

One Man in His Time

Ellen Anderson Gholson Glasgow



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ONE MAN IN HIS TIME

by

ELLEN GLASGOW

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"One man in his time plays many parts."

NOTE

No character in this book was drawn from any actual person past or present.

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BOOKS BY ELLEN GLASGOW



ONE MAN IN HIS TIME



CHAPTER I

THE SHADOW

The winter's twilight, as thick as blown smoke, was drifting through the Capitol Square. Already the snow covered walks and the frozen fountains were in shadow; but beyond the irregular black boughs of the trees the sky was still suffused with the burning light of the sunset. Over the head of the great bronze Washington a single last gleam of sunshine shot suddenly before it vanished amid the spires and chimneys of the city, which looked as visionary and insubstantial as the glowing horizon.

Stopping midway of the road, Stephen Culpeper glanced back over the vague streets and the clearer distance, where the approaching dusk spun mauve and silver cobwebs of air. From that city, it seemed to him, a new and inscrutable force—the force of an idea—had risen within the last few months to engulf the Square and all that the Square had ever meant in his life. Though he was only twenty-six, he felt that he had watched the decay and dissolution of a hundred years. Nothing of the past remained untouched. Not the old buildings, not the old trees, not even the old memories. Clustering traditions had fled in the white blaze of electricity; the quaint brick walks, with their rich colour in the sunlight, were beginning to disappear beneath the expressionless mask of concrete. It was all changed since his father's or his grandfather's day; it was all obvious and cheap, he thought; it was all ugly and naked and undistinguished—yet the tide of the new ideas was still rising. Democracy, relentless, disorderly, and strewn with the wreckage of finer things, had overwhelmed the world of established customs in which he lived.

As he lifted his face to the sky, his grave young features revealed a subtle kinship to the statues beneath the mounted Washington in the drive, as if both flesh and bronze had been moulded by the dominant spirit of race. Like the heroes of the Revolution, he appeared a stranger in an age which had degraded manners and enthroned commerce; and like them also he seemed to survey the present from some inaccessible height of the past. Dignity he had in abundance, and a certain mellow, old-fashioned quality; yet, in spite of his well-favoured youth, he was singularly lacking in sympathetic appeal. Already people were beginning to say that they "admired Culpeper; but he was a bit of a prig, and they couldn't get really in touch with him." His attitude of mind, which was passive but critical, had developed the faculties of observation rather than the habits of action. As a member of the community he was indifferent and amiable, gay and ironic. Only the few who had seen his reserve break down before the rush of an uncontrollable impulse suspected that there were rich veins of feeling buried beneath his conventional surface, and that he cherished an inarticulate longing for heroic and splendid deeds. The war had left him with a nervous malady which he had never entirely overcome; and this increased both his romantic dissatisfaction with his life and his inability to make a sustained effort to change it.

The sky had faded swiftly to pale orange; the distant buildings appeared to swim toward him in the silver air; and the naked trees barred the white slopes with violet shadows. In the topmost branches of an old sycamore the thinnest fragment of a new moon hung trembling like a luminous thread. The twilight was intensely still, and the noises of the city fell with a metallic sound on his ears, as if a multitude of bells were ringing about him. While he walked on past the bald outline of the restored and enlarged Capitol, this imaginary concert grew gradually fainter, until he heard above it presently the sudden closing of a window in the Governor's mansion—as the old gray house was called.

Pausing abruptly, the young man frowned as his eyes fell on the charming Georgian front, which presided like a serene and spacious memory over the modern utilitarian purpose that was devastating the Square. Alone in its separate plot, broad, low, and hospitable, the house stood there divided and withdrawn from the restless progress and the age of concrete—a modest reminder of the centuries when men had built well because they had time, before they built, to stop and think and remember. The arrested dignity of the past seemed to the young man to hover above the old mansion within its setting of box hedges and leafless lilac shrubs and snow-laden magnolia trees. He saw the house contrasted against the crude surroundings of the improved and disfigured Square, and against the house, attended by all its stately traditions, he saw the threatening figure of Gideon Vetch. "So it has come to this," he thought resentfully, with his gaze on the doorway where a round yellow globe was shining. Ragged frost-coated branches framed the sloping roof, and the white columns of the square side porches emerged from the black crags of magnolia trees. In the centre of the circular drive, invaded by concrete, a white heron poured a stream of melting ice from a distorted throat.

The shutters were not closed at the lower windows, and the firelight flickered between the short curtains of some brownish muslin. As Stephen passed the gate on his way down the hill, a figure crossed one of the windows, and his frown deepened as he recognized, or imagined that he recognized, the shadow of Gideon Vetch.

"Gideon Vetch!" At the sound of the name the young man threw back his head and laughed softly. A Gideon Vetch was Governor of Virginia! Here also, he told himself, half humorously, half bitterly, democracy had won. Here also the destroying idea had triumphed. In sight of the bronze Washington, this Gideon Vetch, one of "the poor white trash," born in a circus tent, so people said, the demagogue of demagogues in Stephen's opinion—this Gideon Vetch had become Governor of Virginia! Yet the placid course of Stephen's life flowed on precisely as it had flowed ever since he could remember, and the dramatic hand of Washington had not fallen. It was still so recent; it had come about so unexpectedly, that people—at least the people the young man knew and esteemed—were still trying to explain how it had happened. The old party had been sleeping, of course; it had grown too confident, some said too corpulent; and it had slept on peacefully, in spite of the stirring strength of the labour leaders, in spite of the threatening coalition of the new factions, in spite even of the swift revolt against the stubborn forces of habit, of tradition, of overweening authority. His mother, he knew, held the world war responsible; but then his mother was so constituted that she was obliged to blame somebody or something for whatever happened. Yet others, he admitted, as well as his mother, held the war responsible for Gideon Vetch—as if the great struggle had cast him out in some gigantic cataclysm, as if it had broken through the once solid ground of established order, and had released into the world all the explosive gases of disintegration, of destruction.

For himself, the young man reflected now, he had always thought otherwise. It was a period, he felt, of humbug radicalism, of windbag eloquence; yet he possessed both wit and discernment enough to see that, though ideas might explode in empty talk, still it took ideas to make the sort of explosion that was deafening one's ears. All the flat formula of the centuries could not produce a single Gideon Vetch. Such men were part of the changing world; they answered not to reasoned argument, but to the loud crash of breaking idols. Stephen hated Vetch with all his heart, but he acknowledged him. He did not try to evade the man's tremendous veracity, his integrity of being, his inevitableness. An inherent intellectual honesty compelled Stephen to admit that, "the demagogue", as he called him, had his appropriate place in the age that produced him—that he existed rather as an outlet for political tendencies than as the product of international violence. He was more than a theatrical attitude—a torrent of words. Even a free country—and Stephen thought sentimentally of America as "a free country"—must have its tyrannies of opinion, and

consequently its rebels against current convictions. In the older countries he had imagined that it might be possible to hold with the hare and run with the hounds; but in the land of opportunity for all there was less reason to be astonished when the hunted turned at last into the hunter. Where every boy was taught that he might some day be President, why should one stand amazed when the ambitious son of a circus rider became Governor of Virginia? After all, a fair field and no favours was the best that the most conservative of politicians—the best that even John Benham could ask.

Yes, there was a cause, there was a reason for the miracle of disorder, or it would not have happened. The hour had called forth the man; but the man had been there awaiting the strokes, listening, listening, with his ear to the wind. It had been a triumph of personality, one of those rare dramatic occasions when the right man and the appointed time come together. This the young man admitted candidly in the very moment when he told himself that he detested the demagogue and all his works. A man who consistently made his bid for the support of the radical element! Who stirred up the forces of discontent because he could harness them to his chariot! A man who was born in a circus tent, and who still performed in public the tricks of a mountebank! That this man had power, Stephen granted ungrudgingly; but it was power over the undisciplined, the half-educated, the mentally untrained. It was power, as John Benham had once remarked with a touch of hyperbole, over empty stomachs.

There were persons in Stephen's intimate circle (there are such persons even in the most conservative communities) who contended that Vetch was in his way a rude genius. Judge Horatio Lancaster Page, for instance, insisted that the Governor had a charm of his own, that, "he wasn't half bad to look at if you caught him smiling," that he could even reason "like one of us," if you granted him his premise. After the open debate between Vetch and Benham—the great John Benham, hero of war and peace, and tireless labourer in the vineyard of public service—after this memorable discussion, Judge Horatio Lancaster Page had remarked, in his mild, unpolemical tone, that "though John had undoubtedly carried off the flowers of rhetoric, there was a good deal of wholesome green stuff about that fellow Vetch." But everybody knew that a man with a comical habit of mind could not be right.

Again the figure crossed the firelight between the muslin curtains, and to Stephen Culpeper, standing alone in the snow outside, that large impending presence embodied all that he and his kind had hated and feared for generations. It embodied among other disturbances the law of change; and to Stephen and his race of pleasant livers the two sinister forces in the universe were change and death. After all, they had made the world, these pleasant livers; and what were those other people—the people represented by that ominous shadow—except the ragged prophets of disorder and destruction?

Turning away, Stephen descended the wide brick walk which fell gradually, past the steps of the library and the gaunt railing round a motionless fountain, to the broad white slope of the Square with its smoky veil of twilight. Farther away he saw the high iron fence and heard the clanging of passing street cars. On his left the ugly shape of the library resembled some crude architectural design sketched on parchment.

As he approached the fountain, a small figure in a red cape detached itself suddenly from the mesh of shadows, and he recognized Patty Vetch, the irrepressible young daughter of the Governor. He had seen her the evening before at a charity ball, where she had been politely snubbed by what he thought of complacently as "our set." From the moment when he had first looked at her across the whirling tulle and satin skirts in the ballroom, he had decided that she embodied as obviously as her father, though in a different fashion, the qualities which were most offensive both to his personal preferences and his inherited standards of taste. The girl in her scarlet dress, with her dark bobbed hair curling in on her neck, her candid ivory forehead, her provoking blunt nose, her bright red lips, and the inquiring arch of her black eyebrow over her gray-green eyes, had appeared to him absurdly like a picture on the cover of

some cheap magazine. He had heartily disapproved of her, but he couldn't help looking at her. If she had been on the cover of a magazine, he had told himself sternly, he should never have bought it. He had correct ideas of what a lady should be (they were inherited from the early eighties and his mother had implanted them), and he would have known anywhere that Patty Vetch was not exactly a lady. Though he was broad enough in his views to realize that types repeat themselves only in variations, and that girls of to-day are not all that they were in the happy eighties—that one might make up flashily like Geraldine St. John, or dance outrageously like Bertha Underwood, and yet remain in all essential social values "a lady"—still he was aware that the external decorations of a chorus girl could not turn the shining daughter of the St. Johns for an imitation of paste, and, though the nimble Bertha could perform every Jazz motion ever invented, one would never dream of associating her with a circus ring. It was not the things one did that made one appear unrefined, he had concluded at last, but the way that one did them; and Patty Vetch's way was not the prescribed way of his world. Small as she was there was too much of her. She contrived always to be where one was looking. She was too loud, too vivid, too highly charged with vitality; she was too obviously different. If a redbird had flown into the heated glare of the ballroom Stephen's gaze would have followed it with the same startled and fascinated attention.

As the girl approached him now on the snow-covered slope, he was conscious again of that swift recoil from chill disapproval to reluctant attraction. Though she was not beautiful, though she was not even pretty according to the standards with which he was familiar, she possessed what he felt to be a dangerous allurements. He had never imagined that anything so small could be so much alive. The electric light under which she passed revealed the few golden freckles over her childish nose, the gray-green colour of her eyes beneath the black eyelashes, and the sensitive red mouth which looked as soft and sweet as a carnation. It revealed also the absurd shoes of gray suede, with French toes and high and narrow heels, in which she flitted, regardless alike of danger and of common sense, over the slippery ground. The son of a strong-minded though purely feminine mother, he had been trained to esteem discretion in dress almost as highly as rectitude of character in a woman; and by no charitable stretch of the imagination could he endow his first impression of Patty Vetch with either of these attributes.

"It would serve her right if she fell and broke her leg," he thought severely; and the idea of such merited punishment was still in his mind when he heard a sharp gasp of surprise, and saw the girl slip, with a frantic clutch at the air, and fall at full length on the shining ground. When he sprang forward and bent over her, she rose quickly to her knees and held out what he thought at first was some queer small muff of feathers.

"Please hold this pigeon," she said, "I saw it this afternoon, and I came out to look for it. Somebody has broken its wings."

"If you came out to walk on ice," he replied with a smile, "why, in Heaven's name, didn't you wear skates or rubbers?"

She gave a short little laugh which was entirely without merriment. "I don't skate, and I never wear rubbers."

He glanced down at her feet in candid disapproval. "Then you mustn't be surprised if you get a sprained ankle."

"I am not surprised," she retorted calmly. "Nothing surprises me. Only my ankle isn't sprained. I am just getting my breath."

She had rested her knee on a bench, and she looked up at him now with bright, enigmatical eyes. "You

don't mind waiting a moment, do you?" she asked. To his secret resentment she appeared to be deliberately appraising either his abilities or his attractions—he wasn't sure which engaged her bold and perfectly unembarrassed regard.

"No, I don't mind in the least," he replied, "but I'd like to get you home if you have really hurt yourself. Of course it was your own fault that you fell," he added truthfully but indiscreetly.

For an instant she seemed to be holding her breath, while he stood there in what he felt to be a foolish attitude, with the pigeon (for all symbolical purposes it might as well have been a dove) clasped to his breast.

"Oh, I know," she responded presently in a voice which was full of suppressed anger. "Everything is my fault—even the fact that I was born!"

Shocked out of his conventional manner, he stared at her in silence, and the pigeon, feeling the strain of his grasp, fluttered softly against his overcoat. What was there indeed for him to do except stare at a lack of reticence, of good-breeding, which he felt to be deplorable? His fine young face, with its characteristic note of reserve, hardened into sternness as he remembered having heard somewhere that the girl's mother had been killed or injured when she was performing some dangerous act at a country fair. Well, one might expect anything, he supposed, from such an inheritance.

"May I help you?" he asked with distant and chilly politeness.

"Oh, can't you wait a minute?" She impatiently thrust aside his offer. "I *must* get my breath again."

It was plain that she was very angry, that she was in the clutch of a smothered yet violent resentment, which, he inferred with reason, was directed less against himself than against some abstract and impersonal law of life. Her rage was not merely temper against a single human being; it was, he realized, a passionate rebellion against Fate or Nature, or whatever she personified as the instrument of the injustice from which she suffered. Her eyes were gleaming through the web of light and shadow; her mouth was trembling; and there was the moisture of tears—or was it only the glitter of ice?—on her round young cheek. And while he looked, chilled, disapproving, unsympathetic, at the vivid flower-like bloom of her face, there seemed to flow from her and envelop him the spirit of youth itself—of youth adventurous, intrepid, and defiant; of youth rejecting the expedient and demanding the impossible; of youth eternally desirable, enchanting, and elusive. It was as if his orderly, complacent, and tranquil soul had plunged suddenly into a bath of golden air. Vaguely disturbed, he drew back and tried to appear dignified in spite of the fluttering pigeon. He had no inclination for a flirtation with the Governor's daughter—intuitively he felt that such an adventure would not be a safe one; but if a flirtation were what she wanted, he told himself, with a sense of impending doom, "there might be trouble." He didn't know what she meant, but whatever it was, she evidently meant it with determination. Already she had impressed him with the quality which, for want of a better word, he thought of as "wildness." It was a quality which he had found strangely, if secretly, alluring, and he acknowledged now that this note of "wildness," of unexpectedness, of "something different" in her personality, had held his gaze chained to the airy flutter of her scarlet skirt. He felt vaguely troubled. Something as intricate and bewildering as impulse was winding through the smoothly beaten road of his habit of thought. The noises of the city came to him as if they floated over an immeasurable distance of empty space. Through the spectral boughs of the sycamores the golden sky had faded to the colour of ashes. And both the empty space and the ashen sky seemed to be not outside of himself, but a part of the hidden country within his mind.

"You were at the ball," she burst out suddenly, as if she had been holding back the charge from the

beginning.

"At the ball?" he repeated, and the words were spoken with his lips merely in that objective world of routine and habit. "Yes, I was there. It was a dull business."

She laughed again with the lack of merriment he had noticed before. Though her face was made for laughter, there was an oddly conflicting note of tragedy in her voice. "Was it dull? I didn't notice."

"Then you must have enjoyed it?"

"But you were there. You saw what happened. Every one must have seen." Her savage candour brushed away the flimsy amenities. He knew now that she would say whatever she pleased, and, with the pigeon clasped tightly in his arms, he waited for anything that might come.

"You pretend that you don't know, that you didn't see!" she asked indignantly.

As she looked at him he thought—or it may have been the effect of the shifting light—that her eyes diffused soft green rays beneath her black eyelashes. Was there really the mist of tears in her sparkling glance?

"I am sorry," he said simply, being a young man of few words when the need of speech was obvious. The last thing he wanted, he told himself, was to receive the confidences of the Governor's daughter.

At this declaration, so characteristic of his amiable temperament, her anger flashed over him. "You were not sorry. You know you were not, or you would have made them kinder!"

"Kinder? But how could I?" He felt that her rage was making her unreasonable. "I didn't know you. I hadn't even been introduced to you." It was on the tip of his tongue to add, "and I haven't been yet—" but he checked himself in fear of unchaining the lightning. It was all perfectly true. He had not even been introduced to the girl, and here she was, as crude as life and as intemperate, accusing him of indifference and falsehood. And after all, what had they done to her? No one had been openly rude. Nothing had been said, he was sure, absolutely nothing. It had been a "charity entertainment," and the young people of his set had merely left her alone, that was all. The affair had been far from exclusive—for the enterprising ladies of the Beech Tree Day Nursery had prudently preferred a long subscription list to a limited social circle—and in a gathering so obscurely "mixed" there were, without doubt, a number of Gideon Vetch's admirers. Was it maliciously arranged by Fate that Patty Vetch's social success should depend upon the people who had elected her father to office?

"As if that mattered!"

Her scorn of his subterfuge, her mocking defiance of the sacred formula to which he deferred, awoke in him an unfamiliar and pleasantly piquant sensation. Through it all he was conscious of the inner prick and sting of his disapprobation, as if the swift attraction had passed into a mental aversion.

"As if that mattered!" he echoed gaily, "as if that mattered at all!"

Her face changed in the twilight, and it seemed to him that he saw her for the first time with the peculiar vividness that came only in dreams or in the hidden country within his mind. The sombre arch of the sky, the glimmer of lights far away, the clustering shadows against the white field of snow, the vague ghostly shapes of the sycamores—all these things endowed her with the potency of romantic adventure. In the winter night she seemed to him to exhale the roving sweetness of spring. Then she spoke, and the sharp

brightness of his vision was clouded by the old sense of unreality.

"They treated me as if I were a piece of bunting or a flower in a pot," she said. "They left me alone in the dressing-room. No one spoke to me, though they must have known who I was. They know, all of them, that I am the Governor's daughter."

With a start he brought himself back from the secret places. "But I thought you carried your head very high," he answered, "and you did not appear to lack partners." Some small ironic demon that seemed to dwell in his brain and yet to have no part in his real thought, moved him to add indiscreetly: "I thought you danced every dance with Julius Gershom. That's the name of that dark fellow who's a politician of doubtful cast, isn't it?"

She made a petulant gesture, and the red wings in her hat vibrated like the wings of a bird in flight. There flashed through his mind while he watched her the memory of a cardinal he had seen in a cedar tree against the snow-covered landscape. Strange that he could never get away from the thought of a bird when he looked at her.

"Oh, Julius Gershom! I despise him!"

She shivered, and he asked with a sympathy he had not displayed for mental discomforts: "Aren't you dreadfully chilled? This kind of thing is a risk, you know. You might catch influenza—or anything."

"Yes, I might, if there is any about," she replied tartly, and he saw with relief that her petulance had faded to dull indifference. "I was obliged to dance with somebody," she resumed after a minute, "I couldn't sit against the wall the whole evening, could I? And nobody else asked me,—but I don't like him any the better for that."

"And your father? Does he dislike him also?" he asked.

"How can one tell? He says he is useful." There was a playful tenderness in her voice.

"Useful? You mean in politics?"

She laughed. "How else in the world can any one be useful to Father? It must be freezing."

"No, it is melting; but it is too cold to play about out of doors."

"Your teeth are chattering!" she rejoined with scornful merriment.

"They are not," he retorted indignantly. "I am as comfortable as you are."

"Well, I'm not comfortable at all. Something—I don't know what it was—happened to my ankle. I think I twisted it when I fell."

"And all this time you haven't said a word. We've talked about nothing while you must have been in pain."

She shook her head as if his new solicitude irritated her, and a quiver of pain—or was it amusement?—crossed her lips. "It isn't the first time I've had to grit my teeth and bear things—but it's getting worse instead of better all the time, and I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to help me up the hill. I was waiting until I thought I could manage it by myself."

So that was why she had kept him! She had hoped all the time that she could go on presently without his aid, and she realized now that it was impossible. Insensibly his judgment of her softened, as if his

romantic imagination had spun iridescent cobwebs about her. By Jove, what pluck she had shown, what endurance! There came to him suddenly the realization that if she had learned to treat a sprained ankle so lightly, it could mean only that her short life had been full of misadventures beside which a sprained ankle appeared trivial. She could "play the game" so perfectly, he grasped, because she had been obliged either to play it or go under ever since she had been big enough to read the cards in her hand. To be "a good sport" was perhaps the best lesson that the world had yet taught her. Though she could not be, he decided, more than eighteen, she had acquired already the gay bravado of the experienced gambler with life.

"Let me help you," he said eagerly, "I am sure that I can carry you, you are so small. If you will only let me throw away this confounded bird, I can manage it easily."

"No, give it to me. It would die of cold if we left it." She stretched out her hand, and in silence he gave her the wounded pigeon. Her tenderness for the bird, conflicting as it did with his earlier impression of her, both amused and perplexed him. He couldn't reconcile her quick compassion with her resentful and mocking attitude toward himself.

At his impulsive offer of help the quiver shook her lips again, and stooping over she did something which appeared to him quite unnecessary to one gray suede shoe. "No, it isn't as bad as that. I don't need to be carried," she said. "That sort of thing went out of fashion ages ago. If you'll just let me lean on you until I get up the hill."

She put her hand through his arm; and while he walked slowly up the hill, he decided that, taken all in all, the present moment was the most embarrassing one through which he had ever lived. The fugitive gleam, the romantic glamour, had vanished now. He wondered what it was about her that he had at first found attractive. It was the spirit of the place, he decided, nothing more. With every step of the way there closed over him again his natural reserve, his unconquerable diffidence, his instinctive recoil from the eccentric in behaviour. Conventions were the breath of his young nostrils, and yet he was passing through an atmosphere, without, thank Heaven, his connivance or inclination, where it seemed to him the hardest convention could not possibly survive. When the lights of the mansion shone nearer through the bared boughs, he heaved a sigh of relief.

"Have I tired you?" asked the girl in response, and the curious lilting note in her voice made him turn his head and glance at her in sudden suspicion. Had she really hurt herself, or was she merely indulging some hereditary streak of buffoonery at his expense? It struck him that she would be capable of such a performance, or of anything else that invited her amazing vivacity. His one hope was that he might leave her in some obscure corner of the house, and slip away before anybody capable of making a club joke had discovered his presence. The hidden country was lost now, and with it the perilous thrill of enchantment.

He rang the bell, and the door was opened by an old coloured butler who had been one of the family servants of the Culpepers. How on earth, Stephen wondered, could the Governor tolerate the venerable Abijah, the chosen companion of Culpeper children for two generations? While he wondered he recalled something his mother had said a few weeks ago about Abijah's having been lured away by the offer of absurd wages. "You needn't worry," she had added shrewdly, "he will return as soon as he gets tired of working."

"I hurt my ankle, Abijah," said the girl.

"You ain't, is you, Miss Patty?" replied Abijah, in an indulgent tone which conveyed to Stephen's delicate ears every shade of difference between the Vetchs' and the Culpepers' social standing.

"How are you, Abijah?" remarked the young man with the air of lordly pleasantry he used to all servants who were not white. Beyond the fine old hall he saw the formal drawing-room and the modern octagonal dining-room at the back of the house.

"Howdy, Marse Stephen," responded the negro, "I seed yo' ma yestiddy en she sutney wuz lookin well an' peart."

He opened the door of the library, and while Stephen entered the room with the girl's hand on his arm, a man rose from a chair by the fire and came forward.

"Father, this is Mr. Culpeper," remarked Patty calmly, as she sank on a sofa and stretched out her frivolous shoes.

In the midst of his embarrassment Stephen wondered resentfully how she had discovered his name.



CHAPTER II

GIDEON VETCH

"Your daughter slipped on the ice," explained the young man, while the thought flashed through his mind that Patty's father was accepting it all, with ironical humour, as some queer masquerade.

It was the first time that Stephen had come within range of the Governor's personal influence, and he found himself waiting curiously for the response of his sympathies or his nerves. Once or twice he had heard Vetch speak—a storm of words which had played freely from the lightning flash of humorous invective to the rolling thunder of passionate denunciation. Such sound and fury had left Stephen the one unmoved man in the audience. He had been brought up on the sonorous rhetoric and the gorgeous purple periods of the classic orations; and the mere undraped sincerity—the raw head and bloody bones eloquence, as he put it, of Vetch's speech had been as offensive to his taste as it had been unconvincing to his intelligence. The man was a mountebank, nothing more, Stephen had decided, and his strange power was simply the reaction of mob hysteria to the stage tricks of the political clown.

Yes, the man was a mountebank—but was he nothing more than a mountebank? Like most men of his age, Stephen Culpeper was inclined to swift impressions rather than hasty judgments of people; and he was conscious, while he listened in silence to the murmuring explanations of the girl, that the immediate effect was a sensation, not an idea. At first sight, the Governor appeared merely ordinary—a tall, rugged figure, built of good bone and muscle and sound to the core, with the look of arrested energy which was doubtless an inheritance from the circus ring. There was nothing impressive about him; nothing that would cause one to turn and look back in a crowd. What struck one most was his air of extraordinary freshness and health, of sanguine vitality. His face was well-coloured and irregular in outline, with a high bulging forehead and thick sandy hair which was already gray on the temples. In the shadow his eyes did not appear remarkably fine; they seemed at the first glance to be of an indeterminate colour—was it blue or gray?—and there was nothing striking in their deep setting under the beetling sandy eyebrows. All this was true; and yet while Stephen looked into them over the Governor's outstretched hand, he told himself that they were the most human eyes he had ever seen. Afterward, when he groped through his vocabulary for a more accurate description, he could not find one. There was shrewdness in Gideon Vetch's eyes; there was friendliness; there was the blue sparkle of contagious humour—a ripple of light that was like visible laughter—but above all there was humanity. Though Stephen did not try to grasp the vivid impressions that passed through his mind, he felt intuitively that he had learned to know Gideon Vetch through his look and manner as well as he should have known another man after weeks or months of daily intercourse. Whatever the man's private life, whatever his political faults may have been, there was magic in the clasp of his hand and the cordial glow of his smile. He was always responsive; he stood always on the same level, high or low, with his companion of the moment: he was as incapable of looking up as he was of looking down; he was equally without reverence and without condescension. It was the law of his nature that he should give himself emphatically to the just and the unjust alike.

"He came home with me because I hurt my foot," Patty was saying.

Had she forgotten already, Stephen asked himself cynically, that it was not her foot but her ankle? His suspicions returned while he looked at her blooming face, and he hoped earnestly that she would not feel

impelled to relate any irrelevant details of the adventure. Like Gideon Vetch on the platform she seemed incapable of withholding the smallest fragment of a fact; and the young man wondered if it were characteristic either of "the plain people," as he called them, or of circus riders as a class, that their minds should go habitually unclothed yet unashamed.

"Thank you, sir," said the Governor without effusion; and he asked: "Did you hurt yourself, Patty?" while he bent over and laid his hand on her ankle.

A note of tenderness passed into his voice as he turned to the girl; and when she answered after a minute, Stephen recognized the same tone of affectionate playfulness that she used when she spoke of him.

"Not much," she replied carelessly. Then she held out the drooping pigeon. "I found this bird. Is there anything we can do for it?"

The Governor took the bird from her, and examined it under the light with the manner of brisk confidence which directed his slightest action. The man, for all his restless activity, appeared to be without excess or exaggeration when it was a matter of practical detail. He apparently employed his whole efficient and enterprising mind on the incident of the bird.

"The wings aren't broken," he said presently, lifting his head, "but it is weak from hunger and exhaustion," and he rang the bell for Abijah. "Rice and water and a warm basket," he ordered when the old negro appeared. "You had better keep it in the house until it recovers." Then dismissing the subject, he turned back to Stephen.

"Well, I am glad to see you, Mr. Culpeper," he said. "You had a hard beginning, but, as they used to tell me when I was a kid, a hard beginning makes a good ending."

For the first time a smile softened his face, and the roving blue gleam danced blithely in his eyes. A moment before the young man had thought the Governor's face harsh and ugly. Now he remembered that the Judge had said "the man was not half bad to look at if you caught him smiling." Yes, he had a charm of his own, and that charm had swept him forward over every obstacle to the place he had reached. A single gift, indefinable yet unerring—the ability to make men believe absurdities, as John Benham had once said—and the material disadvantages of poverty and ignorance were brushed aside like trivial impediments. A strange power, and a dangerous one in unscrupulous hands, the young man reflected.

"I remember your face," pursued the Governor, while his smile faded—was brevity, after all, the secret of its magic? "You were at one of my speeches last autumn, and you sat in the front row, I think. I recall you because you were the only person in the audience who looked bored."

"I was." Frankness called for frankness. "I am not keen about speeches."

"Not even when Benham speaks?" The voice was gay, but through it all there rang the unmistakable tone of authority, of conscious power. There was one person, Stephen inferred, who had never from the beginning disparaged or ridiculed Gideon Vetch, and that person was Gideon Vetch himself. John Benham had once said that the man was a mere posturer—but John Benham was wrong.

"Oh, well, you see, Benham is different," replied the young man as delicately as he could. "He is apt to say only what I think, you know."

So far there had been no breach of good taste in the Governor's manner, no warning reminder of an origin that was certainly obscure and presumably low, no stale, dust-laden odours of the circus ring. He had

looked and spoken as any man of Stephen's acquaintance might have done, facetiously, it is true, but without ostentation or vulgarity. When the break came, therefore, it was the more shocking to the younger man because he had been so imperfectly prepared for it.

"And because he is different, of course you think he'd make a better Governor than I shall," said Gideon Vetch abruptly. "That is the way with you fellows who have ossified in the old political parties. You never see a change in time to make ready for it. You wait until it knocks you in the head, and then you wake up and grumble. Now, I've been on the way for the last thirty years or so, but you never once so much as got wind of me. You think I've just happened because of too much electricity in the air, like a thunderbolt or something; but you haven't even looked back to find out whether you are right or wrong. Talk about public spirit! Why, there isn't an ounce of live public spirit left among you, in spite of all the moonshine your man Benham talks about the healing virtues of tradition and the sacred taboo of your political Pharisees. There wasn't one of you that didn't hate like the devil to see me Governor of Virginia—and yet how many of you took the trouble to find out what I am made of, or to understand what I mean? Did you even take the trouble to go to the polls and vote against me?"

Though Stephen flushed scarlet, he held his ground bravely. It was true that he had not voted—he hated the whole sordid business of politics—but then, who had ever suspected for a minute that Gideon Vetch would be elected? His brief liking for the man had changed suddenly to exasperation. It seemed incredible to him that any Governor of Virginia should display so open a disregard of the ordinary rules of courtesy and hospitality. To drag in their political differences at such a time, when he had come beneath the other's roof merely to render him an unavoidable service! To stoop to the pettifogging sophistry of the agitator simply because his opponent had reluctantly yielded him an opportunity!

"Well, I heard you speak, but that didn't change me!" he retorted with a smile.

The Governor laughed, and the sincerity of his amusement was evident even to Stephen. "Could anything short of a blasting operation change you traditional Virginians?" he inquired.

His face was turned to the fire, and the young man felt while he watched him that a piercing light was shed on his character. It was as if Stephen saw his opponent from an entirely fresh point of view, as if he beheld him for the first time with the sharp clearness which the flash of his anger produced. The very absence of all sense of dignity impressed him suddenly as the most tremendous dignity a human being could attain—the unconscious dignity of natural forces—of storms and fire and war and pestilence. Because the man never thought of how he appeared, he appeared always impregnable.

"I shall not argue," said the young man, with a smile which he endeavoured to make easy and natural. "The time for argument is over. You played trumps."

Vetch laughed. "And it wasn't my last card," he answered bluntly.

"The game isn't finished." Though Stephen's voice was light it held a quiver of irritation. "He laughs best who laughs last." The other had started the row, and, by Jove, he would give him as much as he wanted! He recalled suddenly the charges that there was more than the customary political log-rolling—that there were mysterious "discreditable dealings" in the Governor's election to office.

But it appeared in a minute that Gideon Vetch was adequate to any demand which the occasion might develop. Already Stephen was beginning to regard him less as a man than as an energetic idea, as activity incarnate.

"If you mean to imply that the laugh may be on me at the last," he returned, while the points of blue light seemed to pierce Stephen like arrows—no, like gimlets, "well, you're wrong about one part of it—for if that ever happens, I'll laugh with you because of the sheer rotten irony."

For the first time the other noticed how the Governor was dressed—in a suit of some heavy brown stuff which looked as if it had been sprinkled and needed pressing. He wore a green tie and a striped shirt of the conspicuous kind that Stephen hated. Though the younger man was keenly critical of clothes, and perseveringly informed himself regarding the smallest details of fashion, he acknowledged now that he had at last met a man who appeared to wear his errors of dress as naturally as he wore his errors of opinion. The fuzzy brown stuff, the green tie with red spots, the striped shirt—was it blue or purple?—all became as much a part of Gideon Vetch as the storm-ruffled plumage was part of an eagle. If the misguided man had attired himself in a toga, he would have carried the Mantle without dignity perhaps, but certainly with picturesqueness.

"I'll hold you to your promise—or threat," said Stephen lightly, as he turned from the Governor to his daughter. Why, in thunder, he asked himself, had he stayed so long? What was there about the fellow that held one in spite of oneself? "I hope you will be all right again in a few days," he said formally as his eyes met Patty's upraised glance. In the warm room all the glamour of the twilight—and of that hidden country within his mind—had faded from her. She looked fresh and blooming and merely commonplace, he thought. A brief half hour ago he had felt that he was in danger of losing his head; now his rational part was in the ascendant, and his future appeared pleasantly tranquil. Then the girl smiled that faint inscrutable smile of hers, and the disturbing green rays shot from her eyes. A thrill of interest stirred his pulses while something held him there against his will and his better judgment, as if he were caught fast in the steel spring of a trap.

"Oh, that's nothing," replied Patty, with her air of mockery. "If there were no worse things than that!"

He did not hold out his hand, though there was a flutter toward him of her fingers—pretty fingers they were for a girl with no blood that one could mention in public. There was a faint hope in his mind that he might still vanish unthanked and undetained. The one quality in father and daughter which had arrested his favourable attention—the quality of "a good sport"—would probably aid in his escape.

"Drop in some evening, and we'll have a talk," said the Governor in his slightly theatrical but extremely confident manner, "there are things I'd like to say to you. You are a lawyer, if I remember, in Judge Horatio Page's firm, and you were in the war from the beginning."

Stephen smiled. "Not quite." They were at the front door, and all hope of escaping into the desirable obscurity from which he had sprung fled from his mind.

"He is a great old boy, the Judge," resumed Gideon Vetch blandly, "I had a talk with him one day before the elections, when you other fellows were sitting back like a lot of lunatics and waiting for the Democratic primaries to put things over. He is the only one in the whole bunch of you who stopped shouting long enough to hear what I had to say. I like him, sir, and if there is one thing you will never find me doing it is liking the wrong man. I may not know Greek, but I can read men."

The front door was open, and the blast of cold air dispersed all the foolish fancies that had gathered in Stephen's brain. Beyond the fountain and the gate he could see the broad road through the Square and the dark majestic figure of Washington on horseback. The electric signs were blazing on the roofs of the shops and hotels which had driven the original dwelling houses out of the neighbouring streets.

Turning as he was descending the steps, the young man looked into the Governor's face. "Are you sure that you read Julius Gershom correctly?" he inquired.

For a minute—it could not have been longer—the Governor did not reply. Was he surprised for once into open discomfiture, or was his nimble wit engaged in framing a plausible answer? Within the house, where so much was disappointing and incongruous, Stephen had not felt the lack of harmony between Gideon Vetch and his surroundings; but against the fine proportions and the serene stateliness of the exterior, the Governor's figure appeared aggressively modern.

"Julius Gershom!" repeated Vetch. "Well, yes, I think I know my Julius. May I ask if you do?" The ironical humour which flashed like a sharp light over his countenance played with the idea.

"Not by choice." Stephen looked back laughing. There was one thing to be said in the Governor's favour—he invited honesty and he knew how to receive it. "But I read of him in the newspapers when I cannot avoid it. He does some dirty work, doesn't he?"

Again the Governor paused before replying. There was a curious gravity about his consideration of Gershom in spite of the satirical tone of his responses. Was it possible that he was the one man in town who did not treat the fellow as a ridiculous farce?

"If by dirty work you mean the clearing away of obstacles—well, somebody has to do it, hasn't he?" asked Gideon Vetch. "If you want a clean street to walk on, you must hire somebody to shovel away the slush. It is true that we put Gershom to shovelling slush—and you complain of his methods! Well, I admit that he may have been a trifle too zealous about it; he may have spattered things a bit more than was necessary, but after all, he got some of the mud out of the way, didn't he? There are people," he added, "who believe that the wind he raised swept me into office."

"I object to his methods," insisted Stephen, "because they seem to me dishonest."

"Perhaps." The blue eyes—how could he have thought them gray?—had grown quizzical. "But he wasn't moving in the best company, you know. He who sups with the Devil must fish with a long spoon."

"You mean that you defend that sort of thing—that you openly stand for it?"

"I stand for nothing, sir," replied Gideon Vetch sharply, "except justice. I stand for a square deal all round, and I stand against the exploitation or oppression of any class. This is what I stand for, and I have stood for it ever since I was a small, gray, scared rabbit of a creature dodging under hedgerows."

It was the bombastic sophistry again, Stephen told himself, but he met it without subterfuge or evasion. "And you believe that such people as Gershom can serve the cause of justice through dishonest means?" he demanded.

