their stomachs flat on the ground. I'd read it somewhere, I guess. I could smell the flowers, like pond lilies and honeysuckle."

She poured away the dish water, wiped the pan and began rinsing her towels and cloths in a small wooden tub bound with tin. The girl moved aimlessly about the room, fingering the worn furniture.

"That clock looks awfully old," she said abruptly, pausing before a square high Dutch affair with a ridiculous picture of Mount Vernon, wobbly-columned, let in at the bottom.

"Goodness, yes! That clock--why, that clock was a wedding present to Lorenzo's great aunt Valeria--she was a Swedenborgian, I believe. She used to have trances and she could tell you where things were lost. That chair by the window was her mother's. It's made with wooden nails, dowels, they call 'em."

"Did she live here, too?"

"Yes, indeed. The Winterpines are great hands to stay in one place. And the way they come back to die! I'm half Winterpine myself--he and I were second cousins--and I well remember Uncle Milton Winterpine coming home from Java to die in his bed. He was a sailor, and how I used to hang around and coax him to tell me what he'd seen! I remember how he staggered into the house--Mother Winterpine was living then.

"'Here, Esther, here's a fifty-pound sack of Old Gov'ment Javvy for ye, green, and fit for the president's table as soon's it gits ripe,' he says, 'and you won't have to nurse me long;' and we got his boots off and helped him to bed. He never left it. He brought me a parrot, that trip, sort of indigo color and pink. It used to set me thinking of the hot countries and pineapples and natives, and those tall trees with all the leaves on top--palms, I guess I mean. It seems the stars are lower, there, and look bigger; did you ever see the Southern Cross?"

"Oh, yes. It's like any other stars. The first officer on the P & O line always asks me to come and see it. Then he proposes. J. G. plays poker the whole trip. He can't lose. He says it's tiresome."

The strange dialogue went on for what might have been an hour. Far ports and foreign streets, full sails and thronged inns, the fountains of paved courts, the market squares of dark and vivid nations, blossomed from the tongue of this chair-bound woman in her farmhouse prison; and from the blind, unhappy voyager came halting, telegraphic phrases: climate and train schedules and over-lavish fees, miles and meals and petty miseries. No sunset had stained her hurried way, no handed flowers from shy street children had sweetened it. And ever and again she returned insistently to the barnyard interests of the Winterpines!

"See here!" she burst out suddenly, "I'll tell you what I'll do! I told J. G. that I wouldn't go another step with him--mascot or no mascot. He wants to go over the Himalayas--to start next week--he has an idea. But if you'll go, I'll take you! What do you say? My guest, of course: it don't cost you a penny."

The woman turned utterly white. Where her knuckles gripped the arms of the chair they showed a bluish tinge.

"Me? Me?" she whispered. Her eyes fell to her helpless knees.

"Oh, you needn't think of that at all," said Madeline. "I knew a man who didn't *have* any legs, even, that went round the world and up the Pyramids. He had money."

The woman looked wildly about. Her eyes fell on Caroline and this seemed to bring her into some sort of focus again; the color came back to her face.

"That was lovely for you to think of, dear," she said, breathlessly yet; "but--but--for a moment I forgot.... I--I didn't think of Lorenzo!"

"Oh, we'll get a housekeeper for Lorenzo," Madeline said lightly; "he'll do very well, won't he? One man can't be much to take care of--you haven't any children?"

The easy, equal tone, the bright, dry impudence of this little air plant, this rootless, aimless bubble skipping over the bottomless deeps of life, brought the dazzled woman quickly to herself. She looked compassionately at the girl.

"No," she said gravely, her hands unconsciously flying to her deep breast; "we haven't any children. And he's not much to take care of--for his wife. But he wouldn't care for a housekeeper."

"Oh!" her eyes fell uneasily. "Then we'll take him along!" She recovered herself.

Mrs. Winterpine sent her chair with a swift push close to the girl and laid one hand on her hot forehead, pushing back the thick hair.

"What a gen'rous little thing you are!" she cried wonderingly. "But where were you brought up, child? Lorenzo can't jump and run off to the Himalaya Mountains like that! It takes him a long time to make up his mind. He--he don't care for travel, besides. He's a regular Winterpine. And there's the stock. No. I guess I'll keep on doing my traveling at home. That book you said you'd send...."

"I'll send a dozen--fifty!" the girl cried impulsively. "I'll bring them up from New York to-morrow! I'll bring some pictures, too. The Alps and Venice and the snapshots I took on the Nile! You seem to know how they look, well enough!"

"Yes, I know, I know...." the woman repeated dreamily.

"Don't you want to go?" Madeline urged curiously.

Again Mrs. Winterpine turned white.

"Then why don't you?"

"Child, child!" cried she of the chair, "didn't I tell you he don't care for travel? We can't do as we like in this world--we don't live alone. We're placed. There's a hundred things.... Where were you brought up?"

Madeline's face flushed a dark, heavy red. Her light confidence drowned in it; she dropped her eyes.

"In the Klondike!" she said sullenly, "I told you."

A loud, whirring horn cut through the country quiet. A great rattle of gear and chain stormed along the road.

"There's the machine!" the girl said sulkily; "I must go. It's fifteen miles to Ogdenville, and a vile road. Good-by--I'll be up with the books in a day or two."

She moved to the door.

"If I can't come--I change my mind awfully--I'll send them just the same, and--and--" a curious sense of struggle, a visible effort at thought for another, an attempt to grasp an alien point of view, dawned in the defiant dark eyes--"I'll write to you from India, if you want. Would you like it? I can take snap shots...."

"You're real gen'rous, dear," said her hostess, and wheeling quickly to her, kissed her warmly.

She was gone in a cloud of dust. Caroline and the woman sat in silence. At last Rose-Marie yawned pitifully and his mistress got up with reluctance.

"Good-by, Mrs. Winterpine," she said soberly; "I have to go home. They'll be anxious about me. But I'll come again."

"Do, my dear," said the other; "this'll be a wonderful summer for me, with so much company. Wonderful. He'll be interested. But you run right on: don't let the folks worry. I never had any children, but I always had my heart set on a daughter. Good-by."

Caroline and the donkey walked slowly off toward the wood, which cast cool shadows. They vanished into its depths,

and Mrs. Winterpine sat and watched them kindly from her chair, as one watches off the traveler bound for far and golden countries.

"He'd have liked that young one," she said softly.

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