"I'll answer that some day; but it's a long answer, and I can't speak it out here in the cold," responded the Governor, while his blustering manner grew sober. "Gershom is a politician, you see, and I am not. You may laugh, but it is the Gospel truth. I am a reformer, and all I care about is pushing on the idea. I use any tools that I find; and one of the greatest of reformers has said that he was sometimes obliged to use bad ones. If I find good ones, so much the better; if bad—well, it is all in the day's job. But the cause is what matters—the thing you are making, not the implements with which it is made. You dislike my methods of work, but you must admit that by the only test that counts, the test of achievement, they have proved to be sound. I have got somewhere; not all the way; but still somewhere. Without advertisement, without patronage, without a cent I could call my own, I put my wares on the market. I became Governor of

Virginia in spite of everything you did, or did not do, to prevent it." There was a strange effectiveness in the simplicity of the man's speech. It was natural; it was racy; it was like nothing that Stephen had ever heard before. He wondered if it could be traced back to the phraseology of the circus? "Of course you think I am an extremist," concluded Gideon Vetch abruptly, "but before you are as old as I am you will have learned that the only way to get half a loaf is to ask for a whole one. Come again, and I'll talk to you."

"Yes, I'll come again," Stephen answered, and he knew that he should. Whether he willed it or not he would be drawn back by the Governor's irresistible influence. The man had aroused in him an intense, a devouring curiosity. He wanted to know his thoughts and his life, the mystery of his birth, of his upbringing, of his privations and denials. Above all he wanted to know why he had succeeded, what peculiar gift had brought him out of obscurity, and had given him the ability to use men and circumstances as if they were tools in his hands.

When the young man ran down the steps there was a pleasant excitement tingling in his veins, as if he were feeling the glow of forbidden wine. Turning beside the fountain, he glanced back as the Governor was closing the door, and in his vision of the lighted interior he saw Patty Vetch darting airily across the hall. So it was nothing more than a hoax! She hadn't hurt herself in the least. She had merely made a laughing-stock of him for the amusement doubtless of her obscure acquaintances! For an instant anger held him motionless; then turning quickly he walked rapidly past the fountain to the open gate.

The snow was dimly lighted on the long slope to the library; and straight ahead, in the circle beneath the statue of Washington, the bronze silhouette of a great Virginian stood sharply cut against the luminous haze of the street. From the chimney-stack of a factory near the river a wreath of gray smoke was flung over the tree-tops, where it broke and drifted in feathery garlands. Across the road a group of three trees was delicately etched, with each separate branch and twig, on the slate-coloured evening sky.

He had passed through the gate when a voice speaking suddenly at his side caused him to start and stop short in his walk. A moment before he had fancied himself alone; he had heard no footsteps; and the place from where the words came was a mere vague blur in the shadows. There was something uncanny in the muffled approach, and the sensation it produced on his nerves was like the shock he used to feel as a child when his hand was unexpectedly touched in the dark.

"I beg your pardon," he said to the vague shape at the foot of a tree. "Did you speak to me?"

The shadows divided, and what seemed to him the edge of darkness moved forward into the dimly lighted space at his side. He saw now that it was the figure of a woman in a long black cloak, with the dilapidated remains of a mourning veil hanging from her small bonnet. As she came toward him he was stirred first by an impulse of pity and immediately afterward by a violent repulsion. In her whole figure there were the tragic signs of poverty and desperation; but it was the horror of her eyes, he told himself, that he should never forget. They were eyes that would haunt his sleep that night like the face of the drowned man in the nursery rhyme.

"Will you tell me," asked the woman hurriedly, "who lives in this house?"

It was a queer question, he thought, for any one to ask in the Square; but she was probably a stranger.

"This is the Governor's house," he answered courteously. "I suppose you are a stranger in town."

"I got here a few hours ago, and I came out for a breath of air. I was four days and nights on the way."

To this he made no reply, and he was about to pass on again, when her voice arrested him.

"You wouldn't mind telling me, would you, the Governor's name?"

"Not in the least. His name is Gideon Vetch."

"Gideon Vetch?" She repeated the name slowly, as if she were impressing it on her memory. "That's a queer name for a Governor. Was he born in this town?"

"I think not."

"And who lives with him? I saw a girl come out awhile ago. Is she his daughter, perhaps—or his wife—though she looked young for that."

"It must have been his daughter. His wife is not living."

"Is she his only child? Or has he others?" There was a quiver of suspense in her voice, and turning he looked at her more closely. Was it possible that she had known Gideon Vetch in his obscure past?

"She is his only child," he replied.

"Well, that's nice for her. Is she pretty?" An odd question if it had been put by a man; but he had been trained to accept the fact that women are different.

"Yes, you would call her pretty." As he spoke the words there flashed through his mind the picture of Patty Vetch as he had seen her that afternoon, in her red cape and her small hat with the red wings, against the snowy hill under the overhanging bough of the sycamore. Was she really pretty, or was it only the witchery of her surroundings? Now that he was out of her presence the attraction had faded. He was still smarting from the memory of that dancing figure.

"Well, it's a fine house," said the woman, "and it looks large for just two people. I thank you for telling me."

The pathos of her words appealed to the generous chivalry of his nature. He felt sorry for her and wondered if he might offer her money.

"I hope you found lodgings," he said.

"Yes, I've found a room near here—on Governor Street, I think they call it."

"And you are not in want? You do not need any help?"

She shook her head while the rusty mourning veil shrouded her features. "Not yet," she answered. "I'm not a beggar yet." Though her tone was not well-bred, he realized that she was neither as uneducated nor as degraded as he had at first believed.

"I am glad of that," he responded; and then lifting his hat again, he hurried quickly away from her up the road beneath the few old linden trees that were left of an avenue. Glancing back as he reached the Capitol building, he saw her black figure moving cautiously over the snow toward one of the gates of the Square.

"That was a nightmare," he thought, "and now for the pleasant dream. I'll go to the old print shop and see my Cousin Corinna."

CHAPTER III

CORINNA OF THE OLD PRINT SHOP

As Stephan left the Square there floated before him a picture of the old print shop in Franklin Street, where Corinna Page (still looking at forty-eight as if she had stepped out of a portrait by Romney) sat amid the rare prints which she never expected to sell. After an unfortunate early marriage, her husband had been Kent Page, her first cousin, she had accepted her recent widowhood, if not with relief, well, obviously with resignation. For years she had wandered about the world with her father, Judge Horatio Lancaster Page, who had once been Ambassador to Great Britain. Now, having recently returned from France, she had settled in a charming country house on the Three Chopt Road, and had opened the ridiculous old print shop, a shop that never sold an engraving, in a quaint place in Franklin Street. She had rented out the upper floors to a half-dozen tenants, had built a couple of rooms beside the kitchen for the caretaker, and had planted two pyramidal cedars and a hedge of box in the short front yard. "A shop is the only place where you may have calls from people who haven't been introduced to you," she had said; and of course as long as she had money to throw away, what did it matter, Stephen reflected, whether she ever sold a picture or not? At forty-eight she was lovelier, he thought, than ever; she would always be lovelier than any one else if she lived to be ninety. There wasn't a girl in his set who could compare with her, who had the glow and charm, the flame-like inner radiance; there wasn't one who had the singing heart of Corinna. Yes, that was the phrase he had been trying to remember, trite as it was—the singing heart—that was Corinna. She had had a hard life, he knew, in spite of her beauty and her wealth; yet she had never lost the quality of youth, the very essence of gaiety and adventure. When he thought of her, Patty Vetch appeared merely cheap and common, though he felt instinctively that Corinna would have liked Patty if she had seen her in the Square with the pigeon. It was a part of Corinna's charm perhaps, certainly a part of her enjoyment of life that she liked almost every one—every one, that is, except Rose Stribling, whom she quite frankly hated. But, then, people said that Rose Stribling, twelve years younger than Corinna and as handsome as a Red Cross poster, had run too often across Kent Page in the first year of the war. Kent Page had died in Prance of Spanish influenza before he ever saw a trench or a battlefield; and Rose Stribling, all blue eyes and white linen, had nursed him at the last. At that time Corinna was in America, and she hadn't so much as looked at Kent for years; but a woman has a long memory for emotions, and she is capable of resenting the loss of a husband who is no longer hers. Rumour, of course, nothing more; yet the fact remained that Corinna, who liked all the world, hated Rose Stribling. It was the one flaw in Corinna's perfection; it was the black patch on the stainless cheek, which had always made her adorable to Stephen. Like the snow-white lock waving back from her forehead, it intensified the youth in her face. He had often wondered if she could have been half so lovely when she was a girl, before the faint shadows and the tender little lines lent depth and mystery to her eyes, and the single white lock swept back amid the powdered dusk of her hair.

While the young man walked rapidly up Franklin Street, he saw before him the long delightful room beyond the pyramidal cedars and the hedge of box. He saw the ruddy glow of the fire mingling with the paler light of amber lamps, and this mingled radiance shining on the rich rugs, the few old brocades, and the rare English prints which covered the walls. He saw wide-open creamy roses in alabaster bowls which were scattered everywhere, on tables, on stools, on window-seats, and on the rich carving of the Spanish desk in one corner. Against the curtains of gold silk there was the bough of twisted pine he had

broken, and against the pine branch stood the figure of Corinna in her gown of soft red, which melted like a spray of autumn foliage into the colours of the room. She was a tall woman, with a glorious head and eyes that reminded Stephen of a forest pool in autumn. Who had first said of her, he wondered, that she looked like an October morning?

As he approached the shop the glow shone out on him through the dull gold curtains, and he traced the crooked pine bough sweeping across the thin silk background like the bold free sketch of a Japanese print. When he rang the bell a minute later, the door was opened by Corinna, who was holding a basket of marigolds.

"We were just going," she said, "as soon as I had put these flowers in water."

She drew back into the room, bending over the low brown bowl that she was filling, while Stephen went over to the fire, and greeted the two old men who were sitting in deep arm chairs on either side of the hearth. It was like stepping into another world, he thought, as he inhaled a full breath of the warmth and the fragrance of roses; it was as if a door into a dream had suddenly opened, and he had passed out of the night and the cold into a place where all was colour and fragrance and pleasant magic. The other was real life—life for all but the happy few, he found himself thinking—this was merely the enchanted fairy-ring where children played at making believe.

"I hoped I'd catch you," he said, stretching out his hands to the log fire. "I felt somehow that you hadn't gone, late as it is." While he spoke he was thinking, not of Corinna, but of the strange woman he had left in the Square. Queer how that incident had bitten into his mind. Try as he might he couldn't shake himself free from it.

"Father is going to some dreadful public dinner," answered Corinna. "I stayed with him here so he wouldn't have to wait at the club. It won't matter about me. The car is coming for me, and I don't dine until eight. Stay awhile and we'll talk," she added with her cheerful smile. "I haven't seen you for ages, and you look as if you had something to tell me."

"I have," he said; and then he turned from her to the two old men who were talking drowsily in voices that sounded as far off to Stephen as the murmuring of bees in summer meadows. He knew that it was real, that it was the life he had always lived, and yet he couldn't get rid of the feeling that Corinna and the two old men and the charming surroundings were all part of a play, and that in a little while he should go out of the theatre and step back among the sordid actualities.

"The General and I are having our little chat before dinner," said Judge Page, a sufficiently ornamental old gentleman to have decorated any world or any fireside—imposing and distinguished as a portrait by Sir Thomas Lawrence, with a crown of silvery hair and the shining dark eyes of his daughter. He still carried himself, for all his ironical comment, like an ambassador of the romantic school. "It is a sad day for your fighting man," he concluded gaily, "when the only stimulant he can get is the conversation of an old foggy like me."

"Your fighting man," old General Powhatan Plummer, who hadn't smelt powder for more than half a century, chuckled as he always did at the shrewd and friendly pleasantries of the Judge. He was a jocular, tiresome, gregarious soul, habitually untidy, creased and rumpled, who was always thirsty, but who, as the Judge was accustomed to reply when Corinna remonstrated, "would divide his last julep with a friend." The men had been companions from boyhood, and were still inseparable. For the same delusion makes strange friendships, and the General, in spite of his appearance of damaged reality, also inhabited that enchanted fairy-ring where no fact ever entered.

With the bowl of marigolds in her hands, Corinna came over to the tea-table and stood smiling dreamily at Stephen. The firelight dancing over her made a riot of colour, and she looked the image of happiness, though the young man knew that the ephemeral illusion was created by the red of her gown and the burnished gold of the flowers.

"John Benham sent them to me because I praised his speech," she said. "Wasn't it nice of him?"

"He always does nice things when one doesn't expect them," he answered.

Corinna laughed. "Is it because they are nice that he does them?" she inquired with a touch of malice. "Or because they are not expected?"

"I didn't mean that." There was a shade of confusion in Stephen's tone. "Benham is my friend—my best friend almost though he is so much older. There isn't a man living whom I admire more."

"Yes, I know," replied Corinna; and then—was it in innocence or in malice?—she asked sweetly: "Have you seen Alice Rokeby this winter?"

For an instant Stephen gazed at her in silence. Was it possible that she had not heard the gossip about Benham and Mrs. Rokeby? Was she trying to mislead him by an appearance of flippancy? Or was there some deeper purpose, some serious attempt to learn the truth beneath her casual question?

"Only once or twice," he answered at last. "She is looking badly since her divorce. Freedom has not agreed with her."

Corinna smiled; but the transient illumination veiled rather than revealed her obscure motives.

"Perhaps, like our Allies, she was making the future safe for further entanglements," she observed. "I always thought—everybody thought that she got her divorce in order to marry John Benham."

Frankly perplexed, he gazed wonderingly into her eyes. He knew that she saw a great deal of Benham; he believed that their friendship had developed into a deeper emotion on Benham's side at least; and it seemed to him unlike Corinna, who was, as he told himself, the most loyal soul on earth, to turn such an association into a cynical jest.

"I heard that too," he replied guardedly, "but of course nobody knows."

There was really nothing else that he could answer. Though he could discuss Alice Rokeby, one of those vague, sweet women who seem designed by Nature to develop the sentiment of chivalry in the breast of man, he felt that it would be disloyal to speak lightly of his hero, John Benham. "You could never guess where I've been," he said with relief because he had got rid of the subject. "I might as well tell you in the beginning that I have just left the Governor."

"Gideon Vetch!" exclaimed Corinna, as she dropped into a chair at his side. "Why, I thought you were as far apart as the poles!"

"So we were until ten minutes—no, until exactly an hour ago."

"It makes my blood boil when I think of that circus rider in the Governor's mansion," said the General indignantly. "Do you know what my father would have called that fellow? He would have called him a common scalawag—a common scalawag, sir!"

The Judge laughed softly. There was nothing, as he sometimes observed, that flavoured life so deliciously as a keen appreciation of comedy. "Now, I should call him a decidedly uncommon one," he remarked. "The trouble with you, my dear Powhatan, is that you are still in the village stage of the social instinct. In your proper period, when we Virginians were merely one of the several tribes in these United States, you may have served an excellent purpose; but the tribal instinct is dying out with the village stage. If we are going to exist at all outside of the archaeological department of a museum, we must learn to accept—. We must let in new blood."

"Do you mean to tell me, Horatio," blustered the General, "that I've got to let in the blood of a circus rider, sir?"

"Well, that depends. I haven't made up my mind about Vetch. He may be only froth, or he may be the vital element that we need. I haven't made up my mind, but I've met him and I like him. Indeed, I think I may say that Gideon and I are friends. We have come to the same point of view, it appears, by travelling on opposite roads. I had a long talk with him the other day, and I found that we think alike about a number of things."

"Think alike about fiddlesticks!" spluttered the General, while he spilled over his waistcoat the water Corinna had given him. "Why, the fellow ain't even in your class, sir!"

"I said we had thoughts, not habits, in common, Powhatan," rejoined the Judge blandly. "The same habits make a class, but the same thoughts make a friendship."

"He told me he had talked to you," said Stephen eagerly, "and I wanted to know what your impression was. He called you a great old boy, by the way."

The Judge, who could wear at will the face either of Brutus or of Antony, became at once the genial friend of humanity. "That pleases me more than you realize," he said. "I have a suspicion that Gideon knows human nature about as thoroughly as our General here knows the battles of the Confederacy."

"I confess the man rather gripped me," rejoined Stephen. "There's something about him, personality or mere play-acting, that catches one in spite of oneself."

The Judge appeared to acquiesce. "I am inclined to think," he observed presently, "that the quality you feel in Vetch is simply a violent candour. Most people give you truth in small quantities; but Vetch pours it out in a torrent. He offers it to you as Powhatan used to take his Bourbon in the good old days before the Eighteenth Amendment—straight and strong. I used to tell Powhatan that he'd get the name of a drunkard simply because he could stand what the rest of the world couldn't—and I'll say as much for our friend Gideon."

"Do you mean, my dear," inquired Corinna placidly, "that the Governor is honestly dishonest?"

The Judge's suavity clothed him like velvet. "I know nothing about his honesty. I doubt if any one does. He may be a liar and yet speak the truth, I suppose, from unscrupulous motives. But I am not maintaining that he is entirely right, you understand—merely that like the rest of us he is not entirely wrong. I am not taking sides, you know. I am too old to fight anybody's battles—even distressed Virtue's."

"Then you think—you really think that he is sincere?" asked Stephen.

"Sincere? Well, yes, in a measure. Nothing advertises one so widely as a reputation for sincerity; and the man has a positive genius for self-advertisement. He has found that it pays in politics to speak the truth, and so he speaks it at the top of his voice. It takes courage, of course, and I am ready to admit that he is a little more courageous than the rest of us. To that extent, I should say that he has the advantage of us."

"Do you mean to imply," demanded the General wrathfully, "that a common circus rider like that, a rascally revolutionist into the bargain, is better than this lady and myself, sir?"

"Well, hardly better than Corinna," replied the Judge. "Indeed, I was about to add that the two most candid persons I know are Corinna and Vetch. There is a good deal about Vetch, by the way, that reminds me of

Corinna."

"Father!" gasped Corinna. "Stephen, do you think he has gone out of his mind?"

"That is the first sign that wisdom has broken its cage," commented her father. "No, my dear, I did not mean that you look like him; you are far handsomer. I meant simply that you both habitually speak the truth, and because you speak the truth the world mistakes you for a successful comedian and Vetch for a kind of political Robin Hood."

"Well, he is trying to hold us up in highwayman fashion, isn't he?" asked Corinna.

"Does it look that way?" inquired the Judge, with his beaming smile which cast an edge of genial irony on everything that he said. "On the contrary, it seems to me that Vetch is telling us the things we have known about ourselves for a very long time. He says the world might be a better place if we would only take the trouble to make it so; if we would only try to live up to our epitaphs, I believe he once remarked. He says also, I understand, that he is trying to climb to the top over somebody else; and when I say 'he' I mean, of course, his order or his class, whatever the fashionable phrase is. Now, unfortunately, there appears to be but one way of reaching the top of the world, doesn't there?—and that is by climbing up on something or somebody. Even you, my dear Stephen, who occupy that high place, merely inherited the seat from somebody who scrambled up there a few centuries ago. Somebody else probably got broken shoulders before your nimble progenitor took possession. Of course I am willing to admit that time does create in us the sense of a divine right in anything that we have owned for a number of years, as if our inheritance were the crown of some archaic king. I myself feel that strongly. If it came to the point, though I have said that I am too old to fight for distressed Virtue, I should very likely die in the last ditch for every inch of land and every worthless object I ever owned. When Vetch talks about taxing property more heavily I am utterly and openly against him because it is my instinct to be. I refuse to give up my superfluous luxuries in the cause of equal justice for all, and I shall fight against it as long as there is a particle of fight left in my bones. But because I am against him there is no reason, I take it, why I shouldn't enjoy the pleasure of perceiving his point of view. It is an interesting point of view, perhaps the more interesting because we think it is a dangerous one. To approach it is like rounding a sharp curve at high speed."

As he rose to his feet and reached for his walking stick, Stephen remembered that in England the Judge was supposed to have the fine presence and the flashing eagle eyes of Gladstone. Were they alike also, he wondered, in their fantastic mental processes?

"It's time for me to go, Corinna," said the old man, stooping to kiss his daughter, "so I shan't see you until to-morrow." Then turning to Stephen, he added with a whimsical smile, "If you are so much afraid of Vetch, why don't you fight him with his own weapons? What were you doing, you and John, when the people voted for him?"

"To tell the truth nobody ever dreamed that he would be elected," replied Stephen, flushing. "Who would have thought that an independent candidate could win over both parties?"

The Judge had moved to the door, and he looked back, as Stephen finished, with a dramatic flourish of his long white hand. "Well, remember next time, my dear young sir," he answered, "that in politics it is always the impossible that happens." The long white hand fell caressingly on the shoulders of old Powhatan Plummer, and the two men passed out of the door together.

When Stephen turned to Corinna, she was resting languidly against the tapestry-covered back of her chair, while the firelight flickering in her eyes changed them to the deep bronze of the marigolds on the table.

With her slenderness, her grace, her brilliant darkness, she seemed to him to belong in one of the English mezzotints on the wall.

"Did you buy that print because it is so much like you?" he asked, pointing to an engraving after Hoppner's portrait of the Duchess of Bedford.

She laughed frankly. "Every one asks me that. I suppose it was one of my reasons."

As he sat down again in front of the fire, his eyes travelled slowly over the walls; over the stipple engravings of Bartolozzi, over the rich mezzotints of Valentine Green and John Raphael Smith, over the bewitching face of Lady Hamilton as it shone back at him from the prints of John Jones, of Cheesman, of Henry Meyer. Was not Corinna's place among those vanished beauties of a richer age, rather than among the sour-faced reformers and the Gideon Vetches of to-day? The wonderful tone of the old prints, the silvery dusk, or the softly glowing colours that were like the sunset of another century; the warmth and splendour of the few brocades she had picked up in Italy; the suave religious feeling of the worn red velvet from some church in Florence; the candles in wrought-iron sconces, the shimmering firelight and the dreamy fragrance of tea roses—all these things together made him think suddenly of sunshine over the Campagna and English gardens in the month of May and the burning reds and blues and golden greens of the Middle Ages. Corinna with her unfading youth became a part of all the loveliness that he had ever seen—of all beauty everywhere.

"I haven't had a chance to tell you," she said, "that I am going to meet the Governor."

"Where? At the Berkeleys'?"

"Yes, at the Berkeleys' dinner on Thursday. Are you going?"

He laughed. "Mrs. Berkeley called me up this morning and asked me if I would take somebody's place. She didn't say whose place it was, but she did divulge the fact that the dinner is given to Vetch. I told her I'd come—that I was so used to taking other people's places I could fill six at the same time. But a dinner to Vetch! I wonder why she is doing it?"

"That's easy. Mr. Berkeley wants something from the Governor. I don't know what he wants, but I do know that whatever it is he wants it very badly."

"And he thinks he'll get it by asking him to dinner? There seems to me an obvious flaw in Berkeley's reasoning. I doubt if Vetch is the kind of man who follows when you hold out an apple. He appears to be exactly the opposite, and I think he's more likely to dash off than to come when he is called. I wonder, by the way, if they are going to have Mrs. Stribling?"

"Rose Stribling?" A gleam of anger shone in Corinna's eyes. "Why should that interest you?"

"Oh, they say—at least Mrs. Berkeley says, and if there is any misinformation abroad she ought to be aware of it—that Mrs. Stribling's latest attachment to her train is the Governor himself."

He had expected his gossip to arouse Corinna, and in this he was not mistaken. Springing up from her relaxed position, she sat straight and unbending, with her indignant eyes on his face. "Why, I thought the war had cured her."

"The war was not a cure; it was merely a temporary drug for our vanity," he rejoined gaily. "It didn't cure me, so you could hardly regard it as a remedy for Mrs. Stribling's complaint. I imagine coquetry is a more

obstinate malady even than priggishness, and, Heaven knows, I tried hard enough to get rid of that."

"I hoped you would," admitted Corinna. "But, dear boy, the way to make you human—and you've never been really human all through, you know—was not with a uniform and glory." She was talking flippantly, for they made a pretence now of alluding lightly to his years in France—he had gone into the war before his country—and to the nervous malady, the disabled will, he had brought back. "What you need is not to win more esteem, but to lose some that you've got. Your salvation lies in the opposite direction from where flags are waving. If you could only deliberately arrange to do something that would lower your reputation in the eyes of gouty old gentlemen or mothers with marriageable daughters! If you could manage to get your nose broken, or elope with a chorus girl, or commit an unromantic murder, I should begin to have hopes of you."

"I may do something as bad some day and surprise you."

"It would surprise me. But I'm not sure, after all, that I don't like you better as you are, with your fine air of superiority. It makes one believe, somehow, in human perfectibility. Now, I can never believe in that when I realize how I feel about Rose Stribling. There is nothing perfectible in such emotions."

"Rose Stribling! Beside you she is like a pumpkin in the basket with a pomegranate!"

Corinna laughed with frank pleasure. "There are a million who would prefer the pumpkin to the pomegranate," she answered. "Rose Stribling, you must admit, is the type that has been the desire of the world since Venus first rose from the foam."

"Can you imagine Mrs. Stribling rising from foam?" Stephen retorted impertinently.

"No, Venus has grown fatter through the ages," assented Corinna, "but the type is unchanged. Now, among all the compliments that have been paid me in my life, no one has ever compared me to the Goddess of Love. I have been painted with the bow of Diana, but never with the doves of Venus."

Because he felt that her gaiety rippled over an undercurrent of pain, Stephen bent forward and touched her hand with an impulse of tenderness.

"You are more beautiful than you ever were in your life," he said. "There isn't a woman in the world who can compare with you." Then he laughed merrily. "I shall watch you two to-morrow evening, you and Rose Stribling."

"I am sorry," replied Corinna in a troubled voice. "I may tell you the truth since Father says it is the last thing any one ever believes—and the truth is that she makes me savage—yes, I mean it—she makes me savage."

"I know what the Judge means when he says you are like Vetch," returned Stephen abruptly. Then, without waiting for her reply, he added in an impulsive tone: "Triumph over her to-morrow night, Corinna. Go out to fight with all your weapons and seize the trophies from Mrs. Stribling."

"You funny boy!" exclaimed Corinna, but the sadness had left her voice and her eyes were shining. "Why, I am twelve years older than Rose Stribling, and those twelve years are everything."

"Those twelve years are nothing unless you imagine that you are in a novel. It is only in books that there is a chronology of the emotions."

"She is a fat blonde without a heart," insisted Corinna, "and they are invulnerable."

"Well, snatch Vetch away from her. He deserves something better than that combination."

"Oh, she can't hurt him very much, even though she no longer has a husband to get in her way. Have you ever wondered how George Stribling stood her? It must have been a relief to find himself safely dead."

"He stood her as one stands sultry weather probably, but with less hope of a change. He had that slow and heavy philosophy that wears well. I think it even dawned upon him now and then that there was something funny about it."

"Of course he knew that she married him for his money," said Corinna, "but that is the last thing the natural man appears to resent."

Stephen rose and bent over her. "Promise me that you will save Vetch," he implored mockingly.

"Why this sudden interest in Vetch?" Corinna rose also and reached for her fur coat. "It makes me curious to meet him. Yes, I promise you that I will go to-morrow night attired as for a carnival in all the mystery of a velvet mask. I may not save Vetch, but I think at least that I can eclipse Rose Stribling. My motive may not be admirable, but it is as feminine as a string of beads."

He kissed her hand. "Bless your heart because you are both human and my cousin." For an instant he hesitated, and then as they reached the door together, he turned with his hand on the knob, and looked into her eyes. "The Governor has a daughter. Did you know it?" he asked.

"Why, of course I know it. Isn't Patty Vetch as well advertised as the newest illustrated weekly?"

"I was wondering," again he hesitated over the words, "if you had seen her and what you think of her?"

"I have seen her twice. She was in here the other day to look at my prints, and," her brilliant eyes grew soft, "well, I feel sorry for her."

"Sorry? But do you like her?"

"Haven't you always told me that I like everybody?"

He laughed. "With one exception!"

"With one particular exception!"

"But honestly, Corinna." His tone was insistent. "Do you like Patty Vetch?"

"Honestly, my dear Stephen, I do. There is something—well, something almost pathetic about the girl; and I think she is genuine. One day last week she came here and made me tell her everything I could about my prints. I don't mean really that she made me, you know. There wasn't anything forward about her then, though I hear there is sometimes. She seemed to me a restless, lonely, misdirected intelligence hungry to know things. That is the only way I can describe her, but you will understand. She has had absolutely no advantages; she doesn't even know what culture means, or social instinct, or any of the qualities you were born with, my dear boy; but she feels vaguely that she has missed something, and she is reaching out gropingly and trying to find it. I like the spirit. It strikes me as American in the best sense—that young longing to make up in some way for her deficiencies and lack of opportunities, that gallant determination to get the better of her upbringing and her surroundings. A fight always appeals to me, you know. I like the courage that is in the girl—I am sure it is courage—and her straightforward effort to get the best out of life, to learn the things she was never taught, to make herself over if need be."

"Is this Patty Vetch, Corinna, or your own dramatic instinct?"

"Oh, it's Patty Vetch! I had no interest in her whatever. Why should I have had? But I liked the way she went straight as a dart at the thing she wanted. There was no affectation about her, no pretence of being what she was not. She asked about prints because she saw the name and she didn't know what it meant. She would have asked about Browning, or Swinburne, or Meredith in exactly the same way if this had been a book-shop. She wanted to know the difference between a mezzotint and a stipple print. She wanted to know all about the portraits too, and the names of the painters and who Lady Hamilton was and the Duchess of Bedford and the Ladies Waldegrave and 'Serena,' and if Morland's Cottagers were really as happy as they were painted? She asked as many questions as Socrates, and I fear got as inadequately answered."

"Well, she didn't strike me as in the least like that; but you can be a great help to her if she is really in earnest."

"She didn't strike you like that, my dear, simply because you are a man, and some girls are never really themselves with men; they are for ever acting a part; a vulgar part, I admit, but one they have learned before they were born, the instinctive quarry eluding the instinctive hunter. The girl is naturally shy; I could tell that, and she covers it with a kind of boldness that isn't—well, particularly attractive to one of your fastidious mind. Yet there is something rather taking about her. She reminds me of a small, bright tropical bird."

"Of a Virginia redbird, you mean."

"A redbird? Then you have seen her?"

"Yes, I've seen her—only twice—but the last time she indulged her sense of humour in a practical joke about a sprained ankle."

"I suppose she would joke like that. Even the modern girl that we know isn't in the best possible taste. And you must remember that Patty Vetch is something very different from the girls that you admire. I hope she'll let me help her, but I doubt it. She is the sort that wouldn't come if you tried to call and coax her. You said her father was like that, didn't you? Well, with that kind of wildness, or shyness, one can't put out a cage, you know. The only way is to scatter crumbs on the window-sill and then stand and wait. Will you let me take you home?"

They had crossed the pavement to her car, and she waited now with her smile of whimsical gaiety.

"If you will. It is only a few blocks, but I want to hear about the gown you will wear for your triumph."

It seemed to him that there was the chime of silver bells in her laughter. "Oh, my dear, must every victory of my life end in a forlorn hope!"



CHAPTER IV

THE TRIBAL INSTINCT

The spirit of the age, the worship of the many-headed god of magnitude, was holding carnival in the town. Faster and faster buildings were rising; the higher and more flimsily built, the better it seemed, for it is easier to demolish walls that have been lightly erected. Everywhere people were pushing one another into the slums or the country. Everywhere the past was going out with the times and the future was coming on in a torrent. Two opposing principles, the conservative and the progressive, had struggled for victory, and the progressive principle had won. To add more and more numbers; to build higher and higher; to push harder and harder; and particularly to improve what had been already added or built or pushed—these impulses had united at last into a frenzied activity. And while the building and the pushing and the improving went on, the village grew into the town, the town grew into the city, and the city grew out into the country. Beneath it all, informing the apparent confusion, there was some crude belief that the symbol of material success is size, and that size in itself, regardless of quality or condition, is civilization. For the many-headed god is a god of sacrifice. He makes a wilderness of beauty and calls it progress.

Long ago the village had disappeared. Long ago the spacious southern homes, with their walled gardens of box and roses and aromatic shrubs in spring, had receded into the shadowy memories of those whom the modern city pointed out, with playful solicitude, as "the oldest inhabitants." None except the very oldest inhabitants could remember those friendly and picturesque streets, deeply shaded by elms and sycamores; those hospitable houses of gray stucco or red brick which time had subdued to a delicate rust-colour; those imposing Doric columns, or quaint Georgian doorways; those grass-grown brick pavements, where old ladies in perpetual mourning gathered for leisurely gossip; those wrought-iron gates that never closed; those unshuttered windows, with small gleaming panes, which welcomed the passer-by in winter; or those gardens, steeped in the fragrance of mint and old-fashioned flowers, which allured the thirsty visitor in summer. These things had vanished years ago; yet beneath the noisy commercial city the friendly village remained. There were hours in the lavender-tinted twilights of spring, or on autumn afternoons, while the shadows quivered beneath the burnished leaves and the sunset glowed with the colour of apricots, when the watcher might catch a fleeting glimpse of the past. It may have been the drop of dusk in the arched recess of a Colonial doorway; it may have been the faint sunshine on the ivy-grown corner of an old brick wall; it may have been the plaintive melody of a negro market-man in the street; or it may have been the first view of the Culpeper's gray and white mansion; but, in one or all of these things, there were moments when the ghost of the buried village stirred and looked out, and a fragrance that was like the memory of box and mint and blush roses stole into the senses. It was then that one turned to the Doric columns of the Culpeper house, standing firmly established in its grassy lawn above the street and the age, and reflected that the defeated spirit of tradition had entrenched itself well at the last. Time had been powerless against that fortress of prejudice; against that cheerful and inaccessible prison of the tribal instinct. Poverty, the one indiscriminate leveller of men and principles, had never attacked it, for in the lean years of Reconstruction, when to look well fed was little short of a disgrace in Virginia, an English cousin, remote but clannish, had died at an opportune moment and left Mr. Randolph Byrd Culpeper a moderate fortune. Thanks to this event, which Mrs. Culpeper gratefully classified as the "intervention of Providence," the family had scarcely altered its manner of living in the last two hundred years. To be sure there were modern discomforts which related to the abolition of slavery and the prohibition of whiskey;

but since the Culpepers had been indulgent masters and light drinkers, they had come to regard these deprivations as in the nature of blessings. Solid, imposing, and as richly endowed as an institution of learning, the Culpeper generations had weathered both the restraints and the assaults of the centuries. The need to make a living, that grim necessity which is the mother of democracy, had brushed them as lightly as the theory of evolution. Saturated with tradition as with an odour, and fortified by the ponderous moral purpose of the Victorian age, they had never doubted anything that was old and never discovered anything that was new. About them as about the hidden village, there was the charm of mellowness, of unruffled serenity. Some ineradicable belief in things as they have always been had preserved them from the aesthetic derangement of the Mid-Victorian taste; and in standing for what was old, they had stood, inadvertently but courageously, for what was excellent. Security, permanence, possession—all the instincts which blend to make the tribe and the community, all the agencies which work for organized society and against the wayward experiment in human destiny—these were the stubborn forces embodied in the Culpeper stock.

The present head of the family, that Randolph Byrd Culpeper who had been only ten years old when Providence intervened, was now a fine-looking, heavily built man of sixty-five, with prominent dark eyes under sleepy lids, abundant iron-gray hair which was brushed until it shone, and a drooping moustache that was still as brown as it had been in his youth. He had an impressive though stolid bearing, an amiable expression, an engaging smile, and the manner of a weary monarch. It was his boast that he had never done anything for the first time without ascertaining precisely how it had been done by the highest authority before him. Devoid of even the rudiments of an imagination, he had never been visited in a nightmare by the suspicion that the name of Culpeper was not the best result of the best of all possible worlds. As long as his prejudices were not offended his generosity was inexhaustible. For the rest, he bore his social position as reverently as if it were a plate in church, had never spoken a profane word or recognized a joke in his life, and still dined at two o'clock in the afternoon because his grandfather, who was dyspeptic by constitution, had been unable to digest a late dinner. At the time of his marriage, an unusually happy one, he was regarded as "the handsomest man of his day"; and he was still yearned over from a distance by elderly ladies of suppressed romantic temperaments.

Mrs. Culpeper, a small imperious woman of distinguished lineage and uncertain temper, had gone through an entire life seeing only one thing at a time, and never seeing that one thing as it really was. If her husband embodied the moral purpose, she herself was an incarnation of the evasive idealism of the nineteenth century. Her universe was comprised in her family circle; her horizon ended with the old brick wall between the alley and the Culpepers' garden. All that related to her husband, her eight children and her six grandchildren, was not only of supreme importance and intense interest to her, but of unsurpassed beauty and excellence. It was intolerable to her exclusive maternal instinct that either virtue or happiness should exist in any degree, except a lesser measure, outside of her own household; and praise of another woman's children conveyed to her a secret disparagement of her own. Having naturally a kind heart she could forgive any sin in her neighbours except prosperity—though as Corinna had once observed, with characteristic flippancy, "Continual affliction was a high price to pay for Aunt Harriet's favour." In her girlhood she had been a famous beauty; and she was still as fine and delicately tinted as a carving in old ivory, with a skin like a faded microphylla rose-leaf, and stiff yellowish white hair, worn à la Pompadour. Her mind was thin but firm, and having received a backward twist in its youth, it had remained inflexibly bent for more than sixty years. Unlike her husband she was gifted with an active, though perfectly concrete imagination—a kind of superior magic lantern that shot out images in black and white on a sheet—and a sense of humour which, in spite of the fact that it lost its edge when it was pointed at the family, was not without practical value in a crisis.

On the evening of Stephen's adventure in the Square, the Culpeper family had gathered in the front drawing-room, to await the arrival of a young cousin, whom, they devoutly hoped, Stephen would one day perceive the wisdom of marrying. The four daughters—Victoria, the eldest, who had nursed in France during the war; Hatty, who ought to have been pretty, and was not; Janet, who was candidly plain; and Mary Byrd, who would have been a beauty in any circle—were talking eagerly, with the innumerable little gestures which they had inherited from Mrs. Culpeper's side of the house. They adored one another; they adored their father and mother; they adored their three brothers and their married sister, whose name was Julia; and they adored every nephew and niece in the connection. Though they often quarrelled, being young and human, these quarrels rippled as lightly as summer storms over profound depths of devotion.

"Oh, I do wish," said Mary Byrd, who had "come out" triumphantly the winter before, "that Stephen would marry Margaret." She was a slender graceful girl, with red-gold hair, which had a lustrous sheen and a natural wave in it, and the brown ox-like eyes of her father. There was a great deal of what Peyton, the second son, who lived at home, and was the most modern of the family, called "dash" about her.

"It was the war that spoiled it," said Janet, the plain one, who possessed what her mother fondly described as "a charm that was all her own." "I sometimes think the war spoiled everything."

At this Victoria, the eldest, demurred mildly. Ever since she had nursed in France, she had assumed a slightly possessive manner toward the war, as if she had in some mysterious way brought it into the world and was responsible for its reputation. She was tall and very thin, with a perfect complexion, a long nose, and a short upper lip which showed her teeth too much when she laughed. Her hair was fair and fluffy; and Mrs. Culpeper, who could not praise her beauty, was very proud of her "aristocratic appearance."

"Why, he never even mentions the war," she protested.

"I don't care. I believe he thinks about it," insisted Janet, who would never surrender a point after she had once made it.

"He's different, anyhow," said Hatty, the one who had everything, as her mother asserted, to make her pretty, and yet wasn't. "He isn't nearly so normal. Is he, Mother?"

Mrs. Culpeper raised troubled eyes from the skirt of her pale gray silk gown which she was scrutinizing dejectedly. "How on earth could I have got that spot there?" she remarked in her brisk yet soft voice. "I am afraid you are right, dear, about Stephen. He certainly hasn't been like himself for some time. I have felt really anxious, I suppose it was the war."

While the war had lasted she had seen it, according to her habit of vision, with peculiar intentness, and she had seen nothing else; but from the beginning to the end, it had appeared to her mainly as an international disturbance which had upset the serene and regular course of her family affairs. For the past two years she had refused to think of it except under pressure; and then she recalled it only as the occasion when Victoria and Stephen had been in France, and poor Peyton in a training camp. Her feeling had been violent, but entirely personal, while Mr. Culpeper, who possessed the martial patriotism characteristic of Virginians of his class and generation, had been animated by the sacrificial spirit of a hero.

"Oh, Stephen is all right," declared Peyton, who felt impelled to take the side of his brother in a family discussion. He was an incurious and gay young man, of active sporting interests and immaculate appearance, with so few of the moral attributes of the Culpepers that his mother sometimes wondered how he could possibly be the son of his father. Indeed there were times when this wonder extended to

Mary Byrd, for it seemed incredible that anything so "advanced" as the outlook of these two should have been a legitimate offspring of either the Culpeper or the Warwick point of view.

"He would be all right," maintained Janet, "if he would only marry Margaret. I am sure she likes him."

"Oh, I don't know. There's that young clergyman," rejoined Hatty, "and Margaret is so pious. I suppose that's why she has never been popular with men."

"My dear child," breathed Mrs. Culpeper in remonstrance, and she added emphatically, as if the doubt were a disparagement of Stephen's attractions, "Of course she likes him. Why, it would be a perfectly splendid marriage for Margaret Blair."

"It isn't possible," asked Mary Byrd, for if her manners were modern, her prejudices were old-fashioned, "that Stephen could have met any one else over there?" She was wearing an elaborate, very short and very low gown of pink velvet, not one of the simple blue or gray silk dresses, with modest round necks, in which her sisters attired themselves in the evening. A little later she and Peyton would go on to a dance; for her mother's consternation when the frock had been unpacked from its Paris wrappings had been temporarily mitigated by the assertion that unless one danced in gowns like that, one simply couldn't be expected to dance at all. "Of course, if you wish me to be a wall-flower like Margaret Blair," Mary Byrd had protested with wounded dignity; and since Mrs. Culpeper wished nothing on earth so little as that, her only response had been, "Well, I hope to heaven that you won't let your father see it!"

Now, as her husband was heard descending the stairs, she said hurriedly: "Mary Byrd, if you won't put a scarf over your knees, I wish you would wear one around your neck."

"Oh, Father won't mind," retorted Mary Byrd flippantly. "He is a real sport, and he knows that you have to play the game well if you play it at all." Then turning with her liveliest air, she remarked as Mr. Culpeper entered: "Father, darling, I've just said that you were a sport."

Mr. Culpeper surveyed her with portentous disapproval. He adored her, and she knew it, but because it was impossible for his features to wear any expression lightly, the natural gravity of his look deepened to a thundercloud.

"Is Mary Byrd going in swimming?" he demanded not of his daughter, but of the family.

"No, you precious, only in dancing," replied Mary Byrd, as she rose airily and placed a kiss above the thundercloud on his forehead.

"Will you go looking like this?"

"Not if I can possibly look any worse." She swayed like a golden lily before his astonished gaze. "Can you suggest any way that I might?"

"I cannot." His face cleared under the kiss, and he held her at arm's length while paternal pride softened his look. "Do you really mean that you won't shock the young men away from you?" It was as near a jest as he had ever come, and a ripple of amusement passed over the room.

"I may shock them, but not away." The girl was really a wonder. How in the world, he asked himself, did she happen to be his daughter?

"Do you mean that all the other girls dress like this?" It was his final appeal to an arbitrary but acknowledged authority.

"All the popular ones. You can't wish me to dress like the unpopular ones, can you?"

His appeal had failed, and he accepted defeat with the sober courage his father had displayed in a greater surrender.

"Well, I suppose if everybody does it, it is all right," he conceded; and though he was not aware of it, he had compressed into this convenient axiom his whole philosophy of conduct.

As he crossed the room to the glowing fire and the black marble mantelpiece, which had supplanted the delicate Adam one of a less resplendent period, he wore an air that was at once gentle and haughty—the expression of a man who hopes that he is a Christian and knows that his blood is blue.

"Hasn't Stephen come in yet?" he inquired of his wife. "I thought I heard him upstairs."

She shook her head helplessly. "No, and I told him Margaret was coming. That is her ring now."

Mr. Culpeper looked at Mary Byrd. "I am sure that Margaret would clothe herself more discreetly," he remarked in a voice which sounded husky because he tried to make it facetious. "When I was a young man it was the fashion to compare women to flowers, and in these unromantic days I should call Margaret our last violet—"

A peal of laughter fell from the bright red lips of Mary Byrd. "It sounds as depressing as the last rose of summer," she cried, "and it's just as certain to be left on the stem—" Then she broke off, still pulsing with merriment, for the door opened slowly, and the last violet entered the room.



CHAPTER V

MARGARET

As he inserted his latch-key in the old-fashioned lock, Stephen remembered that his mother had instructed him not to be late because Margaret Blair was coming to spend the evening. "It takes you so long to change that I believe you begin to dream as soon as you go to your room," she had added; and while he made his way hurriedly and softly up the stairs, he wondered how he could have so completely forgotten the girl whom he had always thought of vaguely as the one who would some day—some remote day probably—become his wife. He was not in love with Margaret, and he believed, though one could never be sure, that she was not in love with him—that her fancy, if a preference so modest could be called by so capricious a name, was for the handsome young clergyman who read Browning with her every Tuesday afternoon. But he was aware also that she would marry him if he asked her; he knew that the hearts of four formidable parents were set on the match; and in his past experience his mother's heart had invariably triumphed over his less intrepid resolves. When Janet had said that the war had "spoiled" this carefully nurtured sentiment, she had described the failure with her usual accuracy. If he had never gone to France, he would certainly have married Margaret in his twenty-fourth year, and by this time they would have begun to rear a promising family. For he was the offspring of tradition; and the seeds of that strange flower, which some adventurous ancestor had strewn in his soul, could not have broken through the compact soil in which he had grown. If he had never felt the charm of the unknown, he would have remained satisfied to accept convention for romance; if he had never caught a glimpse of wider horizons, he would have restricted his vision contentedly to the tranquil current of James River. But the harm had been done, as Janet said, the exotic flower had sprung up, and he had learned that the family formula for happiness could not suffice for his needs. He craved something larger, something wider, something deeper, than the world in which his fathers had lived. In that first year after his return he had felt that antiquated traditions were closing about him and shutting out the air, just as he had felt at times that the fine old walls of the house were pressing together over his head. At such moments the sense of suffocation, of smothering for lack of space in which to breathe, had driven him like a hunted creature out into the streets. It was not long before he discovered that certain persons brought this feeling of oppression more quickly than others, that the presence of Margaret or of his parents stifled him, while Corinna made him feel as if a window had been suddenly flung open. The doctors, of course, had talked in scientific terms of diseased nerves and a specialist whom his mother had called in on one occasion had tried first to probe into the secrets of his infancy and afterward to analyse his symptoms away. But the war, among other lessons, had taught him that one must not take either one's sensations or scientific opinion too seriously, and he had contrived at last to turn the whole thing into the kind of family joke that his father could understand. Outwardly he took up his life as before; if the penalty of depression was psychoanalysis, it was worth while to pretend at least to be gay. Yet beneath the surface there was, he told himself, a profound revulsion from everything that he had once enjoyed and loved—an apathy of soul which made him a moving shadow in a universe of stark unrealities. He knew that he was sinking deeper and deeper into this morass of indifference; he realized, at times vividly, that his only hope was in change, in a complete break with the past and a complete plunge into the future. His reason told him this, and yet, though he longed passionately to let himself go—to make the wild dash for freedom—his disabled will, the nervous indecision from which he suffered, prevented both his liberation and his recovery. There were hours of grayness when he told himself that he had neither the fortitude to endure the old nor the

energy to embrace the new. In his nature, as in his environment, two opposing spirits were struggling: the realistic spirit which saw things as they were and the romantic spirit which saw things as they ought to be. It was the immemorial battle, brought by circumstances to a crisis, between the race and the individual, between tradition and adventure, between philosophy and experience, between age and youth.

Yes, it was "something different" that he craved. He had known Margaret too long; there was no surprise for him in any gesture that she made, in any word that she uttered. They had drunk too deeply of the same springs to offer each other the attraction of mystery, the charm of the unusual. He was familiar with every opinion she had inherited and preserved, with every dress she had worn, with every book she had read. As a whole she embodied his ideal of feminine perfection. She was gentle, lovely and unselfish; she never asked unnecessary questions, never exacted more of one's time than one cared to give, never interfered with more important, if not more admirable, pursuits. That was the rarest of combinations, he knew—the delightful mingling of every virtue he held desirable in woman—and yet, rare and delightful as he acknowledged it to be, he was obliged to confess that it awakened not the faintest quiver of his pulses. Margaret aroused in him every sentiment except the one of interest; and he had begun to realize that at the moments when he admired her most, it was often impossible for him to make conversation. It had never occurred to him to wonder if their association had become emotionally unprofitable to her also, for in accordance with the system under which he lived, he had assumed that woman's part in love was as heroically passive as it had been in religion. What he had asked himself again and again was why, since she was so perfectly desirable in every way, he had never fallen in love with her? Until this evening he had always told himself that it would come right in the end, that he was in his own phrase simply "playing for time." Margaret was handsomer, if less piquant, than Patty Vetch. She possessed every quality he had found lacking in poor Patty; yet he admitted ruefully that he felt the vague sense of disappointment which follows when one is offered a dish of one's choice and finds that the expected flavour is missing.

There was a peremptory knock at his door, and his mother looked in reproachfully. "You must hurry, Stephen, or everything will be burned to a cinder."

"I am sorry," he replied with compunction, "I didn't realize that I was late."

Her expression was stern but kind. "If you could only learn to be punctual, dear. Of course while we felt that you were not quite yourself, we tried not to worry about it. But you have been home so long now that you ought to be able to drop back into your old habits."

She was right, he knew; the exasperating thing about her was that she was always right. It was reasonable, it was logical, that after two years he should be able to drop back into his old habits of life; and yet he realized, with the intensity of revolt, that these habits represented for him the form of bondage from which he desired passionately to escape. He could not oppose his mother, and the knowledge that he could not oppose her increased his annoyance. As far back as he could remember she had governed her household as a benevolent despot; and the fact that she lived entirely for others appeared to him to have endowed her with some unfair advantage. Her very unselfishness had developed into an unscrupulous power to ruin their lives. How was it possible to weigh one's personal preferences against an irresistible force which was actuated simply and solely by the desire for one's good? Who could withstand a virtue which had encased itself in the first principle of religion—which gave all things and demanded nothing except the sacrifice of one's immortal soul?

"I am ready now," he said; and then as they went downstairs together, he added contritely: "After this I'll try to remember."

"I hope you will, my dear. It vexes your father." Even in his childhood Stephen had understood that his father's "vexation" existed only as an instrument of correction in the hands of his mother. Though he had discovered by the time he was three years old that the image was nothing more than a nursery bugaboo, there were occasions still when the figure was solemnly dressed up and paraded before his eyes.

"So it's the Dad, bless him!" he exclaimed, for if he loved his mother in spite of her virtues, he joined heartily in the family worship of the head of the house. "Well, he has had a word with Margaret anyway, and he ought to thank me for that."

"Dear Margaret," murmured Mrs. Culpeper, "she is looking so sweet to-night."

That Margaret was looking very sweet indeed, Stephen acknowledged as soon as he entered the room, where the firelight suffused the Persian rugs (which had replaced the earlier Brussels carpet woven in a mammoth floral design), the elaborately carved and twisted rosewood chairs and sofas, upholstered in ruby-coloured brocade, the few fine old pieces of Chippendale or Heppelwhite, the massive crystal chandelier, and the precise copies of Italian paintings in gorgeous Florentine frames. Here and there hung a family portrait, one of Amanda Culpeper, a famous English beauty, with a long nose and a short upper lip, not unlike Victoria's. This painting, which was supposed to be by Sir Joshua Reynolds, was a source of unflinching consolation to Victoria, though Stephen preferred the Sully painting of his grandmother, Judith Randolph, who reminded him in some subtle way of Margaret Blair. In his childhood he had believed this drawing-room to be the most beautiful place on earth, and he never entered it now without a feeling of regret for a shattered illusion.

As he took Margaret's hand her expression of intelligent sympathy went straight to his heart; and he told himself emphatically that after all the familiar graces in women were the most lovable. She was a small fragile girl, with a lovely oval face, nut-brown hair that grew in a "widow's peak" on her forehead, and the prettiest dark blue eyes in the world. Her figure drooped slightly in the shoulders, and was, as Mary Byrd pointed out in her dashing way, "without the faintest pretence to style." But if Margaret lacked "style," she possessed an unconscious grace which seemed to Stephen far more attractive. It was delightful to watch the flowing lines of her clothes, as if, he used to imagine in a fanciful strain, she were poured out of some slender porcelain vase. Her dress to-night, of delicate blue crêpe, began slightly below the throat and reached almost to her ankles. It was a fashion which he had always admired; but he realized that it gave Margaret, who was only twenty-two, a quaint air of maturity.

"I am so sorry I am late," he said, "but I had to go back to the office for a paper I'd forgotten." It was the truth as far as it went; and yet because it was not the whole truth, because his delay was due, not to his return for the paper, but to his meeting with Patty Vetch in the Square, his conscience pricked him uncomfortably. When deceit was so easy it ceased to be a temptation.

She looked at him with an expression of guileless sympathy. "After working all day I should think you would be tired," she murmured. That was the way she would always cover up his errors, large or small, he knew, with a trusting sweetness which made him feel there was dishonour in the merest tinge of dissimulation.

Mary Byrd was talking as usual in high fluting notes which drowned the gentle ripple of Margaret's voice.

"I was just telling Margaret about the charity ball," she said, "and the way the girls snubbed Patty Vetch in the dressing-room."

"And it was a very good account of young barbarians at play," commented Mr. Culpeper, who was a

romantic soul and still read his Byron.

"Patty Vetch? Why, isn't that the daughter of the Governor?" asked Mrs. Culpeper, without a trace of her husband's sympathy for the victim of the "snubbing." A moment later, in accordance with her mental attitude of evasive idealism, she added briskly: "I try not to think of that man as Governor of Virginia."

Of course the subject had come up. Wherever Stephen had been in the past few weeks he had found that the conversation turned to the Governor; and it struck him, while he followed the line of girls headed by his mother's erect figure into the dining-room, that, for good or bad, the influence of Gideon Vetch was as prevalent as an epidemic. All through the long and elaborate meal, in which the viands that his ancestors had preferred were served ceremoniously by slow-moving coloured servants, he listened again to the familiar discussion and analysis of the demagogue, as he still called him. How little, after all, did any one know of Gideon Vetch? Since he had been in office what had they learned except that he was approachable in human relations and unapproachable in political ones?

"I wonder if Stephen noticed the girl at the ball?" said Mrs. Culpeper suddenly, looking tenderly at her son across the lovely George II candlesticks and the dish of expensive fruit, for she could never reconcile with her ideas of economy the spending of a penny on decorations so ephemeral as flowers.

"Oh, he couldn't have helped it," responded Mary Byrd. "Every one saw her. She was dressed very conspicuously."

"Do you imply that you were not?" inquired her father, without facetious intention.

Mary Byrd beamed indulgently in his direction. "Oh, you don't know what it is to be conspicuous, dear," she answered. "What did you think of her dress, Stephen?"

He met her question with a blush. Was he really so modest after the war and France and everything?—Victoria wondered in silence.

"It was something red, wasn't it?" he rejoined vaguely.

"It was scarlet tulle." Mary Byrd, as her mother had once observed, "hadn't an indefinite bone in her body." Then she imparted an additional incident. "She got it badly torn. I saw her pinning it up in the dressing-room."

"I should have been sorry for her," said Margaret simply; and he felt that he had never in his life been so nearly in love with her.

"Is she pretty?" asked Mrs. Culpeper, appealing directly to Stephen as a man and an authority. It was the question the strange woman had put to him in the Square, and ironical mirth seized the young man as he remembered.

"Do you think her pretty, Stephen?" repeated Margaret, and waited, with an expression of impartial interest, for his reply.

For an instant he hesitated. Did he think Patty Vetch pretty or not? "I hardly know," he answered. "I suppose it depends upon whether you like that kind of thing or not. Why don't you ask Peyton?" At the time he couldn't have told himself whether he admired Patty or not. She surprised him, she struck a new note, the note of the unexpected, but whether he liked or disliked it, he could not tell. "There is something unusual about her," he concluded hurriedly, feeling that he had not been quite fair.

"Well, I think she's good looking enough," Peyton, the incurious young man of "advanced" tastes, was replying. "She seems to have a kind of fascination. I don't know what it is, but I dare say she inherited it from her father. The Governor may be unsound in his views and uncertain in his methods, but I've yet to see any one who could resist his smile."

"The Judge admires him," remarked Stephen, with the air of a man who tosses a bomb into a legislative assembly.

"Oh, Stephen," protested Victoria on a high note of interrogation, "how can he?"

"The Judge likes to keep up well with the times," observed Mr. Culpeper, whose final argument against any innovation was the inquiry, "What do you suppose General Lee would have thought of it?" Pausing an instant while the family hung breathlessly on his words, he continued heroically: "Now, it doesn't bother me to be called an old fogey."

"There's no use trying to hide the fact that the Judge isn't quite what he used to be," said Mrs. Culpeper in an unusually tolerant tone. "He has let his habit of joking grow on him until you never know whether he is serious or simply poking fun at you."

"The next thing we hear," suggested Peyton, who was quite dreadful at times, "will be that the old gentleman admires the daughter also."

"He doesn't like conspicuous women," rejoined Victoria. "He told me so only the other day when Mrs. Bradford announced that she was going to run for the legislature."

"That's the kind of conspicuousness we all object to," commented Peyton; "Patty Vetch isn't that sort."

Janet was more merciful. "Well, you are obliged to be conspicuous to-day if you want anybody to notice you," she said. "Look at Mary Byrd."

Mary Byrd tossed her bright head as gaily as if a compliment had been intended. "Oh, you needn't think I like to dress this way," she retorted, "or that I don't sometimes get tired of keeping up with things. Why, there are hours and hours when I simply feel as if I should drop."

"Well, as long as you look like that you needn't hope for a change," remarked Stephen admiringly. Then, turning his gaze away from her too obvious brightness, he looked into the tranquil depths of Margaret's blue eyes, and thought how much more restful the old-fashioned type of woman must have been. Men didn't need to bestir themselves and sharpen their wits with women like that; they were accepted, with their inherent virtues or vices, as philosophically as one accepted the seasons.

It was a dull supper, he thought, because his mind was distracted; but a little later, when they had returned to the drawing-room, and the family had drifted away in separate directions—Mary Byrd and Peyton to a dance, his father to his library, and his mother and the three other girls to a game of bridge in the next room, he received an amazing revelation of Margaret's point of view. His sentiment for the girl had always suffered, he was aware, from too many opportunities. He had sometimes wished that an obstacle might arise, that the formidable parents would try for once to tear them apart instead of thrust them together, but, in spite of the changeless familiarity of their association, he was presently to discover how little he had known of the real Margaret beneath the flowing grace and the nut-brown hair and the eyes like blue larkspur. Though the tribal customs had shaped her body and formed her manners, a rare essence of personality escaped like a perfume from the hereditary mould of the race.

As he looked at her now, sitting gracefully on the ruby brocade of one of the rosewood chairs, with her lovely head framed by the band of intricate carving, he was aware that the delicate subtleties and shadings of her feminine charm made an entirely fresh appeal to his perceptions, if not to his senses. He had never admired her appearance more than he did at that instant; and yet his gaze was as dispassionate as the one he bestowed on the Sully portrait of which she reminded him. Her eyes were very soft; there was a faint smile on her thin pink lips which gave the look of coldness, of reticence to her face. With her head bent and her hands folded in her lap, she sat there waiting pensively—for what? It occurred to him suddenly with a shock that she was deeper, far deeper than he had ever suspected.

"You are so different from the other girls, Margaret," he said at last, oppressed by the old difficulty of making conversation. "You don't belong to the same world with Mary Byrd and—" He was going to add "Patty Vetch," but he checked himself before the name escaped him.

She seemed to melt rather than break from her attitude of waiting, so gently did her movements sink into the shadowy glow of the firelight.

"No, I don't," she replied, with a touch of sadness. "I sometimes wish that I did."

"You wish that you did!" Here was surprise at last. "But, why, in Heaven's name, should you wish that when you are everything that they ought to be?"

"As if that mattered!" There was a tone in her voice that was new to him. "It's gone out of fashion to be superior. Nobody even cares any longer about your being what you ought to be. I've been trained to be the kind of girl that doesn't get on to-day, full of all sorts of forgotten virtues and refinements. Nobody looks at me because everybody is staring so hard at the girls who are improperly dressed. There is only one place where I can be sure of having attention, and that is in an Old Ladies' Home. Old ladies admire me."

For the second time that day he found himself startled by the eccentricities of the feminine mind; but in Margaret's passive resignation there was none of Patty's rebellion against the cruelty and injustice of life. Generations of acquiescence were in the slender figure before him; and he realized that the completeness of her surrender to Fate must have softened her destiny. Both girls were victims of the changing fashion in women, of an age that moved not in a stream, but in a whirlpool.

"I admire you," he said in a caressing voice, "more than I admire any one else in the world."

She had been gazing into the fire, and as she turned slowly in answer to his words, it seemed to him that the blue of a summer sky shone on him from beneath the tremulous shadow of her eyelashes.

"The trouble," she replied, with an appealing glance, "is that I don't know how to be common. There isn't any hope of a girl's being popular if she doesn't know how to be common. I would be if I could," she confessed plaintively, "but I haven't the faintest idea how to begin."

"I hope you'll never learn," he insisted. In awakening his sympathy she had awakened also a deep-rooted protective instinct. He felt that he longed to guard and defend her, as a brother of course, and if this newer and tenderer sentiment was the result of feminine calculation, he was too chivalrous or too inexperienced to perceive it. What he perceived was simply that this lovely girl, whom he had known from infancy, had opened her heart and taken him into her confidence. To admit that she was not a success in her small social world, proved her, he felt, to be both frank and courageous.

"Of course they don't call their way common," she pursued, with what seemed to him the most touching candour. "Their word for it is 'pep'." She pronounced the vulgar syllable as if she abhorred it. "That is

what I haven't got, and that's why I have never been a real success in anything except church work. Even in the Red Cross it was 'pep' that counted most, and that was the reason they never sent me to Europe. Mother tried to make me into the kind of girl that men admired when she was young; but the type has gone out of fashion to-day just as much as crinolines or a small waist. If I were clever I suppose I could make myself over and begin to jump about and imitate the sort of animation I never had; but I'm not really clever, for I've tried and I can't do it. It only makes me feel silly to pretend to be what I am not."

Her confession struck him, while he listened to it, as the sweetest and most womanly one he had ever heard.

"I cannot imagine your pretending," he answered, and felt that the remark was as inane as if he had quoted it from a play. After a moment, as she seemed to be waiting for something, he continued with greater assurance, "I dare say they have a quality that the older generation missed. It isn't just commonness. The modern spirit means, I suppose, a breathless vitality. We are more intensely alive than our ancestors, perhaps, more restless, more inclined to take risks."

The phrases he had used made him think suddenly of Gideon Vetch. Was that the secret of the Governor's irresistible magnetism, of his meteoric rise into power? He embodied the modern fetish—success; he was, in the lively idiom of the younger set,—personified "pep." After all, if the old order crumbled, was it not because of its own weakness? Was not the fact of its decay the sign of some secret disintegration, of rottenness at the core? And if the new spirit could destroy, perhaps it could build as well. There might be more in it, he was beginning to discern, than mere lack of control, than vulgar hysteria and undisciplined violence. The quality expressed by that dreadful word was the sparkle on the edge of the tempest, the lightning flash that revealed the presence of electricity in the air. After all, the god of the future was riding the whirlwind.

"I wonder if we can be wrong, you and I?" he went on presently, forgetting the intensely personal nature of Margaret's disclosures, while he followed the abstract trend of his reflections. "Isn't it conceivable that we are standing, not for what is necessarily better, but simply for what is old? Isn't the conservative merely the creature of habit? I suppose the older generation always looks disapprovingly at the younger, and, in spite of our youth, we really belong to the past generation. We see things through the eyes of our parents. We are mentally middle-aged—for middle age is a state of mind, after all. You and I were broken in by tradition—at least I know I was, and even the war couldn't free me. It only made me restless and dissatisfied. It destroyed my belief in the past without giving me faith in the future. It left me eager to go somewhere; but it failed to offer me any direction. It put me to sea without a compass."

Clasping his hands behind his head, he leaned back against the carving of his chair, and fixed his gaze on the portrait of the English ancestress over the mantelpiece. The firelight flickered over his firm, clear-cut features, over the sleek dark hair, which was brushed straight back from his forehead, and over his sombre smoke-coloured eyes in which a dusky glow came and went. Margaret, watching him with her pensive smile, thought that she had never seen him look so "interesting."

"We used to talk in those first days about the 'spiritual effect' of the war," he resumed dreamily, speaking more to himself than to his companion. "As if organized violence could have a steadying effect—could have any results that are not the offspring of violence. It is hard for me to talk about it. I've never even tried before to put it into words; but we are both suffering from the same cause, I think. I know it has played the very deuce with my life. It has made me discontented with what I have; but it hasn't shown me anything else that was worth striving for. I seem to have lost the power of wanting because I've discovered that nothing is worth having after you get it. Every apple has turned into Dead Sea fruit."

He had never before spoken so freely, and when he had finished he felt awkward and half resentful. Margaret's extraordinary frankness had started him, he supposed, on a similar strain; but he wished that he had kept back all that sentimental nonsense about what his mother called disapprovingly, his "frame of mind." Any frame of mind except the permanently settled appeared unsafe to Mrs. Culpeper; and her son felt at the moment that her opinion was justified. Somehow the whole thing seemed to have resulted from his meeting with Gideon Vetch. It was Vetch who had "unsettled" him, who had taken the wind out of the stiff sails of his prejudices. Had the war awakened in him, he wondered, the need of crude emotional stimulants, the dangerous allurements of the unfamiliar, the exotic? Would it ever pass, and would life become again normal and placid without losing its zest and its interest? For it was the zest of life, he realized, that he had encountered in Gideon Vetch.

"But you are a man," Margaret was saying plaintively. "Everything is easier for a man. You can go out and do things."

"So can women now. You can even go into politics."

She made a pretty gesture of aversion. "Oh, I've been too well brought up! There isn't any hope for a girl who is well brought up except the church, and even there she can't do anything but sit and listen to sermons. Mother's consolation," she added with a soft little laugh, "is that I should have been a belle and beauty in the days when Madison was President."

Then putting the subject aside as if she had finished with it for ever, she began talking to him about the books she was reading. Of all the girls he knew she was the only one who ever opened a book except one that had been forbidden.

An hour later, when Margaret went home with her father, Stephen turned back, after putting her into the car, with a warmer emotion in his heart than he had ever felt for her before. She was not only lovely and gentle; she had revealed unexpected qualities of mind which might develop later into an attraction that he had never dreamed she could possess. Never, he felt, had the outlook appeared so desirable. He was in that particular dreaminess of mood when one is easily borne off on waves of sentiment or imagination; and it is possible that, if his mother had been able to refrain from improving perfection, he might have found himself sufficiently in love with Margaret for all practical purposes. But Mrs. Culpeper, who had no need of dissimulation since she had always got things by showing that she wanted them entirely for the good of others, was incapable of leaving her son to work out his own future. When he entered the house again he found her awaiting him at the foot of the staircase.

"I hope you had a pleasant evening, Stephen."

"Yes, Mother, very pleasant."

"Margaret is a dear girl, and so well brought up. Her mother has a great deal for which to be thankful."

"A great deal, I am sure." A sharp sense of irritation had dispelled the dreamy sentiment with which he had parted from Margaret. To his mother, he knew, the evening appeared only as one more carefully planned and carelessly neglected opportunity; and the knowledge of this exasperated him in a measure that was absurdly disproportionate to the cause.

"She is so refreshing after the things you hear about other girls," pursued Mrs. Culpeper. "Poor Mrs. St. John was obliged to go to a rest cure, they say, because of the worry she has had over Geraldine; and the other girls are almost as troublesome, I suppose. That is why I am so thankful that you should have taken a

fancy to Margaret. She is just the kind of girl I should like to have for a daughter-in-law."

"You'll have a long time to wait, Mother. I don't want to marry anybody until I need a nurse in my old age."

He spoke jestingly, but his mother, with her usual tenacity, held fast to the subject. Under the flickering gas light in the hall (they were still suspicious of the effect of electricity on Mr. Culpeper's eyes) her face looked grimly determined, as if an indomitable purpose had moulded every feature and traced every line in some thin plastic substance.

"I have set my heart on this, Stephen."

At this he laughed aloud with an indecorous mirth. In spite of her instincts and traditions how lacking in feminine finesse, how utterly without subtlety of method she was! She had stood always for the unconquerable will in the fragile body, and she had used to the utmost her two strong weapons of obstinacy and weakness. He did not know whether the dread of being nagged or the fear of hurting her had influenced him most; and when he looked back he could recall only a series of ineffectual efforts at evasion or denial. It is true that he had once adored her—that he still loved her—but it was a love, like his father's, which was forbearing but never free, which was always furtive and a little ashamed of its own weakness. Ever since he could remember she had triumphed over their inclinations, their convictions, and even their appetites, for they had eaten only what she thought good for them. She had invariably gained her point; and she had gained it with few words, without temper or agitation, by sheer force of character. If she had been a moral principle she could not have moved more relentlessly.

"Mrs. Blair and I used to talk it over when you and Margaret were children," she continued, in the inflexible tone with which she was accustomed to carry her point. "Even then you were fond of her."

He looked at her with a gleam of the tolerant amusement he had caught from his father's expression. "Can you imagine anything more certain to turn a man against a marriage than the thought that it was arranged for him in his infancy?" he objected.

"Not if he knew that his mother had set her heart on it?" She looked hurt but resolute.

"Don't set your heart on it, Mother. Let me dree my own weird."

"My dear boy, it is for your own good. I am sure that you know I am not thinking of myself. I may say with truth that I never think of myself."

It was true. She never thought of herself; but he had sometimes wondered what worse things could have happened if she had occasionally done so.

"I know that, Mother," he answered simply.

"I have but one wish in life and that is to see my children happy," she said, with an air of injured dignity which made him feel curiously guilty.

It was the old infallible method, he knew. She would never yield her point; she would never relax her pressure; she would never admit defeat until he married another woman.

"I want nobody else in your place, Mother. Goodnight, and try to set your heart on something else."

As he undressed a little later he was thinking of Margaret—of her low white brow under the "widow's

peak," of her soft blue eyes, of her goodness and gentleness, and of the thrill in her voice when she had made that touching confession. Margaret's voice was the last thing he thought of before falling asleep; but hours afterward, when the dawn was beginning to break, he dreamed of Patty Vetch in her red cape and of that hidden country of the endless roads and the far horizons.



CHAPTER VI

MAGIC

The next day after luncheon, as Stephen walked from his club to his office, he lived over again his evening with Margaret. "If she cared for me it might be different," he mused; and then, through some perversity of memory, Margaret's pensive smile became suddenly charged with emotion, and he asked himself if he had not misinterpreted her innocent frankness? Even if she cared, he knew that she would die rather than betray her preference by a word or a look. "Whether she cares or not, and it is just possible that she does care in her heart, she will marry me if I ask her," he thought; and decided immediately that there was no necessity to act impulsively in the matter. "If I ask her she will persuade herself that she loves me. She will marry me just as hundreds of women have married men in the past; and we should probably live as long and as happily as all the others." That was the way his father and mother had married; and why were he and Margaret different from the generations before them? What variable strain in their natures impelled them to lead their own separate lives instead of the collective life of the family? "I suppose Mother is right as far as she sees," he admitted. "To marry Margaret and settle down would be the best thing that could happen to me." Yet he had no sooner put the thought into words than the old feeling of suffocation rushed over him as if his hopes were smothered in ashes.

Yes, he would settle down, of course, but not now. Next year perhaps, or the year after, he would sincerely fall in love with Margaret, and then everything would be different.

He was passing through the Square at the moment; and while he played with the idea of his marriage with Margaret, he found himself glancing expectantly at the car which was waiting in front of the Governor's door. "I wonder if she is going out," he thought, while a superficial interest brightened the dull hours before him. "It would be no more than she deserved if I were to go in and ask after her ankle." In obedience to the mocking impulse, he entered the gate and reached the steps just as Patty came out on the porch. She was walking with ease, he noticed at once, and she wore again the red cape and the little hat with red wings.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "it is you!"

"I stopped to ask after your ankle," he retorted with ironic gaiety. "I am glad it doesn't keep you from walking."

"That's the new way of treating a sprain," she replied calmly. "Haven't you heard of it?"

"Yes, I've heard of it." He glanced down at her stocking of thin gray silk. "But I thought even then there were bandages."

She smiled archly—he felt that he wanted to slap her—and glanced up at him with playful concern. The gray-green rays were brighter in the daylight than he had remembered them and her mocking lips were the colour of cherries. He thought of the thin pink curve of Margaret's mouth and wondered if the war had corrupted his taste.

Yes, Margaret was womanly; she was well bred; she possessed every attribute that in theory he admired; yet she had never awakened this sparkling interest, this attraction which was pungently flavoured with

surprise that he could be so strangely attracted. He could gaze unmoved by the hour on Margaret's smooth loveliness; but the tantalizing vision of this other girl's face, of her cloudy black hair and her clear skin and her changeable eyes, with their misty gleam like a firefly lost in a spring marsh—all these things were a part not of the tedious actuality, but of that hidden country of romance and adventure. For the first time since his return from France, he was carried far outside of himself on the wave of an impulse; he was interested and excited. Not for an instant did he imagine that he was falling in love. His thoughts did not leave the immediate present when he was with her; and a part of the adventure was the feeling that each vivid moment he spent with her might be the last. It was, he would have said had he undertaken to analyse the situation, merely an incident; but it was an incident that delighted him. He knew nothing of Patty Vetch except that she charmed him against his will; and, for the moment at least, this was sufficient.

"Oh, there are sprains and sprains," she answered, with the quiver of her lip he remembered so disturbingly. "Didn't you learn that in the trenches?" Was she really pretty, or was it only the provocative appeal to his imagination, the dangerous sense that you never knew what she would dare to say next?

"I didn't go there to learn about sprains," he responded gravely.

"Nor about maneuvers apparently?" She hesitated over the word as if it were unfamiliar.

At her charge the light of battle leaped to his eyes. "Then it was a maneuver? I suspected as much."

The audacity of her! The unparalleled audacity! "But I am not so much interested in maneuvers," he added merrily, "as I am in the strategy behind them."

She looked puzzled, though her manner was still mocking. "Is there always strategy," she pronounced the word with care, "behind them?"

"Always in the art of warfare."

"But can't there be a maneuver without warfare?" He could see that she was venturing beyond her depths; but he realized that a confession of ignorance was the last thing he must ever expect from her. Whatever the challenge she would meet it with her natural wit and her bright derision.

"Never," he rejoined emphatically. "A campaign goes either before or afterward."

A thoughtful frown knit her forehead. "Well, one didn't go before, did it?" she inquired with an innocent air. "So I suppose—"

He ended her sentence on a note of merriment. "Then I must be prepared for the one that will follow!"

She threw out her hand with a gesture of mock despair. "Oh, you may have been mistaken, you know!"

"Mistaken? About the campaign?"

"No, about the maneuver. Perhaps there wasn't any such thing, after all."

"Perhaps." Though his voice was stern, his eyes were laughing. "I am not so easily fooled as that."

"I doubt if you could be fooled at all." It was the first bit of flattery she had tossed him, and he found it strangely agreeable.

"I am not sure of that," he answered, "but the thing that perplexes me—the only thing—is why you should have thought it worth while."

Her eyes grew luminous with laughter, and the little red wings quivered as if they were about to take flight over her arching brows. "How do you know that I thought about it at all? Sometimes things just happen."

"But not in this case. You had arranged the whole incident for the stage."

"Do you mean that I fell down on purpose?"

"I mean that you were laughing up your sleeve all the time. You weren't hurt and you knew it."

Her expression was enigmatical. "You think then that I arranged to fall down and risk breaking my bones for the sake of having you pick me up?" she asked demurely.

Put so plainly the fact sounded embarrassing, if not incredible. "I think you fell for the fun of it. I think also that you didn't for a second risk breaking your bones. You are too nimble for that."

"I ought to be," she retorted daringly, "since I was born in a circus."

Surprised into silence, he studied her with a regard in which admiration for her courage was mingled with blank wonder at her recklessness. If she had inherited her father's gift of expression, she appeared to possess also his dauntless humour. For an instant Stephen felt that her gaiety had entered into his spirit; and while his impression of her danced like wine in his head, he answered her in her own tone of mocking defiance.

"Well, everything that is born in a circus isn't a clown."

Her eyes widened. "Is that meant for a compliment?"

"No, merely for a reminder. But if you were born in a circus, I assume that you didn't perform in one."

She shook her head. "No, they took me away when I was a baby—just after Mother died. I never lived with the circus people, and Father didn't either except when he was a child. Not that I should have been ashamed of it," she hastened to explain. "They are very interesting people."

"I am sure of it," he answered gravely, and he was very sure of it now.

"When I was a child," she went on in a matter-of-fact tone, "I used to make Father tell me all he could remember about the 'freaks,' as they called them. The fat woman—her name was really Mrs. Coventry—was very kind to him when he was little, and he never forgot it. He never forgets anybody who has ever been kind to him," she concluded with simple dignity.

An emotion which he could not define held Stephen speechless; and before he could command his words, she began again in the same cool and quiet voice. "His mother ran away to marry his father. She came of a very good family in Fredericksburg, and her people never forgave her or spoke to her afterward. But she was happy, and she never regretted it as long as she lived. It was love at first sight. Grandfather was Irish and he was—was—" she hesitated for a word, and at last with evident care selected, "magnificent." "He was magnificent," she repeated emphatically, "and she saw him first on horseback when she was out riding. Her horse became frightened by one of the animals in the circus, and he caught it and stopped it. It began that way, and then one night she stole out of the house after her family had gone to bed, and they ran away and were married. I think she was right," she added thoughtfully, "but then I reckon—I mean I suppose it is in my blood to take risks."

She looked up at him and he responded. "But where did you learn to see things like this, and to put them

into words? Not in a circus?"

"I told you I couldn't remember the circus. Mother was in one, and though Father never told me how he fell in love with her—he never talks of her—I think it must have been when he went back to see the people. He always took an interest in them and tried to help them. He does still. Even now, if anybody belonging to a circus asks him for something, he never refuses him. When he was twelve years old somebody took him away and sent him to school, but he always says he never learned anything at school except misinformation about life. No books, he says, ever taught him the truth except the Bible and 'Robinson Crusoe.' He used to read me chapters of those every day—and he does still when he has the time."

What a strange world it was! How full of colour and incident, how drenched with the quality of the unusual!

"And what did you learn?" he asked.

"I?" She was speaking earnestly. "Oh, I learned a great many—no, a multitude of things about life."

At this he broke into a laugh of pure delight. "With a special course of instruction in maneuvers," he rejoined.

Though her smile showed perplexity she tossed back his innuendo with defiance. "And by the time we meet again I shall have learned about—strategy."

How ready she was to fence, and how quick with her attack! It was easy to believe that there was Irish blood in her veins and an Irish sparkle in her wit.

"Oh, then you will out-general me entirely! Isn't it enough to force me to acknowledge your superior tactics?"

She appeared to scrutinize each separate letter. "Tactics? Have I been using superior tactics without knowing it?"

"That I can't answer. Is there anything that has escaped your instinctive understanding?"

She laughed softly. "Well, there's one thing you may be sure of. I'll know a great deal more about some things by the time I see you again." Then, with one of her darting bird-like movements, she ran down the steps and into the car. "I wish Father were here," she said, looking out at him. "He wants to talk to you."

"I should like to talk to him. I shall come again, if I may."

"Oh, of course, and next time we may both be at home." As the car started she called out teasingly. "My next maneuver may be more successful, you know!"

How provoking she was, and how inspiring! Was she as shrewd, as sophisticated, as she tried to appear, or was he merely, he asked himself, the victim of her irrepressible humour, of a prodigious display of the modern spirit? At least she was a part of her time—not, like Margaret and himself, a discordant note, a divergent atom, in the general march toward recklessness and unrestraint. Young as she was, he felt that she had already solved the problems which he had evaded or pushed aside. She had learned the secret of transition—a perpetual motion that went in circles and was never still. Here, he realized, was where he had lost connection, where he had failed to hold his place in the turmoil. He had tried to stand off and reach a point of view, to become a spectator, while the only way to fit into the century was simply to keep

moving in whirls of unintelligent unison; never to meditate, never to reason upon one's course; but to sweep onward, somewhere, anywhere as long as it was in a new direction. Elasticity, variability—were not these the indispensable qualities of the modern mind? The power to make quick decisions and the inability to cling to convictions; the nervous high pitch and the failure to sustain the triumphant note; energy without direction; success without stability; martyrdom without faith. And around, above, beneath, the pervading mediocrity, the apotheosis of the average. Was this the best that democracy had to offer mankind? Was there no depth below the shallows? Was it impossible, even by the most patient search, to discover some justification of the formlessness of the age, of the crazy instinct for ugliness? He could forgive it all, he might eventually bring his mind to believe in it, if there were only some logical design informing the disorder. If he could find that it contained a single redeeming principle that was superior to the old order, he felt that he should be able to surrender his disbelief.

He was leaving the gate when a woman, walking slowly in front of the house, spoke to him abruptly.

"If I wait here shall I see the Governor come out?"

With the feeling that he was passing again through a familiar nightmare, he turned quickly and looked down on the pathetic figure he had seen the evening before. In the daylight she seemed more pitiable and less repellent than she had appeared in the darkness. The hollowness of her features gave a certain dignity to her expression—the look of one who is returning from the shadows of death. Years ago, before illness or dissipation had wrecked her health and her appearance, she may have been attractive, he surmised, in a common and obvious fashion. Her black eyes were still striking, and the sunlight revealed a quantity of coarse black hair on which he detected the claret tinge of fading dye.

"I am sorry," she added as she recognized him. "I did not know it was you." As soon as she had spoken she became confused and tried to pass on; but he made a movement to detain her.

"Have you any particular reason for wishing to see the Governor?"

"Oh, no, I am a stranger here." Her accents were ordinary, yet there was a note of the unusual in her appearance and manner. Whatever she was, she was not commonplace.

"But you were waiting to see him?" he said.

Her gaze left his face and travelled uncertainly over the mansion. "Oh, yes, I thought I might see him. I've never seen a Governor."

"You do not wish to speak to him?"

"No; why should I wish to speak to him? I'm a stranger, that's all. I like to see whatever is going on. Was that his daughter who went out just now?"

"Yes, that was his daughter."

"Then she is pretty—almost as pretty as—Thank you, sir. I will go along now. I'm staying not far from here, and I come out when I get the chance to watch the squirrels in the Square."

The explanation sounded simple enough; yet he suspected, though he could not have defined his reason, that she was not telling the truth. Again he asked himself if she could have known Gideon Vetch in the past? It was possible; it was not even improbable. Once, even ten or fifteen years ago, she may have been handsome in her coarse and showy style; and he had no proof, except Patty, that the Governor had ever

possessed a fastidious taste.

The woman had turned with furtive haste in the direction of the outer gate; and when Stephen started on again toward the library, he crossed a man who was rapidly ascending the brick walk from the fountain at the foot of the hill. By his jaunty stride and his air of excessive joviality—the mark of the successful local politician—Stephen recognized Julius Gershom, the campaign-maker, as people called him, who had stood behind Gideon Vetch from the beginning of his career. "What an unconscionable bounder the fellow is," thought Stephen as he passed him. What an abundance of self-assertiveness he had contrived to express in his thin spruce figure, his tightly curling black hair, which grew too low on his forehead, and his short black moustache with pointed ends which curved up like polished metal from his full red lips.

"I suppose he is on his way to the Governor," mused the young man idly. "How on earth does Vetch stand him?"

But to his surprise, when he glanced back again, he saw that Gershom had passed the mansion, and was hurrying down the walk which the strange woman had followed a moment before. Stephen could still see her figure approaching a distant gate; and he observed presently that Gershom was not far behind her, and that he appeared to be speaking her name. She started and turned quickly with a movement of alarm; and then, as Gershom joined her, she went on again in the direction she had first taken. A few minutes later their rapidly moving figures left the Square and passed down the street beyond the high iron fence.

"I wonder what it means?" thought Stephen indifferently. "I wonder what the deuce Gershom has got up his sleeve?"

By the time he reached his office the wonder had vanished; but it returned to him on his way home that afternoon when he dropped into the old print shop for a word with Corinna.

"I passed that fellow Gershom in the Square to-day," he said. "Do you know him by sight?"

She shook her head. "What is he like? Patty tells me that he has become a nuisance."

"Ah, then you have seen Patty?"

A smile turned her eyes to the colour of November leaves. "She was here for an hour this morning. I have great hopes of her. I think she is going to supply me with an interest in life."

"Then she still amuses you?"

"Amuses me? My dear, she enchants me. She stands for the suppressed audacities of my past."

He looked at her thoughtfully. "I wonder how much of her is real?"

"Probably half. She is real, I think, in her courage, but not in her conventions."

"Well, I confess that she puzzles me. I can't see just what she means."

"I doubt if she means anything. She is a vital spirit; she chafes at chains; and she is smarting from a sense of inferiority. There is a thirst for power in her little body that may make her either an actress or a politician."

"Now, it seems to me that if she has any sense it is one of superiority. She treated me like a brick under her feet."

For a minute Corinna was silent. The smile on her lips had grown tenderly humorous; and there was a softness in her eyes which made him sorry that he had not known her when he was a child. "Do you know what she told me to-day?" she said. "She studies a page of the dictionary every morning, and she tries to remember and practise all day the new words that she learns. She is now in the letter M."

A peal of merriment interrupted her. "That explains it!" exclaimed Stephen with unaffected delight, "maneuver—misinformation—multitude—"

"So she has practised on you too?"

"Oh, they all practise on me," he retorted. "It is what I was made for."

"Well, as long as it is only words, you are safe, I suppose."

He denied this with a gesture. "It is everything you can possibly practise with—from puddings to pigeons."

"My poor dear, so you have been eating Margaret's puddings. Weren't they good ones?"

"Oh, perfection! But I wasn't thinking of Margaret."

"I know you weren't. For your mother's sake I wish that you were."

His face looked suddenly tired. "Margaret is perfection, I know; but I feel sometimes that only perfect people can endure perfection."

"Yes, I know." Her smile had faded now. "I admire Margaret tremendously, but I feel closer to Patty."

"Perhaps. I am not sure. Somehow I have been sure of nothing since I came out of the trenches—least of all of myself. I am trying to find out now what I am in reality."

As he rose to go she held out her hand. "I think,—I am not certain, but I think," she responded gaily, "that Patty's dictionary may give you the definition."



CHAPTER VII

CORINNA GOES TO WAR

"Yes, I've had a mean life," thought Corinna, while she stood before her mirror carefully placing a patch on her cheek. In her narrow gown of black velvet, with the silver heels of her slippers shining beneath the transparent draperies, she had more than ever the look of festival, of October splendour. If her beauty had lost in roundness and softness, it had gained immeasurably in authority, in that air of having been a part of great events, of historic moments which clung to her like a legend. Romance and mystery were in her smile; and yet what had life held for her, she mused now, except the frustrated hope, the blighted fruit, the painted lily? Her beauty had brought her nothing that was not tawdry, nothing that was not a gaudy imitation of happiness. She had given herself for what? For the shadow of reality, for the tinted shreds of a damaged illusion. The past, in spite of her many triumphs, had been worse than tragic; it had been comic—since it had left her beggared. Looking back upon it now she saw that it had lacked even the mournful dignity of a broken heart.

"I have had a mean life; but it isn't over yet, and I may make something better of the rest of it," she thought. "At least I have fighting blood in my veins, and I will never give up. After all, even if my life has been mean, I haven't been—and that is what really counts in the end. If I haven't been happy, I have tried to be gallant—and it takes courage to be gallant with an aching heart—"

As she fastened the long string of pearls—one of Kent Page's early gifts—she drew back from the mirror, with the light of philosophy, if not of happiness, overflowing her eyes. With her grace and her radiance she stood for the flower of the Virginian aristocratic tradition; with her sincerity and her fearlessness she embodied the American democratic ideal. Her forefathers had brought representative government to the New World. They had sat in the first General Assembly ever summoned in America; and through the generations they had fought always on the side of liberty tempered by discipline, of democracy exalted by patriotism. They had stood from the beginning for dignity, for manners, for the essence of social culture which places art at the service of life. Always they had sought to preserve the finer lessons of the past; always they had struggled against the tyranny of mediocrity, the increasing cult of the second best. From this source, from the inherited instinct for selection, for elimination, from the inbred tendency toward order and suavity of living, Corinna had derived her clear-eyed acceptance of life, her nobility of mind, her loveliness and grace of body. She had been prepared and nurtured for beauty, only to bloom in an age when beauty had been bartered for usefulness. Would the delicate discriminations in which she had been trained, the lights and shadows of her soul, become submerged in the modern effort to reduce all distinctions to a level, all diversities to an average?

Turning away from the mirror, Corinna glanced over the charming room, with the wood fire, the white bearskin rug, the ivory bed draped in blue silk, the long windows opening on the garden terrace and the starlit darkness. There had been luxury always. Money she had had in abundance; yet there had been no hour in the last twenty years when she would not have exchanged it all—everything that money could bring her—for the dinner of herbs where love was. She had possessed everything except the one thing she had wanted. She had served the tin gods in temples of gold and jade. With the deep instinct for perfection in her blood, she had spent her life in an endless compromise with the inferior.

"Was there something lacking in me?" she asked now of her glowing reflection. "Was there some vital spark left out when I was born? And to-night? Why should I care how it goes? What is Rose Stribling to me or I to her?" Why should she still cherish that dull resentment, that smothered sense of injury in her heart? Was it the burden of her inheritance, the weakness of the older races, that she could not forget? She had loved a man who was unworthy; she had loved him for no better reason, she understood now, than a superficial charm, a romantic appeal. The fault was in the man, she knew, yet she had forgiven the man long ago, while she still hated Rose Stribling. Perversity, inconsistency—but it was her nature, and she could not overcome it. "If she had ever loved him, I might have forgiven her," she thought, "but she cared for him as little as she cares for Gideon Vetch to-day. It was vanity then, and it is vanity now. You cannot hurt her heart—only her pride—"

Her father called from the stairs; and with a last swift glance at her image, she caught up a fan of ostrich plumes and a wrap of peacock-blue velvet. She had never looked more brilliant in her life, not even on that June morning twenty-five years ago, when, coloured like a rose, she had been married to Kent Page beneath a bower of roses. She had lost much since then, freshness, innocence, the trusting heart and the transparent gaze, but she had lost neither charm nor radiance.

"So we are invited to meet Gideon Vetch," remarked the Judge as they went down the steps; and from the whimsical sound of his voice, she knew that there was a smile on his face. The house, with its picturesque English front half hidden by Virginia creeper, stood at the end of a long avenue, in the centre of a broad lawn planted in fine old elms.

"Yes, there must be some reason for the dinner, but Sarah Berkeley did not tell me."

"Well, I'll be glad to see the Governor again," said the Judge, leaning comfortably back as the car rolled down the avenue to the road, "but you will have a dreary evening, I fear, unless John should be there."

Corinna smiled in the darkness. So even her father, who so rarely noticed anything, had observed her growing interest in John Benham. After all, might this be—this sudden revival of an old sentiment in John's heart—"the something different," the ultimate perfection for which she had sought all her life? "He is beginning to mean more to me than any one else," she thought. "If only I had never heard that old gossip about Alice Rokeby."

Leaning over, she patted the Judge's hand. "Don't have me on your mind, Father darling. Go ahead and enjoy the Governor as much as you can. I am easy to amuse, you know, and besides, I have my own particular iron in the fire to-night."

"You are never without expedients, my child, but I hope this one has no bearing on Vetch."

"Oh, but it has. Like Esther, the queen, I have put on royal apparel for an ulterior object. Did you notice that I had made myself as terrible as an army with banners?"

"I thought you were looking unusually lovely," replied the Judge gracefully. "But you are always so handsome that I suspected no guile."

Corinna laughed merrily. "But I am full of guile, dear innocent! I go forth to conquer."

"Not the Governor, I hope?"

"Oh, no, the Governor is nothing—a prize, nothing more. My antagonist is Mrs. Stribling."

"Rose Stribling?" The Judge was mildly astonished. "Why, I remember her as a little girl in white dresses."

Corinna's smile became scornful. "Well, she isn't a little girl any longer, and she oughtn't to be in white dresses."

"Dear me, dear me," rejoined the old gentleman. "I am aware that you have a dramatic temperament, but it is scarcely possible that you are jealous of little Rose. She is a good deal younger than you, if I am not mistaken—but my memory is not all that it once was."

"She is twelve years younger and at least twenty years more malicious," retorted Corinna lightly. "But those twelve years aren't as long as they were in your youth, my dear. A generation ago they would have spelt an end of my conquests; to-day they mean only new worlds to conquer."

The Judge looked perplexed. "Am I to infer from this that you have designs on the Governor? And may I inquire what use you intend to make of him after you have captured him from the enemy?"

Corinna shrugged her shoulders. "I hadn't thought of that. Release him, probably. But, whatever happens, I shall have saved him from a worse fate. For that he ought to thank me, and he will if he is reasonable."

"Few men are reasonable in captivity. Do you think, by the way, that Mrs. Stribling would like another husband, and such a husband as our friend the demagogue?"

"I think she would like a political career, and of course her only way of obtaining a career of any kind is to marry one. Though she isn't discerning, she has sense enough to perceive that. They tell me that the Governor is starting straight for the Senate, and the wife of a senator—of any senator—might have a very good time in Washington. Besides, there is always the chance of course that the winds of public folly may blow him into the White House."

"If what you say is true it would be a hard fate for an honest rogue," admitted the Judge. "In your hands he would at least go unharmed."

"Oh, unharmed certainly. Perhaps helped."

"Then it is better so. But the thing that interests me in Vetch, is not his value as a matrimonial or romantic prize; I am concerned solely and simply with his opinions."

"Well, you will have the advantage of Mrs. Stribling and me, for we shall probably find the cigars an impediment to our attack. At any rate, we ought to have a less tedious evening than you expect."

A little later, when she entered the long drawing-room where the other guests were already assembled, Corinna threw an inquiring glance in the direction of Mrs. Stribling. Could the shallow pink and white loveliness of that other woman, the historic type of the World's Desire, bear comparison with her own starry beauty? It was a petty rivalry. She had entered into it half in jest, half in irritation, yet some sportsmanlike instinct prompted her to play the game to the end. She would prove to Rose Stribling that those twelve years of knowledge and suffering had taught her not to surrender, but to conquer.

The Berkeleys were what was still known in their small social world as "quiet people." They entertained little, and always with a definite object which they were not afraid to disclose. Their house, an incongruous example of Mid-Victorian architecture, was still suffused for them with the sentimental glamour of their wedding day. The walls, untouched for years, were covered with embossed paper and

panelled in yellow oak. The furniture, protected for five months of the year by covers of striped linen, was stiffly upholstered in pea-green brocade; and the pictures, hanging very high, were large but inferior oil paintings in heavily gilded frames that represented preposterous sheaves of wheat or garlands of roses. Forty years ago the house reproduced within and without "the best taste" of the period, and was as bad as the Berkeleys could afford to make it. Since then fashions had come and gone; yet the hospitable home remained as unchanged as the politics of the host or the figure of the hostess. The Berkeleys were still content to be "old-fashioned people," with the fine feeling and the indiscriminate taste of an era which had flowered not in architecture but in character, when the standard of living was high and the style in furniture correspondingly low. To-night the ten guests (the Berkeleys never gave large dinners) had been carefully chosen, and the evening would probably be distinguished by good talk and good wine. Though they were law-abiding persons to the core, the bitterness of the Eighteenth Amendment had not penetrated to the subterranean darkness where Mr. Berkeley's treasures were stored.

Mrs. Berkeley, a brisk, compact little woman, with a pretty florid face and the prominent bosom and tapering waist of forty years ago, turned from the Governor as Corinna and the Judge entered, and hurried forward in her animated way, which reminded one of the manner of a child that is trying to make a success of a dolls' party. Beyond Mr. Berkeley, a short, neutral-tinted man without emphasis of personality, Corinna saw Mrs. Stribling's tall, full figure draped in a gown of jade-coloured velvet, with a daringly short skirt from which a narrow, sharply pointed train wound like a serpent. Her heavy hair, of an unusual shade of pale gold, had the smooth, polished look of metal which had been moulded in waves close to her head. In spite of her active life and her disastrous affairs, she presented an unblemished complexion, as if her hard rosy surface were protected by some indestructible glaze. Beside her opulent attractions the frail prettiness of Alice Rokeby, who was dining out for the first time this winter, looked wistful and pathetic. Every one, except Corinna, who had been abroad at the time, knew of the old affair between Alice Rokeby and John Benham; and every one who knew of it had thought that they would be married as soon as she got her divorce. But time had dragged on; Corinna had come home again; and Alice Rokeby's violet eyes had grown deeper and more wistful, with a haunted look in them as if they were denying a hungry heart. She had never dressed well; she had never, as Mrs. Stribling remarked, known how to bring out her best points; and to-night she had been even less successful than usual. Both Corinna and Mrs. Stribling could have told her that she should have avoided violent shades; and yet she was wearing now a dress of vivid purple which made her pale rose-leaf complexion look almost sallow. Though she could exercise when she chose a strangely passive attraction, her charm usually failed in the end for lack of intelligent guidance.

A little beyond Alice Rokeby, where her eyes could follow his gestures, John Benham was talking in his pleasant subdued voice to Patty Vetch, who looked, in her frock of scarlet tulle, as if she had just alighted from the chorus of a musical comedy. Her boyish dark head was bent over a fan of scarlet feathers, a toy which appeared ridiculously large beside her small figure. It was evident that the girl was trying to cover an uncomfortable shyness with an air of mocking effrontery; and a moment later, when Corinna joined them, Benham glanced up with a flash of satirical amusement in his eyes. He was a tall thin man of middle age, with a striking appearance and the straight composed features of an early American portrait. His dark hair, brushed back from his forehead, had the shining gloss that comes of good living and careful grooming, and this gloss was reflected in his smiling gray eyes and in the healthy red of his well-cut though not quite generous mouth. He was a charming guest, an impressive speaker, a sympathetic listener; yet there had always seemed to Corinna to be a subtle deficiency in his character. It was only of late, since their friendship had turned into a warmer feeling, that she had been able to overcome that sense of something wanting which had troubled her when she was with him. She could define no quality that was absent; but the impression he still gave her at times was one of a man tremendously gifted and yet

curiously inadequate. A mental thinness perhaps? An emotional dryness? Or was it merely that here also she felt, rather than perceived, the intrinsic weakness of the old order?

Beyond Benham, Gideon Vetch, rugged, sanguine, and wearing the wrong tie with his evening clothes as valiantly as he had worn the rumpled brown suit in which Stephen had last seen him, was talking in a loud voice to Miss Maria Berkeley—one of those serene single women arrayed in dove-colour who belong as appropriately as crewel work or antimacassars to another century. If Patty was shy and self-conscious, it was evident that her state of mind was not shared by her father. He was interested because he was expressing a cherished opinion, and he was talking in an emphatic tone because he hoped that he might be overheard. When Mrs. Berkeley drew him away in order to introduce him to Corinna, he resumed his theme immediately, as if he were addressing a public meeting and had scarcely noticed that there had been a change in his audience. "Miss Berkeley was asking me what I thought of the effects of prohibition," he explained presently with his smile of unguarded friendliness. How was it possible to arrest the attention of a man who insisted on talking of prohibition?

At the table a little later Corinna asked herself the question again, while she made light conversation for the retired general who had taken her in—an anecdotal, bewhiskered presence, with the husky voice and the glazed eyes of successful pomposity. Glancing occasionally at Vetch who sat on her left, she found that he was describing to Mrs. Berkeley the best protection against forest fires. As far as Corinna was concerned, she felt that she might as well have been a view from the window, or the portrait of Mr. Berkeley's great aunt that hung over the mantelpiece. He had probably, she reflected, classified her lightly as "another gray-haired woman," and passed on to Rose Stribling, who bloomed triumphantly between John Benham and Stephen Culpeper. Vetch was so different from what Corinna had expected to find him that, in some vague way, she felt disappointed and absurdly resentful. Had her imagination, she wondered, prepared her to meet one of the picturesque radicals of fiction? Had she looked for a middle-aged Felix Holt; and was this why the Governor's prosaic figure, his fresh-coloured, undistinguished face and his vehement, spectacular gestures, dispelled immediately the interest she had felt in the meeting? There were no salient points in his appearance, nothing that she could detach from the rest in her mental image of him. There was no single characteristic of which she could say: "He may be common; he may be vulgar; but he strikes the note of greatness here—and here—and here." With such a man, she felt, the direct and obvious appeal of Rose Stribling would be victorious. He could discern pink and white and blue and gold; but the indeterminate shades, the subtleties and mysteries of charm were enigmatical to him. His emotions would be as literal as his convictions or his oratory. Yet there must be some faculty in him which did not appear on the surface, some primitive grasp of realities in his understanding of men. Why should the influence of this sanguine, loud-talking demagogue, she asked herself the next minute, be greater than the influence of John Benham, who possessed every admirable trait except the ability to make people follow him? What was this fundamental difference in material or structure which divided them so completely? When she had traced it to its source would she discover the secret of Vetch's conquering personality?

Looking away from the General, her eyes rested for a moment on Stephen Culpeper, who was listening with his reserved impersonal attention to the amusing prattle of Patty Vetch. Obeying an imperative rule, Mrs. Berkeley had placed her youngest guests together; and yet, if Stephen had been seventy-five instead of twenty-six, he could scarcely have had less in common with the Governor's daughter. With her small glossy head, and her scarlet cheeks and lips above the fan of ostrich feathers, the girl reminded Corinna of a spray of Christmas holly, all dark and bright and shining. Ever since Patty's first visit to the print shop Corinna had felt a genuine liking for her. The girl had something deeper than charm, reflected the older woman; she had determination and endurance, the essentials of character. Of course she was crude, she was ignorant; but these are never insurmountable obstacles except to the dull. With intelligence and

resourcefulness all things are possible—even the metamorphosis of a circus rider's daughter into a woman of the world.

Becoming suddenly aware that Vetch was silent, and that Mrs. Berkeley had turned to Judge Page on her left, Corinna looked for the first time into the frank blue eyes of the Governor. Strange eyes they were, she thought, the one striking feature in a face that was ordinary. It was like looking down into the very fountain of life—no, of humanity.

"I have been watching your daughter," she began casually. "She is very pretty."

"Yes, she is pretty enough"—his tone was playful—"but I don't like this craze for short hair."

She looked him over calmly. Indirect methods would be wasted on such an opponent. "You must admire Mrs. Stribling's."

"I do. Don't you?" His glance roved to the ample beauty beside John Benham. "It looks exactly like a rope of flax."

"A rope suggests a hanging to me," she rejoined grimly.

He laughed, and she noticed that his eyes were brimming over with humour. Yes, they were extraordinary eyes, and they made one feel sympathetic and friendly. The man had a quality, she couldn't deny it.

"We don't hang any longer," he replied.

"Oh, yes, we do sometimes—without the law."

The blue sparkles in his eyes contracted to points of light. She had at last, by arresting his wandering attention, succeeded in making him look at her.

"I wonder what you mean," he mused aloud, and added frankly, "I've never seen you before, have I?"

"Have I?" she mimicked gaily. "Wouldn't you remember me? Or are all gray-haired women alike to you?"

His gaze travelled to her hair. "I didn't mean it that way. Of course I should have remembered." He spoiled this by adding: "I never forget a face," and continued before she could answer, "I don't know whether your hair is gray or only powdered a little; but you are as young as—as summer."

"Or as your political party."

"That's good. I like a nimble wit." He was plainly amused. "But my party isn't young, you know. It is as old as Esau and Jacob. Oh, yes, I've read my Bible. I was brought up on it."

"That is why your speech is so direct," she said when he paused, concluding slowly after a minute, "and so sincere."

"You feel that I am sincere?"

She met his eyes gravely. "Doesn't every one?"

He laughed shortly. "Ah, you know better than that!"

"Well, my father does. He says that it is your sincerity that makes you resemble me."

To her surprise he did not laugh at this. "Do I resemble you?" he asked simply.

"Father thinks so. He says that people won't take us seriously because we tell them the truth."

An impression drifted like smoke across the blue of his eyes. Who was it, she wondered, who had said that his eyes were gray? "Don't they take you seriously?" he asked.

"As a woman, yes. As a human being, no."

He smiled. "You are too deep. I can't follow. I understand only the plain bright ideas of the half educated, you know."

Her brilliant glance shone on him steadily. "I shan't try to explain. What one doesn't understand without an explanation isn't worth knowing. But somebody must take you seriously, or you wouldn't be where you are."

"Do you know where I am?" he demanded impulsively.

"I know that you are Governor of Virginia."

"Oh, that! I thought you meant something more than that," he returned with a note of disappointment in his voice.

"What could I mean more than that? Isn't it the first step upward in a political career?"

"Perhaps. But I was thinking of something else. The chief thing seems to me to be to work a way out of the muddle. Anybody may be Governor or even President if he tries hard enough—but it is a different matter to bring some kind of order out of this confusion. I've got an idea that I've been hammering at for the last twenty years. Not a great one, perhaps, though I think it is; and I'd like to get a chance to put it into practice before I die. I want to wake up people and tell them the truth."

Was he, for all his matter-of-fact appearance, simply another political dreamer, another visionary without a definite vision?

"And will they listen when you tell them?" she asked.

He laughed. "Who knows what may happen? When I was a kid in the circus—you have heard, of course, that I spent my childhood in a travelling circus"—how simply he brought this out!—"the fat woman, we called her 'the fat lady' in those days, had a favourite proverb: 'When the skies fall we shall catch larks'. I reckon when the skies fall the people will learn wisdom."

"But you have caught your larks, haven't you?"

"No, I used to set snares by the hundred, but I never caught anything better than a sparrow."

A wistful look crossed her face, and for an instant the youth seemed to droop and fade in her eyes. "Isn't that life?—sparrows for larks always?"

His sanguine spirit rejected this as she had known that it would. "Life is all right," he replied, "as long as there's a fighting chance left to you. That is the only thing that makes it worth while, fighting to win."

She gazed meditatively at the points of flame on the white candles. "I suppose it would be so with you; for you fit into the age. You are a part of this variable uncertain quantity called democracy, which some of us

old-fashioned folk look upon as a boomerang."

"Yes, I am a part of it," he answered slowly. "I see it as it is, I think. It is pure buncombe, of course, to say that it hasn't its ugly side; but I believe, if I have a chance, that I can make something of it." He paused a moment while he hesitated over the silver beside his plate; but there was no uncertainty in his voice when he went on again, after deliberately picking up the fork he preferred. It was a little thing to remember a man by—the merest trifle—but she never forgot it. Only a big man could be as natural as that, she reflected. "I reasoned it all out before I went into politics," he was saying. "I didn't get it out of books either—unless you count the Bible and 'Robinson Crusoe,' which are the only two I ever read as a boy. But the way I worked it out at last was that democracy, like life, isn't anything that's already finished. It is raw stuff. We are making it every minute of the time; and it depends on us whether we put it through as a straight job or a failure. Democracy, as I see it, isn't a word or a phrase out of a book, or a formula, or anything that has frozen into a fixed shape or pattern. It is warm and fluid, and it is teeming with living forms. It is as much alive as the earth or air or water, and it can be used to develop as many varying energies. That is why it is all so amazingly interesting. As long as you don't fall away from that thought you have your feet planted on solid ground—you can face things squarely—"

"You preach a kind of political pragmatism," she said as he paused.

"Pragmatism? That's a muscular word, but I don't know it. I wonder if Robinson Crusoe discovered it."

"If Robinson Crusoe didn't discover it, he lived it," she rejoined gaily; and then, as the voice of Mrs. Berkeley was heard purring softly on Vetch's other side, Corinna turned to the bewhiskered General, whose only sense, she had already ascertained, was the historic sense.

While she leaned back, with her head bent in the direction of his husky voice, she was visited by a piercing realization of the emptiness, the artificiality of her life. Futility—weariness—disenchantment—a gray lane without a turning that stretched on into nothingness! Many thoughts were blown through her mind like leaves in a high wind. She saw herself from the beginning—striving without rest—searching—searching—for what? For happiness—for perfection—for the starry flower that she had never found. All was tawdry, all was tarnished, all was unreal. In looking back she saw that the festival of her life was an affair of tinselled splendour and glittering dust. Was this only the impression of Vetch on her mood? Did he possess some magic gift of personality which caused the artificial, the counterfeit, to wither in his presence?

Conversation was not animated; and while she listened with a smile to dreary anecdotes of the War Between the States, she allowed her gaze to wander slowly down the table to where Alice Rokeby sat, with her large soft eyes, so vague and wistful, asking of life, "Why have you passed me by?" Now and then these eyes, which reminded Corinna of the eyes in a dream, would turn timidly to John Benham, and then there would steal into them that strange look of hunger, of desperation. What did it mean? Corinna wondered. Surely there was no truth in the old gossip that she had heard long ago and forgotten?

John Benham had put a question to the Governor across the table; and he sat now, leaning a little forward, while he waited for an answer. The light from the tall white candles, in branched candelabra of the Queen Anne pattern, fell directly on his handsome austere face, so full of delicate reserves and fine intentions; and all the disturbing questions fled from Corinna's mind while she looked at him. Surely, she repeated to herself, with a triumphant emphasis, surely there was no truth in that old ugly gossip! The backward sweep of his iron-gray hair accentuated the height of his forehead, and produced at first sight an impression of intellectual superiority. His nose was long and slightly aquiline; his mouth firm and clear-

cut, with thin lips that closed tightly; his chin jutted a little forward, giving a hatchet-like severity to his profile. It was the face of a fair fighter, of a man who could be trusted absolutely beyond personal limitations, of a man who would always keep the vision of the end through any enterprise, who would always put the curb of expediency on emotional impulses, who would invariably judge a theory not by its underlying principle, but by its practical application. A charming face, too, complex and imaginative, a face which made the rugged and open countenance of the Governor appear primitive and undeveloped. Corinna admired Benham; she respected him; she liked—was it even possible, she asked herself, that she loved him? Yet here again she was conscious of that baffled feeling of inadequacy, of something wanting, as if an essential faculty of soul had been either left out by Nature, or refined away by the subtle impersonal processes of his mind.

Clearly there had been an error of judgment in placing him beside Mrs. Stribling. His taste was too fastidious to respond to her palpable allurements. She would have had a better chance with Vetch, for the flippant pleasantry with which Benham responded to the beaming enchantress was clothed in the very tone and look he had used with Patty Vetch in the drawing-room. Yes, it was futile to stray too far from one's type. Rose Stribling had failed to interest Benham, mused Corinna, for the same reason that she herself had been unable to arouse the admiration of Gideon Vetch. The lesson it taught, she repeated cynically, was simply that it was futile to stray too far from one's type. Vetch had talked to her as he might have talked to her father or to the husky warrior on her right; but he had never once looked at her. His attention would be arrested by large, sudden, bright things like the rosy curve of Mrs. Stribling's shoulders or the shining ropes of her hair.

"How absurd it was to imagine that I could compare with that!" thought Corinna with amusement. Her sense of defeat was humorous rather than resentful; yet she realized that it contained a disagreeable sting. Was her long day over at last? Had the sun set on her conquests? Had her adventurous return to power been merely a prelude to the ultimate Waterloo? Lifting her eyes suddenly from her plate she met the deep meditative gaze of John Benham across the marigolds on the table; and the faint flush that kindled her face made her eyes glow like embers. Had he read the thought in her mind? Was the tenderness in his glance only an ironical comment on the ignominious end of her Hundred Days?

She glanced away quickly, and as she did so she looked straight into the eyes of Alice Rokeby—those eyes that asked perpetually of life, "Why have you passed me by?"



CHAPTER VIII

THE WORLD AND PATTY

On the way home, leaning against her father who had not spoken since the car started, Patty shut her eyes and went over, one by one, the incidents of the dinner. What had she done that was right? What had she done that was wrong? Was her dress just what it ought to have been? Had she talked to Stephen Culpeper about the things people are supposed to discuss at a dinner? Had he seen how embarrassed she was beneath her pretence of gaiety? Would she be better looking if she were to let her hair grow long again? What had Mrs. Page, who looked as if she had stepped down from one of those old prints, thought of her?

Beneath the hard brightness of her manner there was a passionate groping toward some dimly seen but intensely felt ideal. She longed to learn if she could only learn without confessing her ignorance. Her pride was the obstinate, unreasonable pride of a child.

"If I could only find out things without asking!" The image of Stephen rose in her mind, which worked by flashes of insight rather than orderly processes. She saw his earnest young face, with the sleek dark hair, which swept in a point back from his forehead, his sombre smoke-coloured eyes, and the firm, slightly priggish line of his mouth. He seemed miles away from her, separated by some imponderable yet impassable barrier. The first time her gaze had rested on him at the charity ball she had thought impetuously, "Any girl could fall in love with a man like that!" and she had carelessly asked his name of the assiduous Gershom, who appeared to her to exist in innumerable reflections of himself. The next day when she had seen Stephen approaching her in the Square, she had obeyed the same erratic impulse, half in jest and half from the gambler's instinct to grasp at reluctant opportunity. After all, had not experience taught her that one must venture in order to win, that nothing came to those who dared not stake the whole of life on the next turn of fortune? She had been startled out of her composure by the sight of Stephen at the dinner; and yet she had not been conscious of any particular wish to see him again, or to sit at his side through two hours of embarrassment and uncertainty. Now, on the way home, she was suffering acutely from the burden of failure, from the smarting realization of her own ignorance and awkwardness. Her one bitter-sweet consolation was the knowledge that she had been "a good loser," that she had carried off her humiliation with a scornful pride which must have blighted like frost any tenderly budding shoots of compassion. "I'll show them that they mustn't pity me!" she thought, while her eyes blazed in the darkness. "I'll prove to them that I think myself every bit as good as they are!" She knew that her manner had been ungracious; but she knew also that something stronger than her will, some instinct which was rooted deep in the secret places of her nature, had made it impossible for her to appear otherwise. Impassioned, undisciplined, and capable of fierce imaginative loyalties and aversions, the strongest force in her character was this bitter ineradicable pride. To accept no benefits that she could not return; to fall under no obligation that would involve a feeling of gratitude; to pay the piper to the utmost penny whenever she called the tune—these were the only laws that she acknowledged. Though she longed ardently for the admiration of Stephen Culpeper, she would have died rather than relinquish the elfin mockery of her challenge.

"Well, did you enjoy it, Patty?" Her father turned to her with sudden tenderness, though the frown produced by some engrossing train of thought still gathered his heavy brows.

She caught his hand while her small face relaxed from its expression of rigid disdain. "I had simply the time of my life," she responded with convincing animation. "That Mrs. Page is the most beautiful woman I ever saw—but she can't be very young. I wonder what she was like when she was my age?"

Vetch laughed. "Not like a short-haired imp with green eyes anyway," he replied. "Mrs. Stribling looked very handsome, too, I thought."

"Oh, she's handsome enough," admitted Patty. "But she hasn't any sense. I listened to what she was saying, and she just asked questions all the time. Mrs. Page is different. You can tell that she has been all over the world. She knows things."

"Yes, I suppose she does," said Vetch. "What did you think of Benham?"

"He is good looking," answered the girl deliberately, "but I don't like him. He is making fun of you."

"Is he?" returned Vetch curiously. "Now, I wonder if you're right about that. At any rate he asked me a question to-night that I should like a chance to answer on the platform."

"He was in the army," said Patty, "and every one says he was a hero. The women were talking about him while you were smoking. They all admire him so. It seems that he went into an officer's training camp as soon as war was declared though he was over age; and then just recently he has done something that every one thinks splendid. He refused a tremendous fee from some corporation—what did they mean by a corporation?—because he thought the money was made dishonestly. Mrs. Page says he has as many public virtues as a civic forum. What is a forum, Father?"

Vetch laughed without replying directly to her question. "Did she say that?" he responded. "And what did she mean by it, I wonder?"

"It sounded clever," said Patty, "but I didn't understand. What is a forum, Father?"

Vetch thought a moment. "Mrs. Page would probably tell you," he replied, "that it is the temple of the improbable."

Patty stirred impatiently. "Now you are trying to talk like Mrs. Page," she rejoined. "I wish I knew what things meant."

"When you find out what they mean, Patty, they will cease to interest you."

"Well, I'd rather be less interested and more comfortable," said Patty, with a trace of exasperation in her voice. "To-night, for instance, I hadn't the faintest idea how to behave. Look at all those books I've read, too, when I might just as well have been enjoying myself. I've found out to-night, Father, that books can't tell you everything—not even books on etiquette."

Vetch broke into a laugh of boisterous amusement. "So that is how you have been spending your time!" he exclaimed. "You'd better trust to your common sense, my dear; it will carry you straighter."

"Oh, no, it doesn't. It doesn't carry me anywhere except into trouble. When I think of all the pains I've taken to learn how to talk like the dictionary! Why, nobody talks like the dictionary any longer! They all talk slang, every one of them—only they don't talk the kind that Julius Gershom and all these politicians do. If you could have seen Mrs. Berkeley's face when I told her I'd had a 'grand' time to-night—she looked exactly like a frozen fish—though just the moment before Mr. Culpeper had called somebody a 'rotter'. I heard him."

The Governor dismissed it all with a wave of his hand. "Trifles, trifles," was his only comment.

The car had entered the Square, and in a moment it was passing the Washington statue and the Capitol building. Until it stopped before the steps of the mansion, Patty did not reply; then springing up with a flutter of her scarlet skirt, she exclaimed airily, "But I am a trifle, too, Father!"

As he held out his hand from the ground, Vetch looked at her with an expression in which pride and pity were strangely mingled. "Then you are one of the trifles that make life worth living," he replied.

He had taken out his latch-key and was about to insert it in the lock, when the door opened and Gershom stood before them.

"I waited for you," he said to Vetch. "There's a matter I must see you about to-night." His ruddy face was tinged with purple, and he had the look of a man who has just been aroused from a nap.

"Well, I'm sleepy, and I'm going to bed," retorted Patty in reply to his glance rather than his words, and her tone was bitterly hostile.

"Then I'll see you to-morrow." He had followed her into the wide hall while the Governor closed the door and stopped to take off his overcoat. "Did you have a good time?"

She responded with a disdainful movement of her shoulders which might have been a shrug if she had had French instead of Irish blood in her veins. In her evening cloak of green velvet trimmed with gray fox she had the look of a small wild creature of the forest. Beneath her thick eyelashes her eyes shone through a greenish mist; and at the moment there was something frightened and furtive in their brightness.

"Of course," she replied defiantly, moving away from him in the direction of the staircase. "I had a wonderful time—perfectly wonderful. The people were all so interesting." Her pronunciation was as deliberately correct as if she were reading from a dictionary. It was the air of superiority that she always assumed with Gershom, for in no other way, she had learned from experience, could she irritate him so intensely.

His jovial manner gave place to a crestfallen look. "Who was there? I reckon I know the names anyway."

He affected a true republican scorn of appearances; and standing there, in his dishevelled business clothes beside Patty's ethereal youth, he looked as hopelessly battered by reality as a political theory, or as old General Powhatan Plummer of aristocratic descent.

Patty had often wondered what it was about the man that aroused in her so unconquerable an aversion. He was not ugly compared to many of the men her father had brought to the house; and ten years ago, when she first met him in the little country town where they were living, his curling black hair and sharp black eyes had seemed to her rather attractive than otherwise. If he had been merely untidy and unashamed in dress, she might have tolerated the failing as the outward sign of a distinguished social philosophy; but, even in those early days, his Jeffersonian simplicity had yielded to an outbreak of vanity. Though his clothes were unbrushed and his boots were unpolished, he wore a sparkling pin in his tie and several sparkling rings on his fingers. There was something else, too, some easy tone of patronage, some familiar inflexion, which as a child she had hated. Now, after the evening with Stephen Culpeper, she shrank from him with a disgust which was made all the keener by contrast. A pitiless light had fallen over Gershom while he stood there beside her, as if his bad taste and his pathetic ambition to appear something that he was not, had become exaggerated into positive vices. She was too young to perceive the essential pathos of all wasted effort, of all misdirected attempts to overcome the disadvantages of ignorance; and while

she looked at him now, she saw only the vulgarity. Like all those who have suffered from insufficient opportunities and wounded pride, Patty Vetch was without mercy for the very weaknesses that she had risen above. After the evening at the Berkeleys' she felt that she should be less ashamed of a drunkard than of a man who wore diamonds because he thought that it was the correct thing to do. She remembered suddenly that on her fourteenth birthday she had bought a pair of paste earrings with ten dollars her father had given her; and for the sting of this reminder she knew that she should never forgive Gershom. Oh, she had no patience with a man who couldn't find out things and learn without asking questions! Hadn't she tried and tried, and made mistakes and tried again, and still gone on trying by hook or by crook; as her father would say, to find out the thousand and one things she oughtn't to do? If she, even as a child, had struggled so hard to improve herself and change in the right way, not the wrong way—then why shouldn't he? Her father, of course, wasn't polished, but he was as unlike Gershom as if they had been born as far apart as the poles. Even to her untrained eyes it was evident that Vetch possessed the authority of personality—a sanction that was not social but moral. Some inherent dislike for anything that was not solid, that was not genuine, had served Vetch as a kind of aesthetic discrimination.

"I know Benham," Gershom was saying eagerly. "I've worked with him. Smart chap, don't you think? Ever heard him speak?"

"No, I hate speeches."

"Did he and the Governor have any words?"

"Of course they didn't—not at dinner," she replied with a crushing manner. "Father is waiting for you."

"Then you'll see me to-morrow? I've got a lot I want to say to you. And I'll tell you this right now, Patty, my dear, you may run round with these high-faluting chaps like Culpeper as much as you please; but how many dinner parties do you think you'd be invited to if I hadn't put the old man where he is?"

At this she turned on him furiously, her eyes blazing through their greenish mist. "I don't owe you anything, and you know it!" she retorted defiantly. Then before he could detain her she broke away from him and ran up the stairs. How dared he pretend that he had placed her under an obligation! As if it made any difference to her whether her father were Governor or not!

As she fled upward she heard Gershom follow Vetch into the library, and she knew that they would sit talking there until long after midnight. These discussions had become frequent of late; and she surmised vaguely, though Vetch never mentioned Gershom's name to her, that the two men were no longer upon the friendly terms of the old days. Ever since Vetch's election, it had seemed to her that the pack of hungry politicians had closed in about him; and only the day before, when she had gone over to the Governor's office in the Capitol building, she had run away from what she merrily described as "the famished wolves" waiting outside his door. It was clear even to her that the political leaders who had supported Vetch were beginning already to distrust him. They had sought, she realized, to use his popularity, his eloquence, his earnestness, for their own ends; and they were making the historic discovery that the man who possesses these affirmative qualities is seldom without the will to preserve them. In their superficial ploughing of the soil, Vetch's adherents had at last struck against the rock of resistance. A man of ambition, or a man of prejudice, they might have controlled; but, as Patty had learned long ago, Vetch was that most difficult of political problems—the man of an idea.

Sitting before her dressing-table she glanced over the room, which was hung with the gaily decorated chintz she had bought after months of secret longing for roses and hollyhocks in her bedroom. Now she felt that it looked cheap and flimsy because she had sacrificed material to colour. She wanted something

different to-night; she wanted something better. Turning to the mirror she gazed back at her vivid face, with the large deep eyes, so full of poignant expectancy, and the soft dimpled chin. From her expression she might have been dreaming of happiness; but the thought in her mind was simply, "The powder I use is too white. Those women to-night used powder that did not show. I must get some to-morrow." She was pretty,—even Stephen thought she was pretty. She could see it in his eyes when he looked at her; but her prettiness was merely the bloom of youth, nothing more. It was not that changeless beauty of structure—that beauty, as she recognized, of the very bone, which made Mrs. Page perennially lovely. "In ten, fifteen, at the most in twenty years, I shall have lost it all," she thought. "Then I shall get fat and common looking; and everything will be over for me because a little youthful colour and sparkle was all that I had. I have nothing to hold on to—nothing that will last. I don't know anything—and yet how could I be expected to know anything after the dull life I've had? In my whole life I've never known a woman that could help me. I've had to find out everything for myself—"

With her gaze still on the mirror, she laid the brush on its back of pink celluloid—how much she had admired it when she bought it!—and leaned forward with her hands clasped on the cover of the dressing-table. Her hair still flying out from the strokes of the brush surrounded her small eager face like a cloud. From the open neck of her kimono, embroidered in a pattern of cranes and wistaria, the thin girlish lines of her throat rose with an appealing fragility, like the stem of some delicate flower.

"I wonder if Mother could have helped me if she had lived?" she asked presently of her reflection. "I wonder if she was different from all the other women I've known?" Through her mind there passed swiftly a hundred memories of her childhood. First there came the one vivid recollection of her mother, a flashing, graceful figure, as light as thistle-down, in a skirt of spangled tulle that stood out from her knees. The face Patty could not remember, but the spangles were indelibly impressed on her mind, the spangles and a short silver wand, with a star on the end of it, which that fairy-like figure had held over her cradle. Of her mother this was all she had left, just this one unforgettable picture, and then a long terrible night when she had not seen her, but had heard her sobbing, sobbing, sobbing, somewhere in the darkness. The next day, when she cried for her, they had said that she was gone, and the child had never seen her again. In the place of her pretty mother there had been a big, rugged man, whom she had never seen before, and when she cried this man had taken her in his arms, and tried to quiet her. Afterward, when she grew bigger and asked questions, one of the neighbours had told her that her mother had lost her mind from a fall in the circus, that they had taken her away to an asylum, and that now she was dead.

"And wherever she is, she ought to go down on her knees and thank Gideon Vetch for the way he's looked after you," said the woman.

"But didn't he look after her too?" asked the child.

At this the woman laughed shrilly, lifting the soaking clothes with her capable red hands, and then plunging them down into the soapsuds." Well, I reckon that's more than the Lord Almighty would expect of him!" she replied emphatically but ambiguously.

"I wonder why Father never took me to see her. I'm sure I'd have remembered it."

The woman looked at her darkly. "There are some places that children don't go to."

"How long ago did she die?"

Patty waited patiently for an answer; but when at last the neighbour raised her head again from the tub, it appeared that her reticence had extended from her speech to her expression which looked as if it had closed over something. "You'll have to ask your father that," she returned in a phrase as cryptic as the preceding one. "I ain't here to tell you things."

After this the child set her lips firmly together, and asked no more questions. Her father had become not one parent, but both to her; and it seemed that wherever she looked he was always there, overshadowing like a mountain everything else on her horizon. In the beginning they had been very poor; but he had never let her suffer for things, although for weeks at a time she knew that he had gone without his tobacco in order to buy her toys. Until she went to the little village school, she had always had an old woman to look after her, and later on, when their circumstances appeared miraculously to improve, he employed the slim, gray, uninteresting spinster who slept now a few doors away from her. There were hours when it seemed to her that she had never learned the meaning of tediousness until the plain but hopeful Miss Spencer came to live with her.

Rising from her chair, she moved away from the mirror, and wandered restlessly to the pile of fashion magazines and festively decorated "books on etiquette" that littered the table beside the chintz-covered couch. "They don't know everything!" she thought contemptuously. How hard she had tried to learn, and yet how confused, how hopeless, it all seemed to her to-night! All the hours that she had spent in futile study appeared to her wasted! At her first dinner she had felt as bewildered and unhappy as if she had never opened one of those thick gaudy volumes that had cost so much—as much as a box of chocolates every day for a week. "I don't care," she said aloud, with sullen resolution. "I am going to let them see that I don't want any favours."

The next afternoon she went out early in order to escape Gershom; but when she came in, after a restless wandering in shops and a short drive, she met him just as he was turning away from the door.

"Something told me I'd find you at this hour," he remarked with unfailing good humour. "Come out and walk about in the Square. It will do you good."

She shook her head impatiently. "I'm tired. I don't like walking."

"Well, I reckon it's easier to sit anyway. We'll go inside."

"No, if I've got to talk to you I'd rather do it out of doors," she replied, turning back toward the gate.

"That's right. The air's fine. I shouldn't wonder if the bad weather ain't all over."

"I don't mind the bad weather," she retorted pettishly because it was the only remark she could think of

that sounded disagreeable.

They passed through the gate, and walked rapidly in the direction of the Washington monument, which lifted a splendid silhouette against a deep blue background of sky. It was one of those soft, opal-tinted February days which fall like a lyric interlude in the gray procession of winter. The sunshine lay like flowing gold on the pavement; and the breeze that stirred now and then in the leafless boughs of the trees was as roving and provocative as the air of spring. In the winding brick walks of the Square children were at play with the squirrels and pigeons; and old men, with gnarled hands and patient hopeless faces, sat warming themselves in the sunshine on the benches. "Life!" she thought. "That's life. You can't get away from it." Then one of the old men broke into a cackle of cheerful laughter, and she added: "After all nobody is ever pathetic to himself."

"I believe I'll go in," she said, turning to Gershom. "I want to take off my hat."

He laughed. "Your hat's all right, ain't it? It looks pretty good to me."

A shiver of aversion ran through her. If only he wouldn't try to be funny! If only he had been born without that dreadful sense of humour, she felt that she might have been able to tolerate him.

"Please don't," she replied fretfully.

"Well, I won't, if you'll walk a little slower. I told you I had something to say to you."

"I don't want to hear it. There's no use talking about it. I'll say the same thing if you ask me for a hundred years."

A chuckle broke from him while he stood jauntily fingering the diamond in his tie, as if it were some talisman which imparted fresh confidence. Oh, it was useless to try to put a man like that in his place—for his place seemed to be everywhere!

"Well, it won't do any harm," he said at last. "As long as I like to listen to it."

"I wish you would leave me alone."

"But suppose I can't?" He was still chaffing. He would continue to chaff, she was convinced, if he were dying. "Suppose I ain't made that way?"

"I don't care how you're made. You may talk to Father if you like; but I'm going upstairs to take off my hat."

His chuckle swelled into a roar of laughter. "Talk to Father! Haven't I been talking to Father over at the Capitol for the last three hours?"

They had reached the gate beyond the monument, and swinging suddenly round, she started back toward the house. As she passed him he touched the end of her fur stole with a gesture that was almost imperative. His eyes had dropped their veil of pleasantry, and she was aware, with a troubled mind, that he was holding back something as a last resource if she continued to prove intractable. Again and again she had this feeling when she was with him—an uneasy intuition that his good humour was not entirely unassumed, that he was concealing a dangerous weapon beneath his offensive familiarity.

"After all I may be going to surprise you," he said lightly enough, yet with this disturbing implication of some meaning that she could not discern. "What if I tell you that I've no intention of making love to you?"

"You mean there is something else you want to see me about?" She breathed a sigh of relief, and her light steps fell gradually into the measure of his. Her conscience pricked her unpleasantly when she remembered that there had been a time when she would have spoken less curtly. Well, what of that? It was characteristic of her energetic mind that past mistakes were dismissed as soon as they were discovered. When one started out in life knowing nothing, one had to learn as best one could, that was all! Every day was a new one, so why bother about yesterday? There was trouble enough in the world as it was, without dragging back what was over.

"Please tell me what it is," she said impatiently.

He looked at her with curious intentness. "It is about an aunt of yours—Mrs. Green. I met her when I was in California."

Her surprise was so complete that he must have been gratified.

"An aunt of mine? I haven't any aunt."

For a minute he hesitated. Now that he had come to practical matters his careless jocularly had given place to a manner of serious deliberation. "Then your father hasn't told you?" he asked.

"Is she his sister?" Her distrust of Gershom was so strong that she could not bring herself to a direct reply.

"So he hasn't?" After all she might as well have answered his question. "No, she isn't his sister." His smile was full of meaning.

"Then she must be"—there was a change in her voice which he was quick to detect—"she must be the sister of my mother."

"Didn't you know that she had one?" he enquired. "Don't you remember seeing her when you were a child?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't remember her, and Father has never spoken of her."

At this he glanced at her sharply, and then looked away over the tops of the trees to the political mausoleum of the City Hall. "We take that as a sort of joke now," he remarked irrelevantly, "but the time was—and not so long ago either—when we boasted of it more than of the Lee monument. Cost a lot too, they say! Queer, ain't it, the way we spend a million dollars or more on a thing one year, and the next want to kick it out on the junk heap? I reckon it's the same way about behaviour too. It ain't so much what you do as the time you do it in that seems to make the difference." As she showed no inclination to follow this train of moralizing, he asked suddenly, "Do you remember your mother?"

"Only once. I remember seeing her once." He had not imagined that her voice could become so gentle.

"Did they ever tell you what became of her?"

"Yes, I know that. She lost her mind. They told me that she died in the asylum."

He was still watching her closely, as if he were observing the effect on her nerves of each word he uttered. "Did they tell you the cause of it?"

She shook her head. "That was all they ever told me."

"You mean your father never mentioned it to you? Are you sure he never spoke of Mrs. Green?"

"I shouldn't have forgotten. But, if she is my mother's sister, why has she never written to me?"

"Ah, that's just it! She was afraid your father wouldn't like it. There was a difference of some kind. I don't know what it was about—but they didn't get on—and—and—"

"I am sure Father was right. He is always right," she said loyally.

"Well, he may have been. I'm not denying that; but it's an old story now, and I wouldn't bring it up again, if I were you. He has enough things to carry without that."

She hesitated a moment before replying. "Yes, I suppose it's better not to speak of it. He has too many worries."

"I knew you'd see it that way; you're a girl of sense. And if Mrs. Green should ever come here, must I tell her that you would like to see her?"

"Does she think of coming here? California is so far away."

"Well, people do come, don't they? And I know she'd like to see you. She was very fond of your mother. I used to know both of 'em in the old days when I was a boy."

"Of course I'd like to see her if she could tell me about my mother. I want to ask questions about her—only it makes Father so unhappy when I bring up the past."

"It would, I reckon. Things like that are better forgotten." Then, dismissing the subject abruptly, he remarked in the old tone of facetious familiarity, "I never saw you looking better. What have you done to yourself? You are always imitating some new person every time I see you."

"I am not!" Her temper flashed out. "I never imitate anybody." Yet, even as she passionately denied the charge, she knew that it was true. For a week, ever since her first visit to the old print shop, she had tried to copy Corinna's voice, the carriage of her head, her smile, her gestures.

"Well, you needn't," he assured her with admiring pleasantry. "As far as looks go—and that's a long way—I haven't seen any one that was better than you!"



CHAPTER IX

SEPTEMBER ROSES

The afternoon sunshine streamed through the dull gold curtains into the old print shop where Corinna sat in her tapestry-covered chair between the tea-table and the log fire. She was alone for the moment; and lying back in the warmth and fragrance of the room, she let her gaze rest lovingly on one of the English mezzotints over which a stray sunbeam quivered. The flames made a pleasant whispering sound over the cedar logs; her favourite wide-open creamy roses with golden hearts scented the air; and the delicate China tea in her cup was drawn to perfection. As she lay back in the big chair but one thing disturbed her serenity—and that one thing was within. She had everything that she wanted, and for the hour, at least, she was tired of it all. The mood was transient, she knew. It would pass because it was alien to the clear bracing air of her mind; but while it lasted she told herself that the present had palled on her because she had looked beneath the vivid surface of illusion to the bare structure of life. Men had ceased to interest her because she knew them too well. She knew by heart the very machinery of their existence, the secret mental springs which moved them so mechanically; and she felt to-day that if they had been watches, she could have taken them apart and put them together again without suspending for a minute the monotonous regularity of their works. Even Gideon Vetch, who might have held a surprise for her, had differed from the rest in one thing only: he had not seen that she was beautiful! And it wasn't that she was breaking. To-day because of her mood of depression, she appeared drooping and faded; but that night, a week ago, in her velvet gown and her pearls, she had looked as handsome as ever. The truth was simply that Vetch had glanced at her without seeing her, as he might have glanced at the gilded sheaves of wheat on a picture frame. He had been so profoundly absorbed in his own ideas that she had been nothing more individual than one of an audience. If he were to meet her in the street he would probably not recognize her. And this was a man who had never before seen a woman whose beauty had passed into history, a man who had risen to his place through what the Judge had described with charitable euphemism, as "unusual methods." "The odd part about Vetch," the Judge had added meditatively on the drive home, "is that he doesn't attempt to disguise the kind of thing that we of the old school would call—well, to say the least—extraordinary. He is as outspoken as Mirabeau. I can't make it out. It may be, of course, that he has a better reading of human nature than we have, and that he knows such gestures catch the eye, like long hair or a red necktie. It is very much as if he said—'Yes, I'll steal if I'm driven to it, but—confound it!—I won't lie!'"

After all, the sting to her vanity had been too slight to leave an impression. There must be another cause for the shadow that had fallen over her spirits. Even a reigning beauty of thirty years could scarcely expect to be invincible; and she had known too much homage in the past to resent what was obviously a lack of discrimination. Her disappointment went deeper than this, for it had its source in the stories she had heard of Vetch that sounded original and dramatic. She had imagined a personality that was striking, spectacular, or at least interesting; and the actual Gideon Vetch had seemed to her merely unimpressive and ordinary. Beside John Benham (as the thought of Benham returned to her, her spirit rose on wings out of the shadow), beside John Benham, in the drawing-room after dinner, Vetch had appeared at a disadvantage that was almost ridiculous; and, as Stephen Culpeper had hastened to point out, this was merely a striking illustration of the damning contrast between the Governor's chequered political career and Benham's stainless record of service.

A smile curved her lips as she gazed at the quivering sunbeams. Was that deep instinct for perfection, the romantic vision of things as they ought to be, awaking again? Did the starry flower bloom not in the dream, but in reality? The passion to create beauty, to bring happiness, which had been extinguished for years, burned afresh in her heart. Yes, as long as there was beauty, as long as there was nobility of spirit, she could fight on as one who believed in the future.

A shadow darkened the window, and a moment afterward there was a fall of the old silver knocker on her door. She thought at first—the shadow had seemed so young—that it was Stephen; but when she opened the door, she saw, with a lovely flush, that it was John Benham.

"You expected me?" he asked, raising her hand to his lips.

"Yes, I knew that you would come," she answered, and the flush died away slowly as she turned back to the fire. In the moment of recognition all the despondency had vanished so utterly that it had not left even a memory. He had brought not only peace, but youth and happiness back to her eyes.

He came in as impressively as he presented himself to an audience; and with the glow of pleasure still in her heart, she found her keen and observant mind watching him almost as if he were a stranger. This had been her misfortune always, the ardent heart joined to the critical judgment, the spectator chained eternally to the protagonist. She received a swift impression that he had prepared his words and even his gestures, the kiss on her fingers. Yet, in spite of this suggestion of the actor, or because of it, he possessed, she felt, great distinction. The straight backward sweep of his hair; the sharp clearness of his profile; the steady serenity of his gray eyes; the ease and suppleness and indolent strength of his tall thin figure—all these physical details expressed the reserves and inhibitions of generations. The only flaw that she could detect was that dryness of soul that she had noticed before, as of soil that has been too heavily drained. She knew that he excelled in all the virtues that are monumental and public, that he was an honourable opponent, a scrupulous defender of established rules and precedents. He would always reach the goal, but his race would never carry him beyond the end of the course; he would always fulfil the law, but he would never give more than the exact measure; he would always fight for the risen Christ, but he would never have followed the humble bearer of the Cross. His strength and weakness were the kind which had profoundly influenced her life. He represented in her world the conservative principle, the accepted standard, the acknowledged authority, custom, stability, reason, and moderation.

As he sat down in front of the fire, he looked at her with a gentle possessive gaze.

"Of course you have never sold a print," he remarked in a laughing tone, and she responded as flippantly.

"Of course!"

"Why didn't you call it a collection?"

"Because people wouldn't come."

"Then why didn't you keep them at home where you have so much that is fine?"

She laughed. "Because people couldn't come. I mean the people I don't know. I have a fancy for the people I have never met."

"On the principle that the unknown is the desirable."

She nodded. "And that the desirable is the unattainable."

His gray eyes were warmed by a fugitive glow. "I shouldn't have put it that way in your case. You appear to have everything."

"Do I? Well, that twists the sentence backward. Shall we say that the attainable is the undesirable?"

"Surely not. Can you have ceased already to desire these lovely things? Could that piece of tapestry lose its charm for you, or that Spanish desk, or those English prints, or the old morocco of that binding? Do you feel that the colours in that brocade at your back could ever become meaningless?"

"I am not sure. Wouldn't it be possible to look at it while you were seeing something else, something so drab that it would take the colour out of all beauty?" She was looking at him over the tea-table, and while she asked the question she raised a lump of sugar in the quaint old sugar tongs she had brought home from Florence.

He shook his head. "I am denied sugar. Has it ever occurred to you that middle age ought to be called the age of denial?" Then his tone changed. "But I wonder if you begin to realize how fortunate you are? You have the collector's instinct and the means to gratify it. To discover with you is to possess—don't you understand the blessing of that? You love beauty as a favoured daughter, not as one of the disinherited who can only peer through the windows of her palace."

"But you also—you love beauty as I do."

"But I can't own it—not as you do." He was speaking frankly. "I haven't the means. At least what I have I have made myself, and therefore I guard it more carefully. It is only those who have once been poor who are really under the curse of money, for that curse is the inability to understand that money is less valuable than anything else on earth that you happen to need or desire. Now to me the most terrible thing on earth is not to be without beauty, but to be without money—"

She smiled. "You are talking like Gideon Vetch."

He caught at the name quickly. "Like Gideon Vetch? You mean that I sound ignoble?"

The laughter in his eyes made him look almost boyish, and she felt that she had come suddenly close to him. After all he was very attractive.

"Is he ignoble?" she asked. "I have seen him only once, and that was at the dinner a week ago."

He looked at her intently. "I should like to know what you think."

"I hardly know—but—well, I must confess that I was disappointed."

"You expected something better?"

She hesitated over her answer. "I expected something different. I suppose I looked for the dash of purple—or at least of red—in his appearance."

"And he seemed ordinary?"

"In a way—yes. His features are not striking, and yet when he talks to you and gets interested in his own ideas, he sheds a kind of warmth that is like magnetism. I couldn't analyse it, but it is there."

"That, I suppose, is the charm of which they talk. Warmth, or perhaps heat, is a better word for it. Fortunately I'm proof against it because of what you might call an asbestos temperament; but I've seen it

catch fire in a crowd, and it sweeps over an audience like a blaze over a prairie. It is a cheap kind of oratory; yet it is a power in unscrupulous hands—and Vetch is unscrupulous."

"You believe that?"

"I know it. It has been proved again and again that he will stoop to any means in order to advance his ideas, which mean of course his ambition. Oh, I'm not denying that in the main he is sincere, that he believes in his phrases. As a matter of fact one has only to look at his appointments, those that he is able to make by his own authority! There isn't a doubt in the world that he deliberately sold his office in exchange for his election—"

So this was one honest man's view of Gideon Vetch! John Benham believed this accusation, for some infallible intuition told her that Benham would never have repeated it, even as a rumour, if he had not believed it. Her father's genial defence of the Governor; his ironic aristocratic sympathy with the radical point of view appeared superficial and unconvincing beside Benham's moral repudiation. And yet what after all was the simple truth about Gideon Vetch? What was the true colour of that variable personality, which appeared to shift and alter according to the temperament or the convictions of each observer? She had never known two men who agreed about Vetch, except perhaps Benham and his disciple, Stephen Culpeper. Each man saw Vetch differently, and was this because each man saw in the great demagogue only the particular virtue or vice for which he was looking, the reflection of personal preferences or aversions? It seemed to her suddenly that the Governor, whom she had thought commonplace, towered an immense vague figure in a cloud of misinterpretation and misunderstanding. His followers believed in him; his opponents distrusted him; but was this not true of every political leader since the beginning of politics? The power to inspire equally devotion and hatred had been throughout history the authentic sign of the saviour and of the destroyer. Her curiosity, which had waned, flared up more strongly than ever.

"I should like to know," she said aloud, "what he is truthfully?"

Benham laughed as he rose to go. "Do you think he can be anything truthfully?"

"Oh, yes, even if it is only a demagogue."

"Only a demagogue! My dear Corinna, the demagogue is the one everlasting and unalterable American institution. He is the idol of the Senate chamber; the power behind the Constitution."

"But what does he really stand for—Vetch, I mean?"

"Ask him. He would enjoy telling you."

"Would he enjoy telling me the truth?"

With the laughter still in his eyes Benham drew nearer and stood looking down on her. "Oh, I don't mean that he is pure humbug. I haven't a doubt, as I told you, that he believes, sufficiently at least for election purposes, in the fallacies that he advocates, even in the old age pension, the minimum, or more accurately, the maximum wage, and of course in what doesn't sound so Utopian since we have experimented with it, that favourite dogma of the near-Socialists, the Government ownership of railroads. His main theory, however, appears to be some far-fetched abstraction which he calls the humanizing of industry—you've heard that before! Mere bombast, you see, but the kind of thing that is dangerous in a crowd. It is the catchpenny politics that has been the curse of our country."

"And of course he is not a gentleman." Corinna's voice was regretful. "I may be old-fashioned, but I can't

help feeling that the Governor ought to be a gentleman. That sounds like General Plummer, I know," she concluded apologetically.

"The archaic cult of the gentleman? Well, I like to think that in Virginia it still has a few obscure followers. It is a prejudice that I dare to admit only when I am not on the platform, for the belief in the gentleman has become a kind of underground religion, like the worship in the Catacombs."

Her eyes had grown wistful when she answered: "It is the price we pay for democracy."

"The price we pay is the reign of social justice in theory, and in practice the rule of the Gideon Vetches of history. Oh, I admit that it may all work out in the end! That is my political creed, you know—that everything and anything may work out in the end. If I stood simply for tradition without progress, I should long ago have been driven to the wall."

"I feel as you do," she said after a moment, "and yet I am curious to see what will become of our experimental Governor."

"And I also. The man may have executive ability, and it is possible that he may give us an efficient administration. But, of course, it is merely a stepping-stone for his inordinate greed for power. His vanity has been inflamed by success, and he sees the Senate, it may be even the Presidency, ahead of him."

Though she smiled there was a note of earnestness in her voice. "Well, why not? There was once a rail splitter—"

"Oh, I know. But the rail splitter was born a president; and it is a far cry to a circus rider who was not born even a gentleman."

"Perhaps. Yet, right or wrong, hasn't the war stretched a little the safety net of our democracy? Isn't it just possible to-day that we might find a circus rider who was born a president too?" Then before he could toss back her questions she asked quickly, "After all, he didn't actually ride, did he?"

Benham shrugged his shoulders, a gesture he had acquired in France. "I've heard so, but I don't know. They tell queer tales of his early years. That was before the golden age of the movies, you see; and I suspect that the movies rather than the war introduced the mock heroic into politics."

He was still standing at her side, looking down into her upraised eyes, which made him think of brown velvet. For a long pause after speaking he remained silent, drinking in the fragrance of the room, the whispering of the flames, and the dreamy loveliness of Corinna's expression. A change had come over her face. In the flushed light she looked young and elusive; and it seemed to him that, beneath the glowing tissue of flesh, he gazed upon an indestructible beauty of spirit.

"Do you know what I was thinking?" he asked presently. "I was thinking that I'd known all this before—that I'd been waiting for it always—the firelight on these splendid colours, the smell of the roses, the sound of the flames, and the way you looked up at me with that memory in your eyes. 'I have been here before'."

A quiver as faint as the shadow of a flower crossed her face. "Yes, I remember. It is an odd feeling. I suppose every one has felt it at times—only each one of us likes to think that he is the particular instance."

"It is trite, I know," he said with a smile, "but feeling is never very original, is it? Only thought is new."

"But I would rather have feeling, wouldn't you?" she asked in a low voice, and sat waiting in a lovely

attitude, prepared without and within, for the moment that was approaching. There was no excitement in such things now, she had had too much experience; but there was an unending interest.

"Then it isn't too late?" he asked quickly; and again after a pause in which she did not answer: "Corinna, is it too late?"

For a minute longer she looked up at him in silence. The glow was still in her eyes; the smile was still on her lips; and it seemed to him that she was wrapped in some enchantment which wrought not in actual life but in allegory—that the light in which she moved belonged less to earth than to Botticelli's springtime. Was romance, after all, he thought sharply, the only reality? Could one never escape it?

While he looked down on her she had stirred, as if she were awaking from a dream, or a memory, and stretched out her hand.

"Is it ever too late," she responded, "as long as there is any happiness left in the world?"

She smiled as she answered him; but suddenly her smile faded and that faint shadow passed again over her face. In the very moment when he had bent toward her, there had drifted before her gaze the soft anxious eyes of Alice Rokeby, and the look in them as they followed John Benham that evening a week ago.

"Oh, my dear," said Benham softly. Then his voice broke and he drew back hurriedly, for a figure had darkened the low window, and a minute afterward the door opened and Patty Vetch entered the room.

"The latch was not fastened, so I came in," she began, and stopped as her look fell on Benham. "I—I hope you don't mind," she added in confusion.

CHAPTER X

PATTY AND CORINNA

Patty had come straight to Corinna after a conversation with Stephen. She needed sympathy, and she had meant to be frank and confiding; but when Benham left them alone in the lovely room, which made her feel as if she had stepped into one of the stained glass windows in the old church she attended, her courage failed, and she forgot all the impulsive words she had learned by heart in the street.

"I am so glad," said Corinna sweetly. "I went to see you after luncheon to-day, and I was very much disappointed not to find you at home."

"That was why I came," answered Patty. "Your card was there when I got in, and I couldn't bear missing you."

"That was right, dear. It was what I hoped you would do."

Turning back to the fire, Corinna stooped and flung a fresh log on the Florentine andirons. Then, without glancing at the girl, she sat down in one of the deep chairs by the hearth, and motioned invitingly to a place at her side. She was determined to win Patty's heart, and she wanted to be near enough to reach out her hand when the right moment came. That moment had not come yet, and she knew it, for she was wise from experience. There was time enough, and she felt no impulse to hasten developments. She was strongly attracted, and since her sympathy was easily stirred, she wished, without any great desire, to help the girl if she could. The only way, she realized, was to watch and hope, to play the waiting game as far as this was possible to her active nature. For, above all things, Corinna hated to wait; and this potent energy of soul, this vital flame, had given the look of winged radiance to her eyes.

"You are always so happy," said Patty breathlessly, as she leaned forward and held out her hands to Corinna as if she were the fire. "Everything about you seems to give out joy every minute."

"You dear!" murmured Corinna softly, for admiration was to her nature what sunshine is to a flower. "I am happy to-day—happy as I thought I should never be again. I am so happy that I should like to take the whole world to my heart and heal its misery." Then she added hastily before the girl could reply: "You came just at the right moment. I have wanted a talk with you, and there couldn't be a better opportunity than this. The other night I tried to join you after dinner; but Mrs. Berkeley got all the women together, and I didn't have a chance to speak a word to you alone. You looked charming in that scarlet dress. Your head is shaped so prettily that I think you are wise to cut your hair. It makes you look like a page of the Italian Renaissance."

"Do you really like it?" asked Patty, and her voice trembled with pleasure. "Father hates it, but men never know."

Corinna laughed. "Not much more about fashions than they know about women."

"And that isn't anything, is it?"

"Well, perhaps they'll learn some day—by the time I am dead and you are old. You look so young, you

can't be over eighteen."

"I'll be nineteen next summer—at least I think I shall, for nobody knows exactly when my birthday comes."

"Not even your father?"

"No, he guesses it's in June, but he isn't perfectly sure, and he hasn't any idea what day of the month it is. He gives me a birthday gift whenever he happens to think of it."

For a minute Corinna gazed thoughtfully into the fire. "It is queer the things men can't remember," she said at last. "Now, my father always forgets, or pretends to, that I've ever been married."

"Then I needn't be so surprised," rejoined Patty brightly, "when mine forgets that I ever was born!"

"Oh, he doesn't forget it really, my dear. He adores you."

"He is an angel to me," answered the girl with passionate loyalty. "I've never had any one else, you know, and he has been simply everything. Only I do wish he wouldn't have that tiresome Miss Spencer to live with us."

"But you ought to have some one with you."

"Not some one like that. She doesn't know as much as I do; but Father thinks she is all right because she lets her hair turn gray and wears long dresses."

Corinna's laugh was like music. "It takes more than that to make a virtuous mind!" she exclaimed, but she was not thinking of Miss Spencer.

"Do you know," said Patty, leaning forward and speaking with the earnestness of a child, "I doubt if Father ever looked at a well-dressed woman until he met you."

Was it natural ingenuousness, or did the girl have a deeper motive? For an instant Corinna wondered; then she returned merrily: "Certainly he wouldn't look at me when Mrs. Stribling is near."

"Yes, he admires Mrs. Stribling very much," replied Patty gravely, "but I don't. She isn't a bit real."

Corinna's gaze softened until it swept the girl's face like a caress. "I hope you won't mind my calling you Patty," she responded irrelevantly. "It is so hard to say Miss Vetch, for I can see that we are going to be friends."

"Oh, if you will!" cried Patty breathlessly, and she added eagerly, "I have never had a real friend, you know, and you are so beautiful. You are more beautiful than anybody I ever saw on the stage."

"Or in the movies?" Corinna's voice was mirthful, but there was a deep tenderness in her eyes. Was the girl as shallow as she appeared, or was there, beneath her vivid enamel-like surface, some rich plastic substance of character? Was she worth helping, worth the generous friendship that Corinna could give, or was she merely a bit of human driftwood that would burn out presently in the thin flame of some transient passion? "I'll take the risk," thought Corinna. "A risk is worth taking," for there was sporting blood in her veins. While she sat there in silence, listening to the artless unfolding of the girl's thoughts, she appeared to be searching for the hidden possibilities in that crude young spirit. So often in the past the older woman had given herself abundantly only to meet disappointment and ingratitude. Why should it be different now?

What was there in this unformed child that appealed so strongly to her sympathy and tenderness? Not beauty surely, for Patty was merely pretty. Charm she had unmistakably; but it was a charm that men would feel rather than women; and of all the feminine varieties that Corinna had known in the past, she disliked most heartily "the man's woman." Was her impulse to help only the need of a fresh interest, the craving for a new amusement? The heart of life she had never reached. Something was missing—the unfading light, the starry flower that she had never found in her search. Now at last, in a golden middle age, she told herself that she would build her happiness not on perfection, but on the second best of experience. She would accept the milder joys, the daily miracles, the fulfilled adventures. And so, partly because she liked the girl, and partly because of a generous whim, she said presently:

"You shall have a friend—a real friend—from this day."

Patty who had been gazing into the fire turned on her a face that was as sparkling as a sunbeam. "I would rather have you for a friend than anybody in the world," she responded in a voice so caressing that Stephen would not have believed it belonged to her.

"I am sure that I can be useful to you," said Corinna, for the gratitude in the girl's voice touched and embarrassed her, "and I know that you can be to me. How would you like to come every morning and help me for an hour or two in my shop? There isn't anything to do, but we may get to know each other better." After all, she might as well show a fighting spirit and see the adventure through to the end.

Patty's eyes shone, but all she said was, "Oh, I'd love to! It is so beautiful here."

"Do you like it?" asked Corinna, and wondered how much the girl really saw. Did she have the eyes and the soul to see and feel beauty? "I have some good things at home. You must come out there."

"If you'll only let me sit and watch you!" exclaimed Patty fervently.

"As long as you like." A smile crossed Corinna's lips, as she imagined those large bright eyes, like stars in a spring twilight, shining on her hour after hour. How could she possibly endure their unfaltering candour? How could she adjust her life to their adoring regard? "How long has your mother been dead, Patty?" she asked suddenly. "Do you know—of course you don't—scarcely anybody has ever heard it—that I had a child once, a little girl, and she lived only one day."

"And she might have been like you," was all Patty said, but Corinna understood.

"Do you remember your mother, dear?"

"Only a little," answered Patty, and then she told of the spangled skirt and the silver wand with the star on the end of it. "That is all I can remember."

She rose with a shy movement and held out her hand. "Then I may come to-morrow?"

"Every day if you will, and most of all on the days when you need a friend." Bending her head, she kissed the girl lightly on the cheek. "Do you like my cousin Stephen?" she asked suddenly.

A look of scorn came into Patty's eyes. "He is so superior," she answered, with a gesture of complete indifference. "I don't like superior persons."

"Ah," thought Corinna, watching her closely, "she is really interested, poor child!"

After this the girl went out into a changed world—into a world which had become, as if by a miracle, less

impersonal and unfriendly. The amber light of the sunset seemed to envelop her softly as if she were surrounded by happiness. It was like first love without its troubled suspense, this new wonderful feeling! It was like a religious awakening without the sense of sin that she associated with her early conversion. Nothing, she felt, could ever be so beautiful again! Nothing could ever mean so much to her in the rest of life! In one moment, almost by magic, she had learned her first lesson in discrimination, in the relative values of experience; she had attained her first clear perception of the difference between the things that mattered a little and the things that mattered profoundly.

The every-day world had faded from her so completely that it seemed a natural incident—it caused her scarcely a start of surprise—when she met Stephen Culpeper under the Washington monument. He had evidently just left his office, for there was a bulky package of papers in his hand; and he greeted her as if it were the merest accident that had taken him through the Square. As a matter of fact it was less of an accident than he made it appear, for he had declined to go home in the Judge's car because of some vague hope that by walking he might meet either Patty or Gideon Vetch. Since the evening of the Berkeleys' dinner the young man's interest had shifted inexplicably from Patty to her father.

"You looked so much like Mr. Benham a little way off," said Patty, as he turned to walk back with her, "that I might have mistaken you for him."

"If you only knew it," he replied, laughing, "you have paid me the highest compliment of my life."

She blushed. "I didn't mean it as a compliment."

"That makes it all the better. But don't you like Benham?"

Patty pondered the question. "I can't get near enough to him either to like or dislike him. He is very good looking."

"He is more than good looking. He is magnificent."

"You think a great deal of him?"

"I couldn't think more," he responded with young enthusiasm. "Every one feels that way about him. He stands for—well, for everything that one would like to be."

"I've heard of him, of course," said the girl slowly. "Father has been fighting him ever since he went into politics; but I never saw Mr. Benham close enough to speak to him until the other evening." She raised her black lashes and looked straight at Stephen with her challenging glance. "All the men seemed so serious, except you."

He laughed and flushed slightly. "And I did not?"

Though her manner could not have been more indifferent, there was an undercurrent of feeling in her voice, as if she meant something more than she had put into words. He might take it as he chose, lightly or seriously, her look implied—and it was, he admitted, a thrilling look from such eyes as hers.

"You are nearer my age," she rejoined, "though you do seem so old sometimes."

A depressing dampness fell on his mood. "Do I seem old to you? I am only twenty-six."

Her inquiring eyebrows were raised in mockery. "That is too old to play, isn't it?"

"Well, I might try," he answered, and added curiously, "I wonder whom you find to play with? Not your father?"

"Oh, no, not Father. He is as serious as Mr. Benham, only he laughs a great deal more. Father jokes all the time, but there is something underneath that isn't a joke at all."

"I should like to talk to your father. I want to find out, if I can, what he really believes."

"You won't find out that," said Patty, "by talking to him."

"You mean he will not tell me?"

"Oh, he may tell you; but you won't know it. Half the time when he is telling the truth, it sounds like a joke, and that keeps people from believing him. He says the best way to keep a secret is to shout it from the housetops; and I've heard him say things straight out that sounded so far fetched nobody would think he was in earnest. I was the only person who knew that he was speaking the truth. They call that a 'method', the politicians. They used to like it before he was elected; but now it makes them restless. They complain that they can't do anything with him."

"That," remarked Stephen, as she paused, "appears to be the chronic complaint of politicians."

"Does it? Well, Mr. Gershom is always saying now that Father can't be depended on. It was much more peaceable," she concluded with artless confidence, "when he let them manage him. Now there are discussions and disagreements all the time. It all seems to be about what they think people want. Have you any idea what they want?"

"Does anybody know what they want—except when they want money?"

"Well, some of them would like Father to go to the Senate," she returned naïvely, "and some of them wouldn't. Do you think that Mr. Benham would be better in the Senate?"

"I think so, of course. But you mustn't judge, you know, by what my thoughts happen to be."

"I'm not judging. I hate politics. I always have. I want to get as far away from them as I can."

He looked at her intently. "And where would you like to go?"

"Into the movies." Her eyes sparkled at the thought. "At least I wanted to go into the movies until I saw Mrs. Page this afternoon."

"Mrs. Kent Page?" he asked in astonishment. "My Cousin Corinna?"

"Yes, in the old print shop. Isn't she adorable?"

He smiled at her fervour. "I have always found her so. But what has she to do with your change of ambition?"

"Oh, nothing, except that she is lovelier than any actress I ever saw."

They had reached the house, and while they ascended the steps, the sound of the Governor's voice, raised in vehement protest, floated to them through the half-open door.

"He must be talking to Julius Gershom," whispered Patty. "It is always like that."

"I don't care a damn for the whole bunch of you," said Vetch suddenly. "You can go and tell that to the crowd!"

"Well, I'll come back again after I've told them," Gershom replied in an insolent tone; and the next moment the door swung back and he appeared on the threshold.

At sight of Patty and Stephen he attempted to cover his embarrassment with a jest. "Your father and I were having one of our little arguments about a Ladies' Aid Society," he said. "He is beginning to kick against too much ice cream."

"Well, if you argue as loud as that," replied the girl with imperturbable coolness, "it won't be necessary to go and tell it to the crowd."

In an instant she had changed from the sparkling elusive creature Stephen had known into a woman of authority and composure. What an eternal enigma was the feminine mind! He had flattered himself that he had reached the end of her superficial attractions; and in a minute, by some startling metamorphosis, she was changed from a being of transparent shallows into the immemorial riddle of sex. She might be anything, or everything, except the ingenuous girl of the moment before.

"We must learn to lower our voices," said the Governor in a laughing tone. His anger, if it were anger, had blown over him like a summer storm, and the clear blue of his glance was as winning as ever. "I've been looking into the matter of that appointment Judge Page asked me about," he added, "and I think I may see my way to oblige him."

"If you are free for half an hour I'd like to have the talk we spoke of the other day," answered Stephen.

"Oh, I'm free except for Darrow. You won't mind Darrow."

He turned toward the library on the left of the hall; and as Stephen entered the room, after a gay and friendly smile in Patty's direction, he told himself that the man promised to be more interesting than any girl he had ever known.



CHAPTER XI

THE OLD WALLS AND THE RISING TIDE

A tall old man was standing by the window in the library, and as he turned his face away from the light of the sunset, Stephen had a vague impression that he had seen him before—not in actual life but in some half-forgotten picture or statue. The Governor's visitor was evidently a carpenter, with a tall erect figure and a face which had in it a dignity that belonged less to an individual than to an era. Beneath his abundant white hair, his large brown eyes still shone with the ardour of a convert or a disciple, and his blanched, strongly marked features had the aristocratic distinction and serenity that are found in the faces of the old who have lived in communion either with profound ideas or with the simple elemental forces of sky and sea. In spite of his gnarled hands and the sawdust that had lodged in the frayed creases of his clothes, he was in his way, Stephen realized, as great a gentleman and as typical a Virginian as Judge Horatio Lancaster Page. Both men were the descendants of a privileged order; both were inheritors of a formal and authentic tradition.

"This is Mr. Darrow," said Vetch in a voice which contained a note of affectionate deference. "I think he knew your father, Culpeper. Didn't you tell me, Darrow, that you had known this young man's father?"

"No, sir, I only said I'd worked for him," replied Darrow, with an air of genial irony which brought the Judge to Stephen's mind again. "That's a big difference, I reckon. I did some repairs a few years ago on a row of houses that belonged to Mr. Culpeper; but the business was all arranged by the agent."

"That was part of the estate, I suppose," explained Stephen. "My father leaves all that to his agent."

"Yes, I thought as much," replied Darrow simply; and after shaking hands with his rough, strong clasp, he sat down in a chair by the window. "They've made a lot of changes inside this house," he remarked. "Before they added on that part at the back the dining-room used to be in the basement. I remember doing some work down there when I was a young man and there was going to be a wedding."

"Well, that long room is very little use to me," returned Vetch. "As far as I am concerned they might have left the house as it was built." Then turning abruptly to Stephen, he said sharply: "You heard Gershom's parting shot at me, didn't you?" There was a gleam of quizzical humour in his eyes, and Stephen found himself asking, as so many others had asked before him, "Is the man serious, or is he making a joke? Does he wish me to receive this as a confidence or with pretended hilarity?"

"Something about telling the crowd?" he answered. "Yes, I heard it."

"We were having a tussle," continued Vetch lightly. "The fat's in the fire at last."

Stephen laughed drily. "Then I hope you will keep it there."

"You mean you would like an explosion?"

"I mean that anything that could clear up the situation would be welcome."

At this Vetch turned to Darrow and observed whimsically: "He doesn't seem to fancy our friend Gershom."

Darrow looked round with a smile from the window. "Well, there are times when I don't myself," he confessed in his deliberate way. "Of all bullies, your political bully is the worst. But he is not bad, he is just foolish. His heart is set on this general strike, and he can't set his heart on anything without losing his head." As the old man turned his face back to the sunset, the strong bold lines of his profile reminded Stephen of the impassive features of an Egyptian carving. Was this the vague resemblance that had baffled him ever since he had entered the room?

"To tell the truth," said Stephen frankly, "the fellow strikes me as particularly obnoxious; but I may be prejudiced."

"I think you are," responded Vetch. "I owe Gershom a great deal. He was useful to me once, and I recognize my debt; but the fact remains, that I don't owe him or any other man the shirt on my back!" As he met Stephen's glance he lowered his voice, and added in a tone of boyish candour that was very winning in spite of his colloquial speech: "I like your face, and I'm going to talk frankly to you."

"You may," replied the young man impulsively. It was impossible to resist the human quality, the confiding friendliness, of the Governor's manner. The chances were, he said to himself, that the whole thing was mere burlesque, one of the successful sleight-of-hand tricks of the charlatan. In theory he was still sceptical of Gideon Vetch, yet he had already surrendered every faculty except that impish heretical spectator that dwelt apart in his brain.

"You want something of course, every last one of you, even Darrow," resumed Vetch, with his charming smile. "I can safely assume that if you didn't want something, you wouldn't be here. Good Lord, if a man so much as bows to me in the street without asking a favour, I begin to think that he is either a half-wit or a ne'er-do-well."

"At least I want nothing for myself," laughed Stephen, a trifle sharply.

"Nor does Darrow, God bless him!—nor, for the matter of that, does Judge Page. I've got nothing to give you that you would take, and so you are wishing Berkeley on me for the penitentiary board." The gleam of humour was still in his eyes and the drollery in his expressive voice.

"We are seeking this for the penitentiary, not for Mr. Berkeley. He is the man you need."

"For a hobby, yes. That's all right, of course, but, my dear young sir, you can't run the business of a state as a hobby any more than you can administer it as a philanthropy."

"Perhaps. But can you administer it successfully without philanthropy?"

At this Darrow turned with a smile. "Can't you see that he is fooling with you?" he said. "Prison reform is one of his fads—that and the rights of the indigent aged and orphans and animals and any other mortal thing that has to live on what he calls the stones of charity. He knows why you came, and he likes you the better because of it."

"Gershom and I have had a word or two about that board," resumed Vetch; and as he stopped to strike a match, Stephen noticed that the cigar he held was of a cheap and strong brand. "Between the Legislature on one side and that bunch of indefatigable lobbyists on the other, I shan't be permitted presently to appoint the darkey who waits on my table." The cigar was lighted now, and to Stephen's sensitive nostrils the air was rapidly becoming too heavy. Oddly enough, he reflected, nothing had "placed" Vetch so forcibly as the brand of that cigar.

"That," observed the young man briefly, "is the penalty of political office."

"So long as I was merely a dark horse," said Vetch, "I was afraid to pull on the curb; but now that I've won the race, they'll find that I'm my own master. Won't you smoke?"

Stephen shook his head. "Not now. There is always the next race to be considered, I suppose."

The Governor's rugged, rather heavy features hardened suddenly until they looked as if they were formed of some more durable substance than flesh. Under the thick sandy hair his eyes lost their blueness and appeared as gray as Stephen had once thought them. "Have you ever heard," he asked with biting sarcasm, "that I was easy to manage and that that was why certain people put me in office?"

"Yes, I've heard that." As the young man replied, Darrow turned from the window and looked at him attentively.

"And may I ask what else you have heard?" inquired Vetch.

Stephen laughed and coloured. "I've heard that it was becoming difficult to do anything with you."

"Because I have the people behind me?"

"Well, because you think you have the people behind you."

Vetch leaned forward with a confiding movement, and flicked the ashes of his objectionable cigar on the immaculate sleeve of Stephen's coat. Yet, even in the careless gesture, a breath of freshness and health, of mental and physical cleanliness, seemed to emanate like an invigorating breeze from his robust spirit. "Of course I admit," he said thoughtfully, "that we are obliged to have some kind of party organization to begin with. There must be method and policy and all sorts of team-pulling and log-rolling until you get started. That kind of thing is useful just as far as it helps and not a step farther. I won my fight as an Independent—and, by George, I'll remain an Independent! I've got the upper hand now. I am strong enough to stand alone. If any party on earth thinks it can manage me—well, I'll show it that I can be my own party!"

Was it true, what they said of him,—that success had already gone to his head, that the best way to get rid of him was to give him a political rope with which he might hang himself? Or was there some solid foundation of fact in his blustering assumption of power? Was he actually a force that would have to be reckoned with in the future? From a mass of confused impressions Stephen could gather nothing clearly except his inability to form a definite opinion of the man. On the one side was the weight of prejudice, of preconceived judgment; and on the other he could place only the effect of a personal magnetism which was as real and as intangible as light or colour.

"Do you think that is possible?" he asked sceptically. "In a democracy like ours is any man so strong that he can stand alone?"

"Well, of course he is not alone as long as he has the support of the majority."

"You may have this support—I neither affirm nor deny it—but upon what does it rest? What do you offer the people that is better than the principles or the promises of the old parties? I heard you speak once, but you did not answer this question—to my mind the only question that is vital. You talked a great deal about humanizing industry—a vague phrase which might mean anything or nothing, since humanity covers all the vices as well as all the virtues of the race. Benham could use that phrase as oratorically as you do, for it rolls easily off the tongue and commits one to nothing."

Vetch's face lost suddenly its rigid gravity, as if he had suffered a rush of energy to the brain. His eyes became blue again, and as keen as the blade of a knife.

"I believe, and the people who are with me believe, that I can make something out of the muddle if I am given a chance," he replied. "Oh, I know that the reactionaries are in the saddle now—that they have been ever since they had the war as an excuse to mount! But I know also that you can no more drive out by law the spirit of liberalism from the American mind than you can drive out nature with a pitchfork. For a little while you may think you have got the better of it; but it will crop out in spite of you. Now, I am a part of returning nature, of the inevitable rebound toward the spirit of liberalism. In the thought of the people who voted for me, I stand for the indestructible common sense of the American mind. I am one of the first signs of the new times."

"And you believe that you prove this," asked Stephen frankly, "by turning over your power of appointment to a group of self-interested politicians? You show your ability to govern by evading the first requirement of good government—that there should be honest and able men in control of public offices?"

A flicker came and went in the blue eyes. "I told you the other day," answered Vetch in a low voice, "that I used the tools at my command, and I tell you now that I am sometimes forced to use rotten ones. People say that I am an opportunist; but who has ever discovered any other policy that deals with life so completely? They say also that I am without public conscience—another name for opinions that have crystallized into prejudices. The truth is that the end for which I work seems to me vastly more important than the methods I use or the instruments that I employ."

It was the familiar chicanery of the popular leader, the justification of expediency, that Stephen had always found most repugnant as a political theory; and while he drew back, repelled and disgusted, he asked himself if the national conscience, the moral integrity of the race, was in the keeping of demagogues?

"I am curious to know," he remarked after a moment, "how you are able to justify the sacrifice of what I regard as common honesty in public affairs?"

To his surprise, instead of answering directly, Vetch put a personal question. "Then you think I am not honest? Darrow wouldn't agree with you."

At this Darrow turned from the window. "Perhaps he doesn't mean what we do," he said quietly. "I've seen honest men that I knew ought to have been in prison."

"I am speaking of course of the doctrines you advocate," answered Stephen. "That seems to me to be, in the jargon of the reformer, somewhat unethical. Can you, I question, achieve anything important enough to compensate for what you sacrifice?"

Darrow turned again with his dry laugh. "You speak as if public honesty, by which I reckon you mean clean elections and unsold offices, were something we had actually possessed," he said.

"Oh, I know the old proceedings were bad enough," replied Stephen, "but I am trying to find out how the Governor expects to make them better. You understand that I am trying merely to see your point of view—to get at the roots of your theory of government. What you tell me will never find its way to the public."

"I realize that," said Vetch gravely, and he added with a quick glance at Darrow: "Do you think if I were not honest that I'd talk to you so frankly?"

Stephen smiled. "It might be. The political coat has many colours. I don't mean to be rude, you know, but one good turn in frankness deserves another."

"I like you the better for that." A cluster of fine lines appeared at the corners of the Governor's laughing eyes. "But, once for all, you must get rid of your false impressions of me, and see me as a fact, not as a kind of social scarecrow. First of all, you think I am an extremist—well, I am not. I am merely a man of facts. I see the world as it is and you see it as you wish it to be—that is the difference between us. I have lived with realities; I know actual conditions—and you know only what you have been told or imagined. Oh, I admit that you saw an edge of reality in the trenches; but, after all, life in the trenches was as abnormal as life in the movies. Each represents an extreme. What you know of average human life, of hunger and pain and labour, could be learned in an academy for young ladies. Yet you imagine that it is experience! You have lived so long in your lily-pond, with the rushes hemming you in, that when you hear all the frogs croaking on the same note, you think complacently, 'that is the voice of the people'. Why, I tell you, man, you are so ignorant of the conditions in this very town, that Darrow could take you out and show you things that would make you feel like Robinson Crusoe!"

Stephen turned eagerly to the old man at the window. "I am ready for you, Mr. Darrow."

Darrow nodded with a reluctant assent. "I've got my Ford around the corner," he answered. "If you would like to go up town with me I can show you a thing or two that might interest you."

"You mean the conditions in this city?"

"The conditions in all cities. They differ only in the name of the town."

"He will show you a little—just a little—of what getting back to peace means," said Vetch earnestly. "By next winter it will be worse, of course, but it has already begun. The rate of wages is falling—for wages always fall first—and the cost of living is still as high as in war times. Rents are going up every day, Darrow can tell you more about the speculation in rents than I can, and the housing of the working-classes, both white and coloured, is growing worse. We shall soon be facing the most serious problem of the system under which we live, the problem of the unemployed. Already it is beginning. Darrow was telling me just before you came in of a man in one of the houses where he has been working—a returned soldier too—who has walked the streets for weeks in search of work. He has been unable to pay his rent, so of course he is obliged to move somewhere, if he can find a place to move into. Oh, I realize perfectly what you are going to say! The brief prosperity of the war still envelops the labouring man in your mind; and you are preparing to remind me of the lace curtains and victrolas of yesterday. Yes, I admit that lace curtains and victrolas are not necessities. It was a case where nature cropped out in the wrong spot. Even the working-man may have suppressed desires, you see, and lace curtains and victrolas may stand not only for the improvidence of the poor, but for the neurasthenic yearnings of the rich. Talk about the economy of Nature! Why, nothing in the universe, not even the civilization of man, has ever equalled her indecent prodigality!"

As the man's words poured out in his rich, deep voice, Stephen stared at him in a silence which reminded him humorously of the pause in church before the sermon began. Was this the reason of Vetch's influence and authority—this flow of ideas, as from a horn of plenty, that left the listener both charmed and bewildered?

"I admit it all," rejoined the young man, "except that you have discovered the remedy."

The Governor laughed and settled back in his big leather-covered chair. "You think that I blow my own

horn too loudly," he continued, "but, after all, who knows how to blow it half so well as I do? For the same reason some over-sensitive nerve of yours may wince at my behaviour at times, my lack of dignity or reserve; but have I ever lost a vote—I put it to you plainly—or the shadow of a vote by an occasional resort to spectacular advertising? It pays to advertise in politics, we all know that!—but it was honest advertising since I never failed to deliver the goods. I started out to prove my strength and to flay my opponents, and you tell me, you group of black-coated conservatives, that I make myself ridiculous because I strike an attitude. The people laughed—but, by George, they laughed with me! Oh, I know you think that I am wandering from my point; but I haven't forgotten your question, and I am going to answer it, if you will give me time. You ask me what I believe—"

"If you could tell me in few words and plainly."

"Well, first of all, I make no pretence. I do not promise to work miracles. I do not, like your conventional candidates, talk in platitudes. I do not undertake to achieve a regeneration of politics out of unregenerate human nature. As long as we have cherries we shall have blackbirds; as long as we have politics we shall have politicians. I acknowledge the good and the bad, and all that I promise is to get as good results as I can out of the mixture. Definitely I stand for a progressive reorganization of society—for a fairer social order and a practical system of cooperative industry, the only logical method of increasing production without reducing the labourer to the old disorganized slavery. I believe in the trite formula we workers preach—in the eight-hour day, the old age pension, which is only the inevitable step from the mother's pension, the gradual nationalization of mines and railroads. I believe in these things which are the commonplace of to-morrow; but it is not because of my beliefs that the people follow me. It is something bigger than all this that catches the crowd. What the people see in me is not the man who believes, but the man who acts. I stand to them not for words—though you and Benham think I've made my way by a gift of tongue—but for deeds—for things performed as well as planned. Other men can tell them what they want. My hold over them is that they feel I can get them what they want—a very big difference! Oh, I use words, I know, like the rest. I have read a few books, and I can talk as well as any political parrot of the lot when I get started. But the words I use are living words, if you notice them. I talk always about the things that I can do, never about the things that I think. Well, that is my secret—my pose, if you prefer—to present my argument to the crowd as an act, not as an idea. There are plenty of imposing statues standing around. What they see in me is a human being like themselves, one who wants what they want, and who will fight to the last ditch to get it for them."

It was plausible; it sounded convincing and logical; and yet, even while Stephen responded to the Governor's personal touch, some obstinate fibre of race or inflexible bent of judgment, refused to surrender. Vetch was probably sincere—it was fairer to give him the benefit of the doubt—but on the surface at least he was parading a spectacular pose. The rôle of the Friend of the People has seldom been absent from the drama of history.

With a glance at the window, where twilight was falling, Stephen rose, and held out his hand. "I shall remember your frankness," he said, "the next time I hear you speak. That, I hope, will be soon."

"And you will wait until then to be converted?"

"I shall wait until then to be wholly convinced."

"Well, Darrow may have better results. You go with Darrow?"

"If he will take me?" The deference with which the old man had inspired the Governor showed in Stephen's manner. "I shall be grateful for a lift on the way home."

Darrow had risen also; and after shaking hands with Vetch, he looked back at the younger man from the doorway. "I'll have my Ford round here in five minutes. Meet me at the nearest gate."

He went out hurriedly; and as Stephen followed him, after the delay of a few minutes, he found himself face to face with Patty, who was coming from "the blue room" on the opposite side of the hall.

"I hope you got what you came for," she said gaily.

"I came for nothing," he retorted lightly, "and I'm sure I got it."

"Well, that won't matter so much since it wasn't for yourself," she mocked. "Nobody ever wants anything for himself in politics. Father could tell you that."

"He told me a good many things—but not that."

"Did he tell you," she inquired daringly, "why he is falling out with Julius Gershom?"

"Is he falling out with him?"

"Didn't you see it—and hear it—when you came in?"

"I suspected as much; but after all it was none of my business."

"And you confine your curiosity to your own business?"

"Not entirely," he answered, and wondered if she were experimenting with the letter "C". "For instance I am curious about you."

Her eyes challenged him with their old defiance. "And I am certainly not your business."

"I admit that you are not—but that does not decrease my curiosity."

For a moment her smile grew wistful. "And what, I wonder," she asked, with the faintest quiver of her cherry-coloured lips, "would you like to know?"

"Oh, everything!" he replied unhesitatingly. There was no longer in his mind the slightest wish to avoid the approaching flirtation. On the contrary, he felt he should welcome it, if she would only continue to look like this. She was not beautiful—yet he realized that she did not need beauty when she could play so easily with a look or a smile on the heartstrings. A rush of tenderness overwhelmed his reserve at the very instant when her lashes trembled and drooped, and she murmured in a whisper that enchanted him: "Oh, but everything is too little." Though it was only the old lure of youth and sex, he felt that it was as divinely fresh and wonderful as first love.

"Is it too little?" he asked, and his voice sounded so far off that it was faint in his ears.

She raised her lashes and gave him a glance charged with meaning. "That depends," she answered, and suddenly, without warning, she passed to the lightest and gayest of tones. "Everything depends on something else, doesn't it? Now Father is coming out, and I must run upstairs and dress."

It was a dismissal, he knew, and yet he hesitated. "May I come again soon?" he asked, and held out his hand.

To his surprise Patty greeted his question with a laugh. "Do you really like politics so much?" she

retorted; and fled lightly toward the staircase beyond the library.



CHAPTER XII

A JOURNEY INTO MEAN STREETS

Darrow's little car was waiting before the entrance; and as soon as Stephen had taken his place by the old man's side, they shot forward into the smoky twilight. A policeman, standing in the circle of electric light at the corner, held up a warning hand; and then, as he recognized Darrow, he nodded with a smile, and there stole into his face the look of deference which Stephen had seen in the Governor's eyes. Glancing up at the sombre ruggedness of the profile beside him, the younger man asked himself curiously from what source of character or Circumstance this old man had derived his strange impressiveness and his Authority over men. With his gaunt length, his wide curving nostrils, his thick majestic lips, he looked, as Stephen had first seen him, a rock-hewn Pharaoh of a man. An unusual type to survive in modern America—republican and imperial! Did he represent, this carpenter who was also a politician, the political despotism of the worker—the crook and scourge of the labourer's power?

Suddenly, while he wondered, Darrow turned toward him. "What do you think of the Governor?"

"I hardly know," answered Stephen thoughtfully. "It is too soon to ask; but I think he is honest."

"He is more than honest," rejoined the other quietly. "He is human. He understands. He belongs to us."

"Belongs?" Stephen repeated the word with a note of interrogation.

Very slowly the old man answered. "I mean that he is more than anything that he says or thinks. He is bigger than his message."

"I suppose he stands for a great deal?"

"A man stands only for what he is, not for an inch more, not for an inch less. The trouble with all the leaders we've had in the past was that their thought outstripped their characters. They believed more than they were and they broke down under it. I'm an old man now. I've watched them come and go."

"You think that Vetch is a great leader?"

"I think he is a great leader, but I don't mean that I think he will ever lead us anywhere."

"You feel that he is losing his grip on the crowd?"

Up from Main Street the workers were pouring out of the factories; and while they moved in a dark stream through the light and shadow on the pavement, the faces flowed past Stephen with a pallid intensity which made him think of dead flowers drifting on a river. In all those faces how little life there seemed, how little individuality and animation!

"When I was a small kid I used to live by the seashore," said the old man presently in his dry, emphatic tones. "Many is the time I've stood and watched the tide coming in, and I never once saw it come in that it didn't go out again."

"Then you believe that the tide is turning against Vetch?"

For a minute, while they sped on in the obscurity of a side street, Darrow meditated.

"No, sir, I ain't saying that much—not yet. But the way I calculate is something like this. Vetch came in on a wave of popular emotion, and a wave of popular emotion is just about like the tide of the sea. It may rise a certain distance, but it can't stand still, and it can't go any farther. It's obliged to turn; and when it turns, it's pretty sure to bring back a good deal that it carried with it. A crowd impulse—as they call it in the pulpit and on the platform—is a dangerous thing. It's dangerous because you can't count on it."

"It looks to me as if Vetch counted upon it a little too much."

"That's his nature. He was born on the sunny side of the street. He thinks because he sees the way to help people that they want to be helped. I've been mixed up in politics now for fifty years, and in the labour movement, as they say, ever since it began to move in the South—and I've found out that people don't really want to be helped—they want to be fooled. Vetch offers 'em facts, and all the time it ain't facts they're wanting, but names."

"I see," assented Stephen. "Names that they can repeat over and over until they get at last to believe that they are things. Long reverberating names like Democratic or Republican—"

Darrow laughed grimly. "That's right, sir, that's the way I've worked it out in my mind. The crowd will come a little way after a fact; but in the end it gets tired because the fact won't work magic, like that conjure-stuff of the darkeys, and then it turns and goes back to the old names that mean nothing. Only when a crowd moves all together it's dangerous because it's like the flood-tide and ebb-tide of the sea."

"And the most irritating part of it," said Stephen, with an insight which had sometimes visited him in the trenches, "is that it gets what it deserves because it can always have whatever it wants—even the truth and honest government."

They were passing rows of narrow old-fashioned tenement-houses, standing, like crumbling walls of red brick, behind sagging wooden fences; and suddenly, while Stephen's eyes were on the lights that came and went so fitfully in the basement dining-rooms, Darrow stopped the car in the gutter of cobblestones, and motioned in silence toward the pavement. As Stephen got out, he glanced vaguely round him at the strange neighbourhood.

"Where are we?"

"North of Marshall Street. A quarter which was once very prosperous; but that was before your day. This is one of several rows of old houses, well-built in their time, better built, indeed, than any houses we're putting up now; but their day is over. The cost of repairing them would be so great that the agent is deliberately letting the property run down in the hope that this part of the street will soon be turned over to negroes. The negroes are so crowded in their quarter that they are obliged to expand, and when they do, this investment will yield a still higher interest. Coloured tenants stand crowding better than white ones, and they will pay a better rent for worse housing. As it is the rent of these houses has doubled since the beginning of the war."

"Good God!" said Stephen. "Do we stop here?"

"I want you to see Canning, the man the Governor told you about. He can't pay his rent, which was raised last Saturday, and the family is moving to-morrow."

"He ought to be paid for living here. Where will he go?"

"Oh, people can always find a worse place, if they look long enough. Canning was in the war, by the way. He's got some nervous trouble—not crazy enough to be taken care of—just on edge and unstrung. The war used him up, I reckon, and anxiety and undernourishment used up his wife and children. It all seems to have come out in the baby—queerest little kid you ever saw—born about a year ago. Mighty funny—ain't it?—the way we let children just a few squares away from us grow up pinched, half-starved, undersized, uneducated, and as little moral as the gutters can make 'em, and all the time we're parading and begging and even collecting the pennies out of orphan asylums, for the sake of the children on the other side of the world. But it's a queer thing, charity, however you happen to look at it. My father used to say—and he had as much sense as any man I ever met—that charity is the greatest traveller under the sun; and even if it begins at home it ain't ever content to stop there over night."

Standing there in the dim street, before the silent rows of bleak houses with their tattered window-shades and their fitful lights, Stephen stared wonderingly at the gaunt shape of the man before him. For the first time he was brought face to face with the other half of his world, with the half of the world where poverty and toil are stark realities. This was the way men like Darrow were thinking, men perhaps like Gideon Vetch! These men saw poverty not as a sentimental term, but as a human experience. They knew, while he and his kind only imagined. With a sensation as acute as physical nausea, a sensation that the thought of the Germans used to bring when he was in the trenches, there swept over him a memory of the social hysteria which had followed, like a mental pestilence or famine, in the track of the war. The moral platitudes, the sentimental philanthropy, and the hypocritical command of conscience to put all the world, except our own cellars, in order, where were these impulses now in a time which had gone mad with the hatred of work and the craving for pleasure? Yet he had once thought that he was returning to a world which could be rebuilt on a foundation of justice, and it was this lost belief, he knew, which had made him bitter in spirit and unfair in judgment.

The gate swung back with a grating noise, and they entered the yard, and walked over scattered papers and empty bottles to the narrow flight of brick steps, which led from the ground to the area in front of the basement dining-room. As Stephen descended by the light from the dust-laden window, a chill dampness rose like a fog from the earth below and filled his nostrils and mouth and throat—a dampness which choked him like the effluvium of poverty. Glancing in from the area a moment later, he saw a scantily furnished room, heated by an open stove and lighted by a single jet of gas, which flickered in a thin greenish flame. In the centre of the room a pine table, without a cloth, was laid for supper, and three small children, in chairs drawn close together, were impatiently drumming with tin spoons on the wood. A haggard woman, in a soiled blue gingham dress, was bringing a pot of coffee from the adjoining room; and in one corner, on a sofa from which the stuffing sagged in bunches, a man sat staring vacantly at a hole in the rag carpet. Tied in a high chair, which stood apart as if it were the pedestal of an idol, a baby, with the smooth unlined face not of an infant, but of a philosopher, was mutely surveying the scene.

More than anything else in the room, more even than the sodden hopelessness of the man's expression, the hopelessness of neurasthenia, this baby, tied with a strip of gingham in his high chair, arrested and held Stephen's attention. Very pallid, with the pallor not of flesh but of an ivory image, with hair as thin and white as the hair of an old man, and eyes that were as opaque as blue marbles, the baby sat there, with its look of stoical philosophy and superhuman experience. And this look said as plainly as if the tiny mute lips had opened and spoken aloud: "I am tired before I begin. I am old before I begin. I am ending before I begin."

Darrow knocked at the door, and the woman opened it with the coffee-pot still in her hand.

"So you've come back," she said in a voice that was without surprise and without gratitude.

"I came back to ask what you've done about a place. This gentleman is with me. You don't mind his stepping inside a minute?"

"Oh, no, I don't mind. I don't mind anything." She drew back as she answered, and the two men entered the room and stood gazing at the stove with the look of embarrassment which the sight of poverty brings to the faces of the well-to-do.

"When are you moving?" asked Darrow, withdrawing his gaze from the glimmer of the embers in the stove, and fixing it on the steam that issued from the coffee-pot.

"In the morning. We've found a cheaper place, though with rent going up every week, it looks as if we'd soon have nowhere worse to move to, unless it's gaol alley." Her tone dripped bitterness, and the lines of her pale lips settled into an expression of scornful resignation.

Without replying to her words, Darrow nodded in the direction of the young man, who had never looked up, but sat in the same rigid attitude, with his vacant eyes staring at the hole in the carpet.

"Any better?"

"How can he be better," returned the woman grimly, "when all he does is to walk the streets until he's fit to drop, and then drag himself home and sit there like that for hours, too worn out even to lift his eyes from the floor. This is the last coffee I've got. I've been saving it since Christmas, but I made it for him because he seems more down than usual to-night." Then a nervous spasm shook her thin figure, and she added in a fierce whisper: "He's sick, that's the matter with him. He ain't sick enough to be in a government hospital, but he'd be better off if he was. Even when he gets work he ain't able to stick to it. The folks that hire him don't have any patience. As long as he was over yonder in France it looked as if every woman in America was knitting for him; and now since he's back here he can't get a job to keep him and the children alive."

"How have you fed the children?"

"On what I could get cheapest. You see how sickly and peaked they look, and it's been awful damp in these rooms sometimes. The doctor says he ain't sick; it ain't his body, it's his mind. He says he's had a kind of horror inside of him ever since he came home. He's turned against everything he used to do, and even everything he used to believe in."

"That's hell!" exclaimed Stephen suddenly; and at her surprised glance, he added, "I've been there and I know. Nerves, they say, but just as real as your skin." He looked away from her to the man on the sofa. "To have *that*, and be in poverty!" Turning away from the father, his glance met the calm eyes of the baby fixed on him with that gaze which was as old and as pitiless as philosophy.

"Ma, may I help myself?" screamed one of the children, drumming loudly on the table. "I'd rather have bread and molasses!" cried another; and "Oh, Ma, when we move to-morrow will you let me take the kitten I found?"

"Well, I've talked to the Governor," said Darrow, in his level voice which sounded to Stephen so unemotional, "and I think we can find a job for your husband."

Suddenly the man on the sofa looked up. "I voted against him," he whispered angrily.

Darrow laughed shortly. "You don't know the Governor if you think he'd hold that against you," he replied.

"But for that little weakness of his he might not be a political problem."

"That's the way he goes on," remarked the woman despairingly. "Always saying things straight out that other people would keep back. He don't care what happens, that's the whole truth of it. He don't care about anything on earth, not even his tobacco."

"Life!" thought Stephen, with a dull pain in his heart. "That's what life is!" And the old familiar feeling of suffocation, of distaste for everything that he had ever felt or thought or believed, smothered him with the dryness of dust. Going quickly over to the sofa, he laid his hand on the man's shoulder, and spoke in a high ringing voice which he tried to make cheerful. "It will pass, old fellow," he said, and could have laughed aloud at the insincerity of his tone. "I know because I've been there." And he added cynically, as a kind of sacrifice on the altar of truth: "Everything will pass if you only wait long enough."

The man started and looked up. With an air of surprise he glanced round the dingy room, at his wife, at the whimpering children, at the dispassionate baby enthroned in his high chair, and at the majestic profile of Darrow. "It's the rottenness of the whole blooming show," he said doggedly. "It ain't just the hole I'm in. I could put up with that if it wasn't for the rottenness of it all."

"I know," replied Stephen quietly. "There are times when the show does look rotten, but we're all in it together."

Then, because he felt that he could stand it no longer, he turned abruptly, and went out into the dusk of the area. In a few minutes Darrow joined him, and in silence the two men felt their way up the brick steps to the bare ground of the front yard.

"I don't know what I ought to do, but I've got to do something," said Stephen, when he had opened the gate and passed through to the pavement where the car waited. Lifting his sensitive young face, he stared up at the row of decaying tenements. "What places for homes!"

For a moment Darrow looked at him without speaking; and then he answered in a voice which sounded as impersonal as the distant rumble of street cars. "I thought you might be interested because these houses, these and the other rows on the next block or two, are part of the Culpeper estate."

"The Culpeper estate?" repeated Stephen in an expressionless tone; and raising his eyes again he looked up at the bleak houses. In that instant, it seemed to him that he was seeing, not the sharp projection of the roofs against the ashen sky, but a long line of pleasant and prosperous generations. Beyond him stood his father, beyond his father stood his grandfather, beyond the tranquil succession of his grandfathers stood—what? Civilization? Humanity?

"Do you mean," he asked quietly, "that we—our family—own these houses?"

"The whole block, and the next, and the next. It is the Culpeper estate. You've never seen 'em before, I reckon. I doubt even if your father has ever seen 'em. The agent attends to all this, and if the agent didn't see that the rents were as high as people would pay, or were paying in the next places, he would be soon out of a job. I'm not blaming him, you know. I've got a son-in-law who is a real estate agent. It's just one of the cases where it's nobody's fault, and everybody's."

Without replying, Stephen turned away and got into the car. He felt bruised and sick, and he wanted to be alone, to think things out by himself in the darkness. "This is only one instance," he thought, as they started down the dim street toward the white blaze of the business quarter in the distance. "Only one out of millions! In every city. All over the world it is the same. Wherever there is wealth it casts its shadow of

poverty."

"I used to bother about it too when I was young," said the old man at his side. "I used to feel, I reckon, pretty near as bad as you are feeling now, but it don't last. When you get on a bit you'll sort of settle down and begin to work it out. That's life. Yes, but it ain't the whole of life. It ain't even the biggest part. Those folks we've been to see have had their good times like the rest of us, only we saw 'em just now when they were in the midst of a bad time. Life ain't confined to a ditch any more than it is to what Gideon calls a lily-pond. Keep your balance, that's the main thing. Whatever else you lose, you must be sure to keep your balance, or you'll be in danger of going overboard."

"Do you mean that there is no remedy for conditions like this?"

The old man pondered his answer so long that Stephen thought he had either given up or forgotten the question.

"The only remedy I have ever been able to see is to work not on conditions, but on human nature," he replied. "Improve human nature, and then you will improve the conditions in which it lives. Improve the rich as well as the poor. Teach 'em to be human beings, not machines, to one another—that's Gideon's idea, you know,—humanize—Christianize, if you like it better—civilize. It's a pretty hopeless problem—the individual case—charity is all rotten from root to branch. If you could see the harm that's been done by mistaken charity! Why, look at my friend, Mrs. Page, now. She tried to work it out that way, and what came of it except more rottenness? And yet until the State looks after the unemployed, there is obliged to be charity."

"Do you mean Mrs. Kent Page?" asked Stephen in surprise, and remembered that his mother had once accused Corinna of trying to "undermine society."

"She is one of my best friends," answered the old man, with mingled pride and affection. "I go to see her in her shop every now and then, and I reckon she values my advice about her affairs as much as anybody's. Well, when she came home from Europe she found that she owned a row of tenements like this one, and her agent was profiteering in rents like most of the others. I wish you could have seen her when she discovered it. Splendid? Well, I reckon she's the most splendid thing this old world has ever had on top of it! She went straight to work and had those houses made into modern apartments—bathrooms, steam heat, and back yards full of trees and grass and flowers, just like Monroe Park, only better. The rent wasn't raised either! She put that back just where it was before the war; and then she let the whole row to the tenants for two years. You never saw anything like the interest she took in that speculation—you'd have thought to hear her that she was setting out to bring what the preachers call the social millennium."

"She never mentioned it to me," said Stephen, with interest. "How did it turn out?"

Darrow threw back his great head with a laugh. "I don't reckon she did mention it, bless her! It don't bear mentioning even now. Why, when she went back last fall to see those houses, she found that the tenants had all moved into dirty little places in the alley, and were letting out the apartments, at five times the rent they paid, to other tenants. They were doing a little special profiteering of their own—and, bless your life, there wasn't so much as a blade of grass left in the yards, even the trees had been cut down and sold for wood. And you say she never mentioned it?"

"How could she? But, after all, I suppose the question goes deeper than that?"

"The question," replied Darrow, with an energy that shook the little car, "goes as deep as hell!"

They were driving rapidly up Grace Street; and as they shot past the club on the corner, Stephen noticed the serene aristocratic profile of Peyton at one of the brilliantly lighted windows. A little farther on, when they turned into Franklin Street, he saw that the old print shop was in darkness, except for the lights in the rooms of the caretaker and the lodgers in the upper storey. Corinna had gone home, he supposed, and he wondered idly if she were with Benham? As they went on they passed the house of the Blairs, where he caught a glimpse of Margaret on the porch, parting from the handsome young clergyman. The sight stirred him strangely, as if the memory of his dead life had been awakened by a scent or a faded flower in a book. How different he was from the boy Margaret had known in that primitive period which people defined as "before the war"! It was as if he had belonged then to some primary emotional stratum of life. All the complex forces, the play and interplay of desire and repulsion, of energy and lassitude, had developed in the last two or three years.

On either side, softly shaded lights were shining from the windows, and women, in rich furs, were getting out of luxurious cars. It was the world that Stephen knew; life moulded in sculptural forms and encrusted with the delicate patina of tradition. Here was all that he had once loved; yet he realized suddenly, with a sensation of loneliness, that here, not in the mean streets, he felt, as Vetch would have said, "stranger than Robinson Crusoe." Something was missing. Something was lost that he could never recover. Was it Vetch, after all, who had shown him the way out, who had knocked a hole in the wall?

When Darrow stopped the car before the Culpeper gate, Stephen turned and held out his hand. "Thank you," he said simply. "I shall see you again."

Crossing the pavement with a rapid step, he entered the gate and ran up the steps to the porch between the white columns. As he passed into the richly tempered glow of the hall, it seemed to him that an invisible force, an aroma of the past, drifted out of the old house and enveloped him like the sweetness of flowers. He was caught again, he was submerged, in the spirit of race.

A little later, when he was passing his mother's door, he glanced in and saw her standing before the mirror in her evening gown of gray silk, with the foam-like ruffles of rose-point on her bosom and at her elbows, which were still round and young looking.

Catching his reflection in the glass, she called out in her crisp tones, "My dear boy, where on earth have you been? You know we promised to dine with Julia, and then to go to those tableaux for the benefit of the children in Vienna. She has worked so hard to make them a success that she would never forgive us if we stayed away."

"Yes, I know. I had forgotten," he replied. Why was he always forgetting? Then he asked impulsively, while pity burned at white heat within him, "Is Father here? I want to speak to him before we go out."

"He came in an hour ago," said Mrs. Culpeper; and as she spoke the mild leonine countenance of Mr. Culpeper, vaguely resembling some playful and domesticated king of beasts, appeared at the door of his dressing-room.

"Do you wish to see me, my boy?" he asked affectionately. "We were just wondering if you had forgotten and stayed at the club."

"No, I wasn't at the club. I've been looking over the Culpeper estate—a part of it." Stephen's voice trembled in spite of the effort he made to keep it impersonal and indifferent. "Father, do you know anything about those old houses beyond Marshall Street?"

It was the peculiar distinction of Mr. Culpeper that, in a community where everybody talked all the time, he had been able to form the habit of silence. While his acquaintances continually vociferated opinions, scandals, experiences, or anecdotes, he remained imperturbably reticent and subdued. All that he responded now to Stephen's outburst was, "Has anybody offered to buy them?"

"Why, what in the world!" exclaimed Mrs. Culpeper, who was neither reticent nor subdued. From the depths of the mirror her bright brown eyes gazed back at her husband, while she fastened a cameo pin, containing the head of Minerva framed in pearls, in the rose-point on her bosom.

"To buy them?" repeated Stephen. "Why, they are horrors, Father, to live in—crumbling, insanitary horrors! And yet the rent has been doubled in the last two or three years."

From the mirror his mother's face looked back at him, so small and clear and delicately tinted that it seemed to him merely an exaggerated copy of the cameo on her bosom, "I hope that means we shall have a little more to live on next year," she said reflectively, while the expression that Mary Byrd impertinently called her "economic look" appeared in her eyes. "What with the high cost of everything, and the low interest on Liberty Bonds, and the innumerable relief organizations to which one is simply forced to contribute, it has been almost impossible to make two ends meet. Poor Mary Byrd hasn't been able to give a single party this winter."

Before Stephen's gaze there passed a vision of the dingy basement room, the embittered face of the woman, the sickly tow-headed children, the man who could not lift his eyes from the hole in the carpet, and the baby with that look of having been born not young, but old, the look of pre-natal experience and disillusionment. And he heard Darrow's dry voice complaining because the well-to-do classes still gave to starving orphans across the world. After all, what was there to choose between the near-sighted and the far-sighted social vision? How narrow they both appeared and how crooked! Darrow would let all the children of Europe starve as long as their crying did not interfere with the aims of his Federation of Labour; Stephen's sister Julia, with her instinct for imitation and her remote sense of responsibility, would step over the poverty at her door, while she held out her hands, in the latest fashionable gesture of philanthropy, to the orphans in France or Vienna. And beside them both his mother, who because of her constitutional inability to see anything beyond the family, perceived merely the fact that her own child would be disappointed if the tableaux for the benefit of starving children somewhere did not go off well. The question, he realized, was not which one of the three points of view was the most admirable, but simply which one served best the ultimate purpose of the race. Selfishness seemed to have as little as altruism to do with the problem. Was Corinna, who had failed in philanthropy and chosen beauty, the only wise one among them?

"But children are living in these houses," he said, "and not only living—they are forced to move out because the rent has become so high that they must find a worse place. I've just seen it with my own eyes. Three sickly little children and a dreadful baby—a baby that knows everything already."

A quiver of pain crossed Mr. Culpeper's handsome features; but he said only, "I will speak to the agent."

"Won't you look into it yourself?" asked Stephen hopelessly. "The agent is only the agent—but the responsibility is yours—ours. Of course the agent doesn't want to make expensive repairs when he can get as high rent without doing so. He knows that people are obliged to have a roof over them; and if the roofs are too bad for white people, he can always find negroes to pay anything that he asks. Can't you see what it is in reality—that we are preying on the helpless?"

Turning suddenly from the mirror, Mrs. Culpeper crossed the floor hastily and put her arms about her

son's shoulders. Her face was very motherly and there was a compassionate light in her eyes, "My dear, dear boy," she murmured in the soothing tone that one uses to the ill or the mentally unbalanced. "My dear boy, you must really go and dress. Julia will never forgive us." In her heart she was sincerely grieved by what he had told her. She would have helped cheerfully if it had been possible to her nature; but stronger than compassion, stronger even than reason, was the instinct of evasive idealism which the generations had bred. He understood, while he looked down on her white hair and unlined face, that even if he took her with him to that basement room, she would see it not as it actually was, but as she wished it to be. Her romanticism was invulnerable because it had no contact, even through imagination, with the edge of reality.

And he knew also, while she held him in her motherly arms, that something had broken down within his soul—some barrier between himself and humanity. The wall of tradition and sentiment no longer divided him from Darrow, or Gideon Vetch, or the man who could not look at anything but the hole in the carpet. Never again could he take his inherited place in the world of which he had once been a part. For an instant a nervous impulse to protest, to startle by some violent gesture that look of gentle self-esteem from the faces before him, jerked over him like a spasm. Then the last habit that he would ever break in his life, the very law of his being, which was the law of order, of manners, of self-control, the inbred horror, older than himself or his parents, of giving himself away, of making a scene of his own emotions, this ancestral custom of good breeding closed over him like the lid of a coffin.

With a smile he looked into the anxious face of his father. "Isn't there some way out of it, Dad?"

The muscles about Mr. Culpeper's mouth contracted as if he were going to cry; but when he spoke his voice was completely under control. "I can't interfere, son, with the way the agent manages the property," he answered, "but, of course, if you have discovered a peculiarly distressing case—if it is an object of charity—"

He paused abruptly in amazement, for Stephen was laughing, laughing in a way, as Mrs. Culpeper remarked afterward, that nobody had ever even thought of laughing before the whole world had become demoralized.

"Damn charity!" he exclaimed hilariously. "I beg your pardon, Mother, but if you only knew how inexpressibly funny it is!" Then the laughter stopped, and a wistful look came into his eyes, for beyond the broken walls he saw Patty Vetch in her red cape, and around her stretched the wind-swept roads of that hidden country.

A minute later, as he left the room, his mother's eyes followed him anxiously. "Poor boy, we must bear with him," she said in melting maternal accents.



CHAPTER XIII

CORINNA WONDERS

After a winter of Italian skies spring had come in a night. It was a morning in April, blue and soft as a cloud, with a roving fragrance of lilacs and hyacinths in the air. Already the early bloom of the orchard had dropped, and the freshly ploughed fields, with splashes of henna in the dun-coloured soil, were surrounded by the budding green of the woods.

As Mrs. Culpeper knocked at the door of Corinna's shop, she noticed that the pine bough in the window had been replaced by bowls of growing narcissi. For a moment her stern expression relaxed, and her face, framed in a bonnet of black straw with velvet strings, became soft and anxious. Beneath the veil of white illusion which reached only to the tip of her small sharp nose, her eyes were suddenly touched with spring.

"How delicious the flowers smell," she remarked when Corinna opened the door; and then, as she entered the room and glanced curiously round her, she asked incredulously, "Do people really pay money for these old illustrations, Corinna?"

"Not here, Cousin Harriet. I bought these in London."

"And they cost you something?"

"Some of these, of course, cost more than others. That," Corinna pointed to a mezzotint of the Ladies Waldegrave by Valentine Green, "cost a little less than ten thousand dollars."

"Ten thousand dollars!" Mrs. Culpeper gazed at the print as disapprovingly as if it were an open violation of the Eighteenth Amendment. "We didn't pay anything like that for our largest copy of a Murillo. Well, I may not be artistic, but, for my part, I could never understand why any one should want an old book or an old picture." Sitting rigidly upright in one of the tapestry-covered chairs, she added condescendingly: "Stephen admires this room very much."

"Stephen," remarked Corinna pleasantly, "is a dear boy."

"Just now," returned Stephen's mother, with her accustomed air of duty unflinchingly performed, "he is giving us a great deal of anxiety. Never before, not even when he was in the war, have I spent so many sleepless nights over him."

"I am sorry. Poor Stephen, what has he done?"

"I have always hoped," observed Mrs. Culpeper firmly, "that Stephen would marry Margaret."

"I am aware of that." A flicker of amusement brightened Corinna's eyes. "So, I think, is Stephen."

"I have tried to be honest. It seems to me that a mother's wish should carry a great deal of weight in such matters."

"It ought to," assented Corinna, "but I've never heard of its doing so."

"Everything would have been satisfactory if he had not allowed himself to be carried away by a foolish fancy."

"I cannot imagine," said Corinna primly, "that Stephen could ever be foolish. It gives me hope of him."

Impaling her, as if she had been a butterfly, with a glance as sharp as a needle, Mrs. Culpeper demanded sternly, "How much do you know of this affair, my dear?"

In spite of her natural courage Corinna was seized with a shiver of apprehension. "Do you think it is an affair?" she asked.

"I think it is worse. I think it is an infatuation."

"What, Stephen? Not really?" Corinna's voice was mirthfully incredulous.

"I have seen the girl once or twice," resumed Mrs. Culpeper, "and she seems to me objectionable from every point of view."

"Only from the Culpeper one," protested Corinna. "I find her very attractive."

"Well, I do not." Mrs. Culpeper had relapsed into her tone of habitual martyrdom. "If Stephen chooses to kill me," she added, "he may do it."

Corinna leaned toward her ingratiatingly. "Don't you admit, Cousin Harriet, that I have improved Patty tremendously?"

"I see no difference."

"Oh, but there is one—a great difference! If you had come to one of the Governor's receptions last winter, you couldn't have told that she wasn't—well, one of us. She has been so quick to pick up things that it is amazing."

Mrs. Culpeper lifted the transparent mesh from the point of her nose. "Do you know," she demanded, "that the girl was born in a circus tent?"

"So I have heard. It was a romantic beginning."

Foiled but undaunted, the older woman fixed on Corinna the stare with which she would have attempted the conversion of an undraped pagan if she had ever encountered one. Though she was unconscious of the fact as she sat there, suffering yet unbending, in the Florentine chair, she represented the logical result of the conservative principle in nature, of the spirit that forgets nothing and learns nothing, of the instinct of the type to reproduce itself, without variation or development, until the pattern is worn too thin to endure. That Stephen had inherited this passive force, Corinna knew, but she knew also, that it was threatened by his incurable romanticism, by that inarticulate longing for heroic adventures.

Suddenly, as if moved by a steel spring, Mrs. Culpeper rose. "I know you have a great deal of influence over Stephen," she said, "and I hoped that, instead of encouraging him in his folly, you would sympathize with me."

"I do sympathize with you, Cousin Harriet—only I have learned that it is sometimes very difficult to decide what is folly and what is wisdom in a man's life."

"There can scarcely be a doubt, I think, about this. Surely you cannot imagine that there would be

happiness for my son in a marriage with the daughter of Gideon Vetch?"

There was a dreamy sweetness in Corinna's eyes. "I can't answer that, Cousin Harriet, because I don't know. But are you sure it has gone as far as that? Has Stephen really thought of marriage?"

"I don't know. He tells me nothing," replied Mrs. Culpeper hopelessly, and she added after a pause: "But I can't help having eyes. It is either that—or he is going into politics." Her tone was as despairing as if she had said, "he is coming down with fever."

For a minute Corinna hesitated; then she responded cheerfully, "If it is any comfort to you, Cousin Harriet, I feel that you are making a mountain out of a mole hill. When it comes to the point, I believe that Stephen will revert to type like the rest of us."

Mrs. Culpeper clutched desperately at the straw that was offered her. "You think he won't ask her to marry him?"

"If he does," said Corinna firmly, "I shall be more surprised than I have ever been in my life."

The look of martyrdom faded slowly from her visitor's features. "You say this because you know Stephen?"

"Because I know Stephen—and men," answered Corinna, while she thought of John Benham. "Frankly, I think it would be a splendid thing for Stephen to do. It would prove, you know, that he cared enough to make a sacrifice. I think it would be splendid; but I think also that we are of the breed that looks too long before it leaps. Our great adventures take place in dreams or in talk. We like to play with forlorn hopes; but the only forlorn hope we have actually embraced is the conservative principle; and we couldn't let that go, even if we tried, because it is bred in our bone. So I believe that the hereditary habit will drag Stephen safely back before he rushes into danger. He may play with the thought of Patty, but he will probably marry Margaret."

If Mrs. Culpeper's too refined features could have expressed passion, it would have been the passion of thankfulness. "It was worth coming," she said, "to hear you say that of Stephen."

When at last she had gone, primly grateful for the scrap of comfort, Corinna stood for a minute with her eyes on the sunbeams at the window. Outside there were the roving winds and the restless spirit of April; and feeling suddenly that she could stand the close walls and the familiar objects no longer, she put on her hat and gloves and went out into the street. Scarcely knowing why, with some vague thought that she might go to see Patty, she turned in the direction of the Capitol Square, walking with her buoyant grace which seemed a part of the fugitive beauty of April. The air was so fragrant, the sunshine so softly burning, that it was as if summer were advancing, not gradually, but in a single miracle of florescence. It was one of those days which release all the secret inexpressible dreams of the heart. Every face that she passed was touched with the wistful longing which is the very essence of spring. She saw it in the faces of the women who hurried, warm, flushed, and impatient, from the shops or the markets; she saw it in the faces of the men returning from work and thinking of freedom; and she saw it again in the long sad faces of the dray-horses standing hitched to a city cart at the corner.

In the Square the sunlight lay in splinters over the young grass, which was dotted with buttercups, and overhead the long black boughs of the trees were sprinkled with pale green leaves. Back and forth from the grassy slopes to the winding brick walks, squirrels darted, busy and joyous; and a few old men, never absent from the benches, were smiling vaguely at the passers-by.

When she reached the gate of the Governor's house, her wish to see Patty had vanished, and she decided that she would go on to the library and ask for a book that she had recently heard John Benham discussing. How much of her life now, in spite of its active impersonal interests, was beginning to centre in John Benham! They were planning to be married in June, and beyond that month of roses, which was once so saturated with memories of her early romance, she saw ahead of her long years of tranquil happiness. Well, she could not complain. After all, was not tranquil happiness the best that life had to offer?

She had ascended the steps of the library, and was about to enter the swinging doors, when she turned and glanced back at the dappled boughs of an old sycamore, outlined so softly, with its budding leaves, against the green hill and the changeable blue of the sky. The long walk was almost deserted. A fountain played gently at the end of the slope; a few coloured nurses were dozing on a bench, while their be-ribboned charges scattered peanuts before a fluttering crowd of sparrows, pigeons, and squirrels; and, leaning on a rude crutch, a lame old negro woman was dragging a basket of brushwood to the brow of the hill. The scene was very peaceful, wrapped in that languorous stillness which is the pervading charm of the South; and beyond the high spikes of the iron fence, the noise of passing street cars sounded far off and unreal.

She was still standing there, with her dreamy eyes on the old negress toiling up the hill with her basket of brushwood, when a man passed the fountain hurriedly, and came with a brisk, springy stride up the brick walk below the library. As she watched him, at first without recognition, she thought vaguely that his rugged figure made a picture of embodied activity, of physical energy and enjoyment. The next minute he reached the old negress, glanced at her casually in passing, and turning abruptly round, lifted the basket, and carried it to the top of the hill. Then, as he looked back at the old woman, who limped after him, he laughed with boyish merriment, and Corinna saw in amazement that the man was Gideon Vetch.

"He is obliged to be theatrical," remarked a voice behind her, and glancing over her shoulder she saw that she had been joined by a severe-looking young woman with several books under her arm.

"Is it that?" asked Corinna doubtfully, and she added to herself after a moment, "I wonder?"

A little later, as she was leaving the Square, Stephen overtook her, and she told him of the incident. "The Governor is always breaking out like an epidemic where you least expect him," she concluded with a smile.

"I know. I've caught him." Though the young man's eyes reflected her smile, his tone was serious. "I can't rid myself of the fellow."

"Have you been to see him this morning?"

He laughed. "I should say not! But I've been in a worse fix. I've just walked up the street with—well, imagine it!—that bounder Gershom."

"So you both haunt the Square?"

At the question Stephen turned and faced her frankly. "How, in Heaven's name, does she stand him?"

"That's a riddle. To me he is impossible."

"He is more than that. He is unspeakable." As he looked into her eyes a deep anxiety or disturbance appeared beneath the superficial gaiety of his smile. "The fellow had evidently had a quarrel, perhaps a permanent break, with Vetch. He was in a kind of cold rage; and do you know what he said to me? He told

me,—not openly, but in pretended secrecy,—that Vetch had never married Patty's mother—"

For an instant Corinna gazed at him in silence. Then her words came in a gasp of indignation. "Of course there isn't a word of truth in it!"

"So I said to him. He insists that he has the proofs. You know what it means?"

"Oh, I know—poor Patty! You understand why he told you?"

"I couldn't at first see the reason; but afterward it came to me."

"The reason is as clear as daylight. He is infatuated, and he imagines that you stand in his way."

"Not only that. I think he has some idea of using whatever proofs he has to bend Vetch to his will. He was sharp enough not to say so, for he knew that would be pure blackmail. The ground he took was one of nauseating morality, but I inferred that he is trying to force Vetch to agree to this general strike, and that he is prepared to threaten him with some kind of exposure if he doesn't. This, however, was mere surmise on my part. The fellow is as shrewd as he is unprincipled."

When Corinna believed it was in full measure and overflowing. "It's not true. I know it's not true."

"Has Patty told you anything?"

"Nobody has told me anything. One doesn't have to have a reason for knowing things—at least one doesn't unless one is a man. I know it because I know it." Then, without waiting for his reply, she continued with cheerful firmness: "The best way to treat scandal is to forget it. Don't you think that Patty improves every day?"

He reddened and looked away from her. "Yes, she grows more attractive, I—" While she still waited for him to complete his sentence, he shot out in an embarrassed tone: "Corinna, do you believe in Gideon Vetch?"

For an instant Corinna hesitated. "I believe that he is—well, just Gideon Vetch," she answered enigmatically.

"Just a professional politician?"

"Not at all. He is a great deal more than that, but what that great deal is I cannot pretend to say."

"Do you ever see him away from Patty?"

"Now and then. He has been to the shop."

"And you like him?"

Again she hesitated. "Yes, I like him." Turning her head, she looked straight at him with a glow in her eyes. "That is," she corrected softly, "I should like him if it were not for John."

"You compare him with John?"

"Don't you?"

"Naturally. Of course the Governor loses by that."

"Who wouldn't?"

Her face flushed at the thought, and as Stephen watched her, he asked in a gentler voice, "Are you really to be married in June?"

She smiled an assent, with her dreaming gaze on the young leaves and the blue sky.

"Are you happy?" he persisted.

Her smile answered him again. "One dreads the lonely fireside as one grows older." Then suddenly, as if the shadow of a cloud had drifted over the bright sky, he saw the smile fade from her lips and the glow from her upraised eyes. Somewhere within her brain a voice as hollow as an echo was repeating, *"Isn't that life—sparrows for larks always?"*

"Well, you know what I feel about you, and what I think about Benham," replied Stephen. "You two together stand for all that I admire." As if ashamed of the tone of sentiment, he continued carelessly after a moment: "Vetch is very far from being a Benham, and yet there is something about the man that holds one's attention. People are for ever discussing him. A little while ago we were talking about his personal peculiarities and his political offences. Now we are wondering how he will handle this strike if it comes off; and what effect it will have on his career? Benham, of course, thinks that he is an instrument in the hands of a political group; that his office was the price they paid him not to interfere in the strike. As for me I have no opinion. I am waiting to see what will happen."

They had reached the old print shop; and, as they paused beneath the cedars in the front yard, Stephen glanced up at the window under the quaint shingled roof. The upper storey, he knew, was rented to a couple of tenants, and he was not surprised when he saw the curtains of dotted swiss pushed aside and a woman's face look down on him over the red geranium on the window-sill. The face was familiar; but, while he stared back at it, searching his memory for a resemblance, the white curtains dropped together again, veiling the features. Where had he seen that woman before? What association of ideas did the sight of her recall? In a flash, while he still groped through mental obscurity, light broke on him.

"Who is that woman, Corinna?" he asked. "What do you know of her?"

"That woman?" Corinna repeated; then, as he lifted his eyes to the window, she added, "Oh, that's Mrs. Green. A pathetic face, isn't it? I know nothing about her except that she came in a few weeks ago, and the caretaker tells me that she is leaving to-morrow."

"Do you know where she came from?"

"My dear Stephen! Why, what in the world?" A laugh broke from Corinna's lips. "Did you ever see her before?"

"Twice, and both times in the Capitol Square. I thought her dreadful to look at."

"I've only glanced at her, but she appeared to me more pathetic than dreadful. She has been ill, I imagine, and she looks terribly poor. I'm afraid the rent is too high, but I can't do anything, for she rented her room from the tenants. I suppose, poor thing, that she is merely a sad adventuress, and it is not the sad adventuresses, but the glad ones, who usually enlist a young man's sympathy. By the way, I am lunching with the Governor to-morrow."

"Is it a party?"

"No, just the family. That shows how intimate I have become with the Vetches. Don't tell Cousin Harriet, or she would think I was beginning to corrupt your politics. But I may use my influence to find out what the Governor intends to do about the strike, and a cousin with a political secret is worth having."

With a laugh Stephen went on his way, wondering vaguely what there was about the woman at the window, Mrs. Green Corinna had called her, that made it impossible for him to rid his mind of her? Glancing back from the end of the block, he saw that Corinna had entered the shop and that the curtains at the upper window had been pushed back again while the dim face of Mrs. Green looked down into the street. Was she watching for some one? Or was she merely relieving the monotony of life indoors by gazing down into Franklin Street at an hour when it was almost deserted?



CHAPTER XIV

A LITTLE LIGHT ON HUMAN NATURE

Corinna had not expected to see the Governor until luncheon next day; but, to her surprise, he came to the shop just as she was about to lock the door and go home for the afternoon. At first she thought that the visit was merely a casual one—it was not unusual for him to drop in as he was going by—but he had no sooner glanced about the room to see if they were alone than he broke out with his characteristic directness.

"There is something I want to ask you. Will you answer me frankly?"

"That depends. Tell me what it is and then I will answer your question."

"It is about Patty. You've seen a great deal of her, haven't you?"

"A great deal. I am very fond of her."

"Then perhaps you can tell me if she is interested in this young Culpeper?"

For a minute Corinna struggled against a burst of hysterical laughter. Oh, if Cousin Harriet had only met him here, she thought, what a comedy they would have made!

"Surely if any one has an opinion about that, it must be you," she rejoined as gravely as she could.

"I haven't; not the shadow of one." He was plainly puzzled. "I thought you might help me. You have a way of seeing things."

"Have I?" The spontaneous tribute touched her. "I wish I could see this, but I can't. Frankly, since you ask me, I may say that I have been troubled about it. There are things that Patty hides, even from me, and I think I have her confidence."

"I dare say you wonder why I have come to you to-day," he said. "I can handle most situations; but I have never had to handle the love affairs of a girl, and I'm perfectly capable of making a mess of them. Things like that are outside of my job."

He seemed to her a pathetic figure as he stood there, in his boyish embarrassment and his redundant vitality, confessing an inability to surmount the obstacle in his way. She had never known any one, man or woman, who was so obviously lacking in subtlety of perception, in all those delicate intuitions on which she relied more completely than on judgment for an accurate impression of life. Was he, with his bigness, his earnestness, his luminous candour, only an overgrown child? Even his physical magnetism, and she felt this in the very moment when she was trying to analyse it, even his physical magnetism might be nothing more than the spell exercised by primitive impulse over the too complex problems of civilization. She had heard that he was unscrupulous—vague charges that he had never been able to repel—yet she was conscious now of a secret wish to protect him from the consequences of his duplicity, as she might have wished to protect an irresponsible child. Some mysterious sense perception made her aware that beneath what appeared to be discreditable public actions there was the simple bed-rock of honesty. For the quality she felt in Vetch was a profound moral integrity, an integrity which was bred by nature in the innermost fibre of the man.

"If you will tell me—" she began, and checked herself with a sensation of helplessness. After all, what could he tell her that she did not know?

"I want to do what is right for her," he said abruptly. "I should hate for her to be hurt."

While he talked it seemed to Corinna that she was living in some absurd comedy, which mimicked life but was only acting, not reality. In her world of reserves and implications no man would have dared to make himself ridiculous by a visit like this.

"Do you believe that she cares for Stephen?" she asked bluntly.

"It didn't start with me. Miss Spencer, that's the lady who lives with us you know, is afraid that Patty sees too much of him. He is at the house every day—"

"Well?" Corinna waited patiently. She was not in the least afraid of what Stephen might do. She knew that she could trust him to be a gentleman; but being a gentleman, she reflected, did not necessarily keep one from breaking a woman's heart. And Patty had a wild, free heart that might be broken.

"I don't know what to do about it," Vetch was saying while she pondered the problem. "As I told you a minute ago this is all outside my job."

"Have you spoken to Patty?"

"I started to, but she made fun of the idea—you know the way she has. She asked me if I had ever heard of any one falling in love with a plaster saint?"

Corinna smiled. "So she called Stephen a plaster saint?"

"She was chaffing, of course."

"Well, I don't see that there is anything you can do unless you send Patty away."

"She wouldn't go," he responded simply; then after a moment of embarrassed hesitation, he blurted out nervously, "Is this young Culpeper what you would call a marrying man?"

This time it was impossible for Corinna to suppress her amusement, and it broke out in a laugh that was like the chiming of silver bells. Oh, if only Cousin Harriet could hear him! Then observing the gravity of Vetch's expression, she checked her untimely mirth with an effort.

"That depends, I suppose. At his age how can any one tell?" In her heart she did not believe that Stephen would marry Patty; she was not sure even that she, Corinna, should wish him to do so. There was too much at stake, and though her philosophy was fearless, her conduct had never been anything but conventional. While in theory she despised discretion, she realized that the virtue she despised, not the theory she admired, had dominated her life. The great trouble with acts of reckless nobility was that the recklessness was only for a moment, but the nobility was obliged to last a lifetime. It was not difficult, she knew, for persons like Stephen or herself to be heroic in appropriate circumstances; the difficulty began when one was compelled to sustain the heroic rôle long after the appropriate circumstances had passed away. Yet, in spite of the cynical lucidity of her judgment, the romantic in her heart longed to have Stephen, by one generous act of devotion, prove her theory fallacious. Her strongest impulse, the impulse to create happiness, to repair, as her father had once described it, crippled destinies; this impulse urged her now to help Patty's pathetic romance in every way in her power. It would be very fine if Stephen cared enough to forget what he was losing. It would be magnificent, she felt, but it would not be

masculine. For she had had great experience; and though men might vary in a multitude of particulars, she had found that the solidarity of sex was preserved in some general code of emotional expediency.

"Do you think," Vetch was making another attempt to explain his meaning, "that he is seriously interested?"

"I am perfectly sure," she replied, "that he is more than half in love with her."

"Is he the kind, then, to let himself go the rest of the way?"

She shook her head. "That I cannot answer. From my knowledge of the restraining force of the Culpeper fibre, I should say that he is not."

"You mean he wouldn't think it a suitable marriage?"

She blushed for his crudeness. "I mean his mother wouldn't think it a suitable marriage. Patty is very attractive, but they know nothing about her except that. You see they have had the disadvantage of knowing everything about every one who has married, or who has even wished to marry, into the family for the last two hundred years. It is a disadvantage, as I've said, for the strain is so highly bred that each generation becomes mentally more and more like the fish in caves that have lost their eyes because they stopped trying to see. Stephen is different in a way—and yet not different enough. It would be his salvation if he could care enough for Patty to take a risk for her sake; but his mother, of course, would fight against it with every particle of her influence, and her influence is enormous." Then she met his eyes boldly: "Wouldn't you fight against it in her place?" she asked.

"I? Oh, I shouldn't care a hang what anybody thought if I liked the girl," he retorted. His smile shone out warmly. "Would you?" he demanded in his turn.

For an instant his blunt question disconcerted her, and while she hesitated she felt his blue eyes on her downcast face. "You can't judge by me," she answered presently. "Only those who have been in chains know the meaning of freedom."

"Are you free now?"

"Not entirely. Who is?"

He was looking at her more closely; and when at last she raised her eyelashes and met his gaze, the lovely glow which gave her beauty its look of October splendour suffused her features. Anger seized her in the very moment that the colour rushed to her cheeks. Why should she blush like a schoolgirl because of the way this man—or any man—looked at her?

"Are you going to marry Benham?" he asked; and there was a note in his voice which disturbed her in spite of herself. Though she denied passionately his right to question her, she answered simply enough: "Yes, I am going to marry him."

"Do you care for him?"

With an effort she turned her eyes away and looked beyond the green stems and the white flowers of the narcissi in the window to the street outside, where the shadows of the young leaves lay like gauze over the brick pavement.

"If I didn't care do you think that I would marry him?" she asked in a low voice. Through the open

window a breeze came, honey-sweet with the scent of narcissi, and she realized, with a start, that this early spring was poignantly lovely and sad.

"Well, I wish I'd known you twenty years ago," said Vetch presently. "If I'd had a woman like you to help me, I might have been almost anything. Nobody knows better than I how much help a woman can be when she's the right sort."

She tore her gaze from the sunshine beyond, from the beauty and the wistfulness of April. What was there in this man that convinced her in spite of everything that Benham had told her?

"Your wife has been dead a long time?" She spoke gently, for his tone more than his words had touched her sympathy.

As soon as she asked the question, she realized that it was a mistake. An expressionless mask closed over his face, and she received the impression that he had withdrawn to a distance.

"A long time," was all he answered. His voice had become so impersonal that it was toneless.

"Well, it hasn't kept you back—not having help," she hastened to reply as naturally as she could. "You are almost everything you wished to be in the world, aren't you?" It was a foolish speech, she felt, but the change in his manner had surprised and bewildered her.

He laughed shortly without merriment. "I?" he replied, and she noticed for the first time that he looked tired and worried beneath his exuberant optimism. "I am the loneliest man on earth. The loneliest man on earth is the one who stands between two extremes." As she made no reply, he continued after a moment, "You think, of course, that I stand with one extreme, not in the centre, but you are mistaken. I am in the middle. When I try to bring the two millstones together they will grind me to powder."

She had never heard him speak despondently before; and while she listened to the sound of his expressive voice, so full, for the hour at least, of discouragement, she felt drawn to him in a new and personal way. It was as if, by showing her a side of his nature the public had never seen, he had taken her into his confidence.

"But surely your influence is as great as ever," she said presently. A trite remark, but the only one that occurred to her.

"I brought the crowd with me as far as I thought safe," he answered, "and now it is beginning to turn against me because I won't lead it over the precipice into the sea. That's the way it always is, I reckon. That's the way it's been, anyhow, ever since Moses tried to lead the Children of Israel out of bondage. Take these strikers, for instance. I believe in the right to strike. I believe that they ought to have every possible protection. I believe that their families ought to be provided for in order to take the weapon of starvation out of the hands of the capitalists. I'd give them as fair a field as it is in my power to provide, and anybody would think that they would be satisfied with simple fairness. But, no, what they are trying to do is not to strike *for* themselves, but to strike *at* somebody else. They are not satisfied with protection from starvation unless that protection involves the right to starve somebody else. They want to tie up the markets and stop the dairy trains, and they won't wink an eyelash if all the babies that don't belong to them are without milk. That's war, they tell me; and I answer that I'd treat war just as I'd treat a strike, if I had the power. As soon as an army began to prey on the helpless, I'd raise a bigger army if I could and throw the first one out into the jungle where it belonged. But people don't see things like that now, though they may in the next five hundred years. The trouble is that all human nature, including capitalist and labourer,

is tarred with the same brush and tarred with selfishness. What the oppressed want is not freedom from oppression, but the opportunity to become oppressors."

Was this only a mood, she wondered, or was it the expression of a profound disappointment? Sympathy such as John Benham had never awakened overflowed from her heart, and she was conscious suddenly of some deep intuitive understanding of Vetch's nature. All that had been alien or ambiguous became as close and true and simple as the thoughts in her own mind. What she saw in Vetch, she perceived now, was that resemblance to herself which the Judge had once turned into a jest. She discerned his point of view not by looking outside of herself, but by looking within.

"I know," she responded in her rich voice. "I think I know."

He gazed at her with a smile which had grown as tired as the rest of him. "Then if you know why don't you help—you others?" he asked. "Don't you see that by standing aside, by keeping apart, you are doing all the harm that you can? If democracy doesn't seem good enough for you, then get down into the midst of it and make it better. That's the only way—the only way on earth to make a better democracy—by putting the best we've got into it. You can't make bread rise from the outside. You've got to mix the yeast with the dough, if you want it to leaven the whole lump."

She had been standing with her hands clasped before her and her eyes on the sky beyond the window; and when he paused, with a husky tone in his voice, she spoke almost as if she were in a dream. "I believe in you," she said, and then again, as he did not speak she repeated very slowly: "I believe in you."

"That helps," he answered gravely. "I don't suppose you will ever realize how much that will help me." As he finished he turned toward the door; and a minute afterward, without another word or look, he went out into the street, and she saw his figure cross the flowers and the sunlight in the window.

When he had gone Corinna opened the door and stood watching the long black shadows of the cedars creep over the walk of broken flagstones. Always when she was alone her thoughts would return like homing birds to John Benham; but this afternoon, though she spoke his name in her reflections, she was conscious of an inner detachment from the vital interests of her personal life. For a little while, so strong was the mental impression Vetch had made on her, she saw his image even while she thought the name of John Benham. Then, with an effort of will, she put the Governor and all that he had said out of her mind. After all, how little would she ever see of him now—how seldom would their paths cross in the future! A strange and interesting man, a man who had, in one instant of mental sympathy, stirred something within her heart that no one, not even Kent Page, had ever awakened before. For that one instant a ripple, nothing more, had moved on the face of the deep—of the deep which was so ancient that it was older even than the blood of her race. Then the ripple passed and the sunny stillness settled again on her spirit.

She thought of John Benham easily now; and while she stood there a quiet happiness shone in her eyes. After the storm and stress of twenty years, life in this Indian summer of the emotions was like an enclosed garden of sweetness and bloom. She had had enough of hunger and rapture and disappointment. Never again would she take up the old search for perfection, for the starry flower of the heights. Something that she could worship! So often in the past it had seemed to her that she missed it by the turn of a corner, the stop on the roadside, by the choice of a path that led down into the valley instead of up into the hills. So often her god had revealed the feet of clay just as she was preparing to scatter marigolds on his altar. It appeared to her as she looked back on the past, that life had been merely a succession of great opportunities that one did not grasp, of high adventures that one never followed.

The sound of a motor horn interrupted her reverie, and she saw that a big open car, with a green body, had turned the corner and was about to stop at her door. An instant later anger burned in her heart, for she saw that the car was driven by Rose Stribling. Even a glimpse of that flaunting pink hollyhock of a woman was sufficient to ruffle the placid current of Corinna's thoughts. Could she never forget? Must she, who had long ago ceased to love the man, still be enslaved to resentment against the woman?

With an ample grace, Mrs. Stribling descended from the car, and crossed the pavement to the flagged walk which led to the white door of the old print shop. In her trimly fitting dress of blue serge, with her small straw hat ornamented by stiff black quills, she looked fresher, harder, more durably glazed than ever. A slight excess, too deep a carmine in her smooth cheeks, too high a polish on her pale gold hair, too thick a dusk on her lashes; this was the only flaw that one could detect in her appearance. If men liked that sort of thing, and they apparently did, Corinna reflected, then they could scarcely complain of an emphasis on perfection.

"I've just got back," began Rose Stribling in a tone as soft as her metallic voice could produce. "It's been an age since I've seen you—not since the night of that stupid dinner at the Berkeleys', and I'm so much interested in the news I have heard."

For a minute Corinna stared at her. "Yes, my shop has been very successful," she answered, after a pause in which she tried and failed to think of a reply that would sound more disdainful. "If you are looking for prints, I can show you some very good ones."

"Oh, I don't mean that." Mrs. Stribling appeared genuinely amused by the mistake. "I am not looking for prints—to tell the truth I shouldn't know one if I saw it. I mean your engagement, of course. There isn't anybody in the world who admires John Benham more than I do. I always say of him that he is the only man I know who will sacrifice himself for a principle. All his splendid record in the army—when he was over age too—and then the way he behaved about that corporation! I never understood just why he did it—I'm sure I could never bring myself to refuse so much money,—but that doesn't keep me from admiring him." For a minute she looked at Corinna with a smile which seemed as permanent as the rest of her surface, while she discreetly sharpened her wits for the stab which was about to be dealt. "I can't tell you how surprised I was to hear you had announced your engagement. You know we were so sure that he was going to marry Alice Rokeby after she got her divorce. Of course nobody knew. It was just gossip, and you and I both know how absurd gossip can be."

So this was why she had stopped! Corinna flinched from the thrust even while she told herself that there was no shadow of truth in the old rumour, that malice alone had prompted Rose Stribling to repeat it. In a woman like that, an incorrigible coquette, every relation with her own sex would be edged with malice.

"Well, I just stopped to wish you happiness. I must go now, but I'll come again, when I have time, and look

at your shop. Such a funny idea—a shop, with all the money you've got! But no idea seems too funny for people to-day. And that reminds me of the Governor. Have you seen the Governor again since the evening we dined with him?"

Her turn had come, and Corinna, for she was very human, planted the sting without mercy. "Oh, very often. He was here a few minutes ago."

"Then it's true? Somebody told me he admired you so much."

Corinna smiled blandly. "I hope he does. We are great friends." Would there always be women like that in the world, she asked herself—women whose horizon ended with the beginning of sex? It was a feminine type that seemed to her as archaic as some reptilian bird of the primeval forests. How long would it be, she wondered, before it would survive only in the dry bones of genealogical scandals? As she looked after Rose Stribling's bright green car, darting like some gigantic dragon-fly up the street, her lips quivered with scorn and disgust. "I wonder if she thought I believed her?" she said to herself in a whisper. "I wonder if she thought she could hurt me?"

The sunshine was in her eyes, and she was about to turn and go back into the shop, when she saw that Alice Rokeby was coming toward her with a slow dragging step, as if she were mentally and bodily tired. The lace-work of shadows fell over her like a veil; and high above her head the early buds of a tulip tree made a mosaic of green and yellow lotus cups against the Egyptian blue of the sky. Framed in the vivid colours of spring she had the look of a flower that has been blighted by frost.

"How ill, how very ill she looks," thought Corinna, with an impulse of sympathy. "I wish she would come in and rest. I wish she would let me help her."

For an instant the violet eyes, with their vague wistfulness, their mute appeal, looked straight into Corinna's; and in that instant an inscrutable expression quivered in Alice Rokeby's face, as if a wan light had flickered up and died down in an empty room.

"The heat is too much for you," said Corinna gently. "It is like summer."

"Yes, I have never known so early a spring. It has come and gone in a week."

"You look tired, and your furs are too heavy. Won't you come in and rest until my car comes?"

The other woman shook her head. She was still pretty, for hers was a face to which pallor lent the delicate sweetness of a white rose-leaf.

"It is only a block or two farther. I am going home," she answered in a low voice.

"Won't you come to my shop sometimes? I have missed seeing you this winter." The words were spoken sincerely, for Corinna's heart was open to all the world but Rose Stribling.

"Thank you. How lovely your cedars are!" The wan light shone again in Alice Rokeby's face. Then she threw her fur stole from her shoulders as if she were fainting under the weight of it, and passed on, with her dragging step, through the lengthening shadows on the pavement.



CHAPTER XV

CORINNA OBSERVES

Yes, Patty was in love, this Corinna decided after a single glance. The girl appeared to have changed miraculously over-night, for her hard brightness had melted in the warmth of some glowing flame that burned at her heart. Never had she looked so Ariel-like and elusive; never had she brought so hauntingly to Corinna's memory the loveliness of youth and spring that is vivid and fleeting.

"Can it be that Stephen is really in earnest?" asked the older woman of her disturbed heart; and the next instant, shaking her wise head, she added, "Poor little redbird! What does she know of life outside of a cedar tree?"

At luncheon the Governor, in an effort to hide some perfectly evident anxiety, over-shot the mark as usual, Corinna reflected. It was his way, she had observed, to cover a mental disturbance with pretended hilarity. There was, as always when he was unnatural and ill at ease, a touch of coarseness in his humour, a grotesque exaggeration of his rhetorical style. With his mind obviously distracted he told several anecdotes of dubious wit; and while he related them Miss Spencer sat primly silent with her gaze on her plate. Only Corinna laughed, as she laughed at any honest jest however out of place. After all, if you began to judge men by the quality of their jokes where would it lead you?

Patty, with her eyes drooping beneath her black lashes, sat lost in a day dream. She dressed now, by Corinna's advice, in straight slim gowns of serge or velvet; and to-day she was wearing a scant little frock of blue serge, with a wide white collar that gave her the look of a delicate boy. There were wonderful possibilities in the girl, Corinna mused, looking her over. She had not a single beautiful feature, except her remarkable eyes; and yet the softness and vagueness of her face lent a poetic and impressionistic charm to her appearance. "In that dress she looks as if she had stepped out of the Middle Ages, and might step back again at any minute," thought Corinna. "I wonder if I can be mistaken in Stephen, and if he is seriously in love with her?"

"Patty is grooming me for the White House," remarked Vetch, with his hearty laugh which sounded a trifle strained and affected to-day. "She thinks it probable that I shall be President."

"Why not, Father?" asked Patty loyally. "They couldn't find a better one."

"Do you hear that?" demanded the Governor in delight. "That is what one coming voter thinks of me."

"And a good many others, I haven't a doubt," replied Corinna, with her cheerful friendliness. Through the windows of the dining-room she could see the long grape arbour and the gray boughs of the crepe myrtle trees in the garden.

She had dressed herself carefully for the occasion in a black gown that followed closely the lines of her figure. Her beauty, which a painter in Europe had once compared to a lamp, was still so radiant that it seemed to drain the colour and light from her surroundings. Even Patty, with her fresh youth, lost a little of her vividness beside the glowing maturity of the other woman. When Corinna had accepted the girl's invitation, she had resolved that she would do her best; that, however tiresome it was, she would "carry it off." Always a match for any situation that did not include Kent Page or a dangerous emotion, she felt

entirely competent to "manage," as Mrs. Culpeper would have said, the most radical of Governors. She liked the man in spite of his errors; she was sincerely attached to Patty; and their artless respect for her opinion gave her a sense of power which she told herself merrily was "almost political." Though the Governor might be without the rectitude which both Benham and Stephen regarded as fundamental, she perceived clearly that, even if Vetch were lacking in the particular principle involved, he was not devoid of some moral excellence which filled not ignobly the place where principle should have been. She was prepared to concede that the Governor was a man of many defects and a single virtue; but this single virtue impressed her as more tremendous than any combination of qualities that she had ever encountered. She admitted that, from Benham's point of view, Vetch was probably not to be trusted; yet she felt instinctively that she could trust him. The two men, she told herself tolerantly, were as far apart as the poles. That the cardinal virtue Vetch possessed in abundance was the one in which Benham was inadequate had not occurred to her; for, at the moment, she could not bring herself to acknowledge that any admirable trait was absent from the man whom she intended to marry.

"You would make a splendid president, Father," Patty was insisting.

"Well, I'm inclined to think that you're right," Vetch responded whimsically, "but you'll have to convince a few others of that, I reckon, before we begin to plan for the White House. First of all, you'll have to convince the folks that started the boom to make me Governor. It looks as if some of them were already thinking that they'd made a mistake."

"Oh, that horrid Julius," said Patty lightly. "He doesn't matter a bit, does he, Mrs. Page?"

"Not to me," laughed Corinna, "but I'm not a politician. Politicians have queer preferences."

"Or queer needs," suggested Vetch. "You don't like Gershom, I infer; but when you are ready to sweep, remember you mustn't be over-squeamish about your broom."

"I have heard," rejoined Corinna, still laughing, "that a new broom sweeps clean. Why not try a new one next time?"

"You mean when I run for the Presidency?" Was he joking, or was there an undercurrent of seriousness in his words?

They had risen from the table; and as they passed through the long reception-room, which stretched between the dining-room and the wide front hall, Abijah brought the information that Mr. Gershom awaited the Governor in the library.

"I shall probably be kept there most of the afternoon," said Vetch, and she could see that his regret was not assumed. "The next time you come I hope I shall have better luck." Then he hurried off to his appointment, while Corinna stopped at the foot of the staircase and followed with her gaze the slender balustrade of mahogany. "If they had only left everything as it was!" she thought; and then she said aloud: "It is so lovely out of doors. Get your hat and we'll walk awhile in the Square. I can talk to you better there, and I want to talk to you seriously."

After the girl had disappeared up the quaint flight of stairs, Corinna stood gazing meditatively at the bar of sunlight over the front door. She was thinking of what she should say to Patty—how could she possibly warn the girl without wounding her?—and it was very gradually that she became aware of raised voices in the library and the hard, short sound of words that beat like hail into her consciousness.

"I tell you we can put it over all right if you will only have the sense to keep your hands off!" stormed

Gershom in a tone that he was trying in vain to subdue.

"Are you sure they will strike?"

"Dead sure. You may bet your bottom dollar on that. We can tie up every road in this state within twenty-four hours after the order goes out—"

Arousing herself with a start, Corinna opened the door and went out. She could not have helped hearing what Gershom had said; and after all this was nothing more than a repetition of the plain facts that Vetch had already confided to her. But why, she wondered, did they persist in holding their conferences at the top of their voices?

In a few minutes Patty came down, wearing a sailor hat which made her look more than ever like an attractive boy; and they descended the steps together, and strolled past the fountain of the white heron to the gate in front of the house. Turning to the left as they entered the Square, they walked slowly down the wide brick pavement, which trailed by the library and a larger fountain, to the dingy business street beyond the iron fence at the foot of the hill. As they went by, a woman, who was feeding the squirrels from one of the benches, lifted her face to stare at them curiously, and something vaguely familiar in her features caused Corinna to pause and glance back. Where had she seen her before? And how ill, how hopelessly stricken, the haggard face looked under the thick mass of badly dyed hair. The next minute she remembered that the woman had lodged for a week or two above the old print shop, and that only yesterday Stephen had asked about her. Poor creature, what a life she must have had to have wrecked her so utterly.

In the golden-green light of afternoon the Square was looking peaceful and lovely. For the hour a magic veil had dropped over the nakedness of its outlines, and the bare buildings and bare walks were touched with the glamour of spring. Soft, pale shadows of waving branches moved back and forth, like the ghosts of dreams, over the grassy hill and the brick pavements.

Turning to the girl beside her, Corinna looked thoughtfully at the fresh young face above the white collar which framed the lovely line of the throat. Under the brim of the sailor hat Patty's eyes were dewy with happiness.

"Are you happy, Patty?"

"Oh, yes," rejoined Patty fervently, "so much happier than I ever was in my life!"

"I am glad," said the older woman tenderly. Then taking the girl's hand in hers she added earnestly: "But, my dear, we must be careful, you and I, not to let our happiness depend too much upon one thing. We must scatter it as much as we can."

"I can't do that," answered Patty simply. "I am not made that way. I pour everything into one thought."

"I know," responded Corinna sadly, and she did. She had lived through it all long ago in what seemed to her now another life.

For a moment she was silent; and when she spoke again there was an anxious sound in her voice and an anxious look in the eyes she lifted to the arching boughs of the sycamore. "Do you like Stephen very much, Patty?" she asked.

Though Corinna did not see it, a glow that was like the flush of dawn broke over the girl's sensitive face.

"He is so superior," she began as if she were repeating a phrase she had learned to speak; then in a low voice she added impulsively, "Oh, very much!"

"He is a dear boy," returned Corinna, really troubled. "Do you see him often?" Now, since she felt she had won the girl's confidence, her purpose appeared more difficult than ever.

"Very often," replied Patty in a thrilling tone. "He comes every day." The luminous candour, the fearless sincerity of Gideon Vetch, seemed to envelop her as she answered.

"Do you think he cares for you, dear?" asked Corinna softly.

"Oh, yes." The response was unhesitating. "I know it."

How naive, how touchingly ingenuous, the girl was in spite of her experience of life and of the uglier side of politicians. No girl in Corinna's circle would ever have appeared so confiding, so innocent, so completely beneath the spell of a sentimental illusion. The girls that Corinna knew might be unguarded about everything else on earth; but even the most artless one of them, even Margaret Blair, would have learned by instinct to guard the secret of her emotions.

"Has he asked you to marry him?" Corinna's voice wavered over the question, which seemed to her cruel; but Patty met it with transparent simplicity.

"Not yet," she answered, lifting her shining eyes to the sky, "but he will. How can he help it when he cares for me so much?"

"If he hasn't yet, my dear"—while the words dropped from her reluctant lips, Corinna felt as if she were inflicting a physical stab,—"how can you tell that he cares so much for you?"

"I wasn't sure until yesterday," replied Patty, with beaming lucidity, "but I knew yesterday because—because he showed it so plainly."

With a lovely protective movement the older woman put her arm about the girl's shoulders. "You may be right—but, oh, don't trust too much, Patty," she pleaded, with the wisdom that the years bring and take away. "Life is so uncertain—fine impulses—even love—yes, love most of all—is so uncertain—"

"Of course you feel that way," responded the girl, sympathetic but incredulous. "How could you help it?"

After this what could Corinna answer? She knew Stephen, she told herself, and she knew that she could trust him. She believed that he was capable of generous impulses; but she doubted if an impulse, however generous, could sweep away the inherited sentiments which encrusted his outlook on life. In spite of his youth, he was in reality so old. He was as old as that indestructible entity, the spirit of race—as that impalpable strain which had existed in every Culpeper, and in all the Culpepers together, from the beginning. It was not, she realized plainly, such an anachronism as a survival of the aristocratic tradition. Deeper than this, it had its roots not in belief but in instinct—in the bone and fibre of Stephen's character. It was a part of that motive power which impelled him in the direction of the beaten road, of the established custom, of things as they have always been in the past.

Her kind heart was troubled; yet before the happiness in the girl's face what could she say except that she hoped Stephen was as fine as Patty believed him to be? "You may be right. I hope so with all my heart; but, oh, my dear, try not to care too much. It never does any good to care too much." She stooped and kissed the girl's cheek. "There, my car is at the door, and I must hurry back to the shop. I'll do anything in

the world that I can for you, Patty, anything in the world."

As the car rolled through the gate and down the wide drive to the Washington monument, Patty stood gazing after it, with a burning moisture in her eyes and a lump in her throat. Terror had seized her in an instant, terror of unhappiness, of missing the one thing in life on which she had passionately set her heart. What had Mrs. Page meant by her questions? Had she intended them as a warning? And why should she have thought it necessary to warn her against caring too much for Stephen?

The girl had started to enter the house when, remembering suddenly that Gershom was still there, she turned hurriedly away from the door, and walked back down the brick pavement to the fountain beyond the library. The squirrels still scampered over the walk; the thirsty sparrows were still drinking; the few loungers on the benches still stared at her with dull and incurious eyes. Not a cloud stained the intense blue of the sky; and over the bright grass on the hillside the sunshine quivered like an immense swarm of bees.

As she approached the fountain where she had first met Stephen, it seemed to her that a romantic light, a visionary enchantment, fell over this one spot of ground, and divided it by some magic circle from every other place in the world. The crude iron railing, the bare gravel, the ugly spouting fountain which was stripped of every leaf or blade of grass—these things appeared to her through an indescribable glamour, as if they stood there as the visible gateway to some invisible garden of dreams. Whenever she looked at this ordinary spot of earth a breathless realization of the wonder and delight of life rushed over her. She knew nothing of the mental processes by which these external objects were associated with the deepest emotions of the heart. Only when she visited this place that wave of happiness swept over her; and she lived again as vividly as she lived in the moments when Stephen was with her and she was looking into his eyes.

His voice called her while she stood there; and turning quickly, she saw that he was coming toward her down the walk. Immediately the loungers on the benches vanished by magic; the murmur of the fountain became like the music of harps; and the sunshine on the grassy hill was alive with the quiver of wings. As she went toward him she was aware of the blue sky, of the golden green of the trees, of the happy sounds of the birds, and over all, as if it were outside of herself, of the rapturous beating of her own heart.

"I was looking for you," he said when he reached her.

"And you found me at last." Her eyes were like wells of joy.

"I'd never have given up until I found you." The words were trivial; but it was the things he said without words that really mattered. Already they had established a communion that was independent of speech. He had never told her that he loved her; yet she saw it in every glance of his eyes and heard it in every tone of his voice.

While they walked slowly up the hill she wondered trustingly why, when he had told her so plainly in every other way that he loved her, he should never have put it into words. There could not be any doubt of it; perhaps this was the reason he hesitated. The present was so perfect that it was like the most exquisite hour of a spring afternoon. One longed to hold it back even though one knew that it led to something more lovely still.

"Are you happy?" she asked, and wondered if he would kiss her again when they parted as he had kissed her yesterday in the dusk of the hall?

"Yes, and no." He drew nearer to her. "I am happy now like this—here with you—but at other times I am troubled. I can't see my way clearly."

"But why should you? Why should any one be troubled when it is so easy to be happy?"

"Easy?" He laughed. "If life were only as simple as that!"

"It is if one knows what one wants."

"Well, one may know what one wants, and yet not know if one is wise in wanting it."

"Oh, wise!" She shook her head with an impatient movement. "Isn't the only wisdom to be happy and kind?"

He looked at her thoughtfully, while a frown drew his straight dark eyebrows together. "If you wanted a thing with all your heart, and yet were not sure—"

Her impatience answered him. "I couldn't want it with all my heart without being sure."

"Sure I mean that it is best—best for every one—not just for oneself—"

Her laugh was like a song. "Do you suppose there has ever been anything since the world began that was best for every one? If I knew what I wanted I shouldn't ask anything more. I would spread my wings and fly to it."

He smiled. "You are so much like your father at times—even in the things that you say. Yes, I suppose you would fly to it because you have been trained that way—to be direct and daring. But I am made differently. Life has taught me; it is in my blood and bone to stop and question, to look so long that at last I lose the will to choose, or to leap. There are some of us like that, you know."

"Perhaps," she smiled. "I don't know. It seems to me a very silly way to be." The song had gone out of her voice, and a heaviness, an impalpable fear, had descended again on her heart. Why did one's path lead always through mazes of uncertainty and disappointment instead of straight onward toward one's desire? A passionate impulse seized her to fight for what she wanted, to grasp the fragile opportunity before it eluded her. Yet she knew that fighting would not do any good. She could do nothing while her happiness hung on a thread. She could do nothing but fold her hands and wait, though her heart burned hot with the injustice of it, and she longed to speak aloud all the words that were rising to her tightly closed lips.

"Oh, don't you see—can't you see?" she asked brokenly, baring her heart with a desperate impulse. Her eyes were drawing him toward the future; and, in the deep stillness of her look, it seemed to him that she was putting forth all her power to charm; that her youth and bloom shed a sweetness that was like the fragrance of a flower.

For an instant every thought, every feeling, surrendered to her appeal. Then his face changed as abruptly as if he had put a mask over his features; and glancing back over her shoulder, she saw that his mother and Margaret Blair were walking along the concrete pavement under the few old linden trees. As they approached it seemed to the girl that Stephen turned slowly from a man of flesh and blood into a figure of granite. In one instant he was petrified by the force of tradition.

"It is my mother," he said in a low voice. "She has not been in the Square for years. I was telling her yesterday how pretty it looks in the spring." He went forward with an embarrassed air, and Mrs. Culpeper laid a firm, possessive touch on his arm.

"I thought a little stroll might do me good," she explained. "The car is waiting across the street at Doctor Bradley's." Then she held out her free hand to Patty, with a smile which, the girl said afterward to Corinna, looked as if it had frozen on her lips. "Stephen speaks of you very often, Miss Vetch," she said. "He talks a great deal about his friends, doesn't he, Margaret?"

Margaret assented with a charming manner; and the two girls stood looking guardedly into each other's eyes. "She is attractive," thought Margaret, not unkindly, for she was never unkind, "but I can't understand just what he sees in her." And at the same moment Patty was saying to herself, "Oh, she is everything that he admires and nothing that he enjoys."

Aloud the elder girl said casually, "It is so quaint living down here in the Square, isn't it?"

"But it is too far away from everything," replied Stephen hurriedly. "It must be very different from what it was when you came to balls here, Mother."

"Very," answered Mrs. Culpeper stiffly because the cold hard smile was still on her lips.

"It doesn't seem far away when you are used to it," remarked Patty in a spiritless tone. The vague heaviness, like a black cloud covered her heart again. She was jealous of Margaret, jealous of her sweet, pale face, of her trusting blue eyes, of the delicate distinction that showed in the turn of her head, in her fragile hands, in the lovely liquid sound of her voice.

"Cousin Corinna has promised to bring me to see you," said Margaret in her kind and gentle way.

"I hope you'll come," replied Patty politely; but in her thoughts she added, "I hope you won't. I hope I'll never see you again." She couldn't be natural; she couldn't be anything but stiff and awkward; and she was aware all the time that Stephen was as embarrassed as she was. All the things that she must fight against, that she must triumph over, were embodied in that small black figure with the ivory face, so inelastic, so unbending, so secure in its inherited authority. There was war between her and Stephen's mother; and she stood alone, with only her undaunted spirit to support her, while on the opposite side were entrenched all the immovable dead ranks of the generations. "I shall fight it out," thought the girl bitterly. "I don't care what she thinks of me. I shall fight it out to the end."

With her hand on Stephen's arm, Mrs. Culpeper turned slowly away. "I feel a little tired," she explained politely to Patty, "so I am sure that you won't mind yielding to an infirm old woman, and will let my son help me back to the car."

"Oh, I don't mind," replied Patty, with gay indifference.

"I'll see you very soon," said Stephen; and it seemed to the girl as she watched him walking toward the Washington monument that he looked as old and as tired as his mother.

Of course he was obliged to go. There wasn't anything else that he could do, and yet—and yet—as Patty gazed after the three slowly moving figures, she felt that a cold hand had reached out of the sunshine and clutched her heart.



CHAPTER XVI

THE FEAR OF LIFE

Stephen had intended to go back as soon as he had put his mother into the car; but she clung so tightly to his arm, and there was something so appealing in her fragile dependence, that, almost without realizing it, he found that he was sitting in front of her, and that she was taking him down to his office.

"We will leave you and go back, Stephen," she said, while a look of faintness spread over her features. "I feel as if one of my heart attacks might be coming on."

"Wouldn't you rather I went home with you?" he inquired solicitously.

His mother shook her head and reached feebly for Margaret's hand. "Margaret will take care of me," she replied in the weak voice before which her husband and her children had learned to tremble.

As he sat there uneasily in the stuffy car, which smelt of camphor and reminded him of a hearse, he was threatened by that familiar sensation of oppression, of closing walls. Would he ever again be free from this impalpable terror, from this dread of being shut within a space so small that he must smother if he did not escape? And not only places but persons, as he had found long ago, persons with closed souls, with narrow minds, produced in him this feeling of physical suffocation. Margaret, with her serenity, her changeless sweetness, affected him precisely as he was affected by the stained glass windows of a church. He felt that he should stifle unless he could break away into a place where there were winds and blown shadows and pure sunshine. He admired her; he might have loved her; but she smothered him like that rich and heavy wave of the past from which he was still struggling to free himself. For he knew now that it was not the past he wanted; it was the future. Above all things he needed release, he needed deliverance; and yet he knew, more surely at this moment than ever before, that he was not free, that he was still in chains, still the servant, not the master, of tradition. He lacked the courage of life, the will to feel and to live. Only through emotion, only through some courageous adventure of the spirit, only through daring to be human, could he reach liberation; and yet he could not dare; he could not let himself go; he could not lose his life in order that he might find it. Corinna was right, he felt, when she called him a prig. She was right though he hated priggishness, though he longed to be natural and human, to let himself be swept away on the tide of some irresistible impulse. He longed to dare, and yet he had never dared. He longed to take risks, and yet he studied every step of the road. He longed to be unconventional, and yet he would have died rather than wear a red flower in his buttonhole. The thought of Patty rushed over him like the wind at dawn or the light of the sunrise. There was deliverance; there was freedom of spirit! She was the impulse he dared not follow, the risk he dared not take, the red flower he dared not wear.

"What lovely eyes Miss Vetch has," Margaret was saying. "Don't you think so, Cousin Harriet?"

Mrs. Culpeper sniffed at her bottle of smelling-salts. "She seemed to me very ordinary," she answered stiffly. "How could Gideon Vetch's daughter be anything else?"

"Yes, it's a pity about her father," admitted Margaret placidly. "If what Mr. Benham thinks is true, I suppose the Governor has agreed not to interfere in this dreadful strike."

Again Mrs. Culpeper sniffed. "Every one knows he is merely a tool in the hands of those people," she

said.

In the weeks that followed Stephen heard his mother's opinion repeated wherever he went. Everywhere the strike was discussed, and everywhere, in the Culpeper's circle, Gideon Vetch and his policies were repudiated. It was generally believed that the strike would be called, and that the Governor had been, as old General Plummer neatly put it, "bought off by the riff-raff." There were those, and the General was among them, who thought that Vetch had been definitely threatened by the labour leaders. There were open charges of "shady dealings" in the newspapers; hints that he had got the office of Governor "by striking a bargain" with the faction whose tool he had become. "Don't tell me, sir, that they didn't put him there because they knew they could count on him!" roared old Powhatan, with the accumulated truculence of eighty quarrelsome years. Of course the General was intemperate; but, as the Judge observed facetiously, "it was refreshing, in these days when there was nothing for decent people to drink, to find that intemperance was still possible. With the General fuming over corruption and Benham preaching morality, there is no need," he added, "for us to despair of virtue."

For the people who condemned Vetch were quite as emphatic in praise of John Benham; and in these weeks of unrest and anxiety, Corinna's face was glowing with pride and pleasure. That Benham, in his unselfish service, was leading the way, no one doubted. Tireless, unrewarded,—for it was admitted by those who esteemed him most that he was never really in touch with the crowd, that his zeal awakened no human response,—he had sacrificed his private practice in order to devote himself day and night to averting the strike. Stephen, inspired to hero worship, asked himself again what the difference was, beyond simple personal rectitude, between Vetch and Benham? Vetch, lacking, so far as the young man knew, every public virtue except the human touch which enkindles either the souls or the imaginations of men, could overturn Benham's argument with a dramatic gesture, an emotional phrase. Why was it that Benham, possessing both the character of the patriot and the graces of the orator, should fall short in the one indefinable attribute which makes a man the natural leader of men?

"People admire him, but they won't follow him," Stephen thought in perplexity. "Vetch has something that Benham lacks; and it is this something that makes people believe in him in spite of themselves."

This idea was in his mind when he met Benham one day on the steps of his club, and stopped to congratulate him on the great speech he had made the evening before.

"By Jove, it makes me want to throw my hat into the ring!" he exclaimed, half in jest, half in earnest.

"I wish you would," replied the other gravely. "We need young men. It is youth that turns the world."

Never, Stephen thought, had Benham, appeared more impressive, more perfectly finished and turned out; never had he appeared so near to his tailor and so far from his audience. He was a handsome man in his rather colourless fashion, a man who would look any part with distinction from policeman to President. His sleek iron-gray hair had as usual the rich sheen of velvet; his thin, sharp profile was like the face on a Roman coin. A man of power, of intellect, of character; and yet a man who had missed, in some inexplicable way, greatness, achievement. On the whole Stephen was glad that Corinna had announced her engagement. She and Benham seemed so perfectly suited to each other—and, of course, there was nothing in that old story about Alice Rokeby. A friendship, nothing more! Only the other day Benham had spoken casually of his "friendship" for Mrs. Rokeby; he always called her "Mrs. Rokeby"; and Stephen had accepted the phrase as a satisfactory explanation of their past association.

"I'd like to go into some public work," said the young man. "To tell the truth I can't settle down."

"I know," Benham responded sympathetically. "I went through it all myself; but there is nothing like throwing oneself into some outside work. I wish you would come into this fight. If we can avert this strike it will be worth any sacrifice."

That Benham was making tremendous personal sacrifices, Stephen knew, and the young man's voice was tinged with emotion as he answered, "I'm afraid I'm not much of a speaker."

"Oh, you would be, if you would only let yourself go." There it was again! Even Benham recognized his weakness; even Benham knew that he was afraid of life.

"Besides we need men of every type," Benham was saying smoothly. "We need especially good organizers. The fight won't be over to-morrow. Even if we win this time, we must organize against Vetch and defeat him once and for all in the next elections."

"Then you think he is really as dangerous as the papers are trying to make him appear?"

"I think," Benham replied shortly, "that he is in it for what he can get out of it."

"Well, call on me when I can help you," said Stephen, as they parted; and a minute later when he reached the pavement, he found occasion to repeat his impulsive offer to Judge Horatio Lancaster Page.

"I've promised Benham that I'll do all I can to help him defeat Vetch."

"You're right," returned the Judge, with his smile of discerning irony. "I suppose we're obliged to fight him."

"If we don't what will happen?"

"That's what I'd like to see, my boy. I'd give ten years full measure and running over to see exactly what would happen."

"Benham is afraid his crowd may send him to the Senate."

"Perhaps, but there is always a chance of their sending him to Jericho instead."

Stephen nodded. "Yes, there's trouble already, I believe, over this strike."

The Judge laughed with a note of cynical humour. "I can understand why he should feel that the chief obstacle to loving humanity is human nature."

"He's dead right, too. It is so easy to be a philosopher—or a philanthropist—in a desert. I've felt like that ever since I came home."

But the Judge had grown serious, and there was no merriment in his voice when he answered: "I may be wrong, of course, and, thank God, my mind hasn't yet got too stiff with age to change; but I've a reluctant belief deep down in me that this fellow Vetch has got hold of something that is going to count. I don't pretend to know what it is; an idea, a feeling, merely an undeveloped instinct for truth, or expediency, if you like it better. Of course it is all crude and raw. It needs cultivation and direction; but it's there—the vital principle, even if we don't recognize it when we see it. All the same," he concluded in a lighter tone, "I'm glad you are going into the fight. We can't hurt a principle by fighting it, you know."

Then he passed on his way; and the transient enthusiasm which had illuminated Stephen's mind drifted away like clouds of blown smoke. How could he fight with any heart when there seemed to him nothing

on either side that was worth fighting for—nothing except the unselfish patriotism of John Benham? He remembered the fervour, the exaltation with which he had gone to France that first year of the war. The belief in a righteous cause which would bring peace on earth and good will toward men; the belief in a human fellowship which would grow out of sacrifice; the belief in a fairer social order which would flower from the bloodstained memories of the battlefields,—what was there left of these romantic illusions to-day? Was it true, as Vetch had once said, that organized killing, even in a just cause, must bring its spiritual punishment? Could the lust of blood be changed by a document into the love of one's brother? "I gave my youth in that war," he thought, "and I won from it—what? Disillusionment." With the reflection he felt again the exhaustion of the nerves, the infirmity of purpose against which he had struggled ever since his return. "If there were only something worth fighting for, worth believing in! If I could only believe earnestly, or desire passionately—anything!"

Just as Corinna had longed for perfection, for something to worship, he found himself longing now for a cause, for any cause, even a lost one, to which he could give himself. He wanted facts, deeds, certainties. He was suffocated by shams and insincerities—and phrases.

Then suddenly, this was one of the symptoms of his nervous malady, the reaction swept over him in a wave of energy which receded almost immediately. If he could only find deliverance from himself and his own subjective processes! If he could only be borne away by the passion he felt and yet could not feel completely! He wanted Patty, he knew, but did he want her enough to justify the effort that he must make to win her? Would she be worth to him the break with his mother, with his traditions, with his inherited ideals? He saw her small, slight figure in the dappled sunlight under the budding trees. He saw her vivid flower-like face, her romantic eyes, and the arch and charming smile with which she watched his approach. Yes, he wanted her, he wanted her, and she was the only thing on God's earth, he told himself rhetorically, that he did want with the whole of his nature!

Quickening his steps, he turned in the direction of the Capitol Square, which stretched, like the painted curtain of a theatre, across the end of the street. A singular intuition, a presentiment, had come to him that if he could sustain this impulse, this tide of energy until he saw Patty, he should be cured—he should find freedom of spirit. Only through love, he had discovered, could there be resurrection from this spiritual death of the last two or three years. Only through some tremendous rush of desire could he overcome the partial paralysis of his will. His instinct, he knew, was right, but would his resolution last until he had found Patty?

It was early afternoon, and the faintly tinted shadows, as smooth as silk, were falling straight across the bright green grass on the hillside. The Square was almost deserted at this hour, except for the old men on the benches and the squirrels that were preparing to return to their nests in the trees. The breath of spring was over all, roving, fragrant, provocative.

He shrank from going straight to the house; but Patty was not in the walks, and he realized that if he found her at all it would be within doors. Perhaps it was better so. After all, he must become accustomed to the mansion and all that it contained, including Gideon Vetch, if he really loved Patty! And did he really love her? Oh, was it all to begin over again after the days and nights when he had threshed it out alone in desperation of mind? Had he lost not only all that was vital, but all that was stable, that was positive and affirmative in his life?

He stood for a moment with his eyes on the fresh young leaves which stirred softly. Then, as if hope and courage had passed into him with the air of spring, he turned away and walked rapidly to the gate of the Governor's house. His hand was on the iron fence, and he was about to enter the yard, when the door

opened and Patty came out on the porch with Julius Gershom. Stepping quickly back under the trees, Stephen watched the girl descend the steps, pass the fountain, and go swiftly out of the gate into the broad drive of the Square. She was talking eagerly to her companion; and, though she had told him that she disliked the man, she was smiling up at him while she talked. Her face was like a pink flower under the dark brim of her sailor hat, and in her eyes, beneath the inquiring eyebrows, there was the expression of charming archness that he had imagined so vividly. If she saw him, she made no sign; and for a moment after she had gone by, he stood vaguely wondering if she had seen him and if she had chosen this way to punish him for his neglect of the past two or three weeks? But even then, accepting that charitable interpretation, what explained the objectionable presence of Gershom? Was there anything that could explain or excuse the presence of Gershom?

The fire in his heart died down to cinders, while the light faded not only from that hidden country of the endless roads, but from the green hill and the blue sky and the little shining leaves of the branches overhead.

In the distance, he could see the two figures moving onward toward the gate of the Square; and beyond them there was only the long straight street filled with gray dust and the empty shadows of human beings.



CHAPTER XVII

MRS. GREEN

As Patty went by so quickly, she saw Stephen without appearing to glance in his direction. For the last few weeks a flame had run over her whenever she remembered, and there was scarcely a moment when it was out of her mind, that she had shown her heart so openly and that, as she expressed it bitterly, "he had hidden behind his mother." "If he comes back again," she told herself recklessly, and she felt scorched when she thought that he might never come back, "I'll let him see that I can trifle as well as, or better, than he can. I'll let him see that two can play at that kind of game." A hundred times Corinna's warning returned to her. The words, which had made so slight an impression when she heard them, were burned now into her memory. Oh, Mrs. Page had known all along what it meant! She had understood from the beginning; and she had tried, without hurting her, to make her see the blind folly of such an infatuation. As she thought of this to-day, Patty's heart ached with injured pride and resentment, not only against Stephen, but against the unfairness of life. Why was it that men and circumstances would never let one be natural and generous? Was there a conspiracy of events, as Mrs. Page had once said, to prevent the finest impulses from coming to flower? "I'd have done anything on earth for him," thought the girl with passionate indignation. "I'd have made any sacrifice. I could have been anything that he wanted." And she felt bitterly that the best in her soul, the sacred places of her life had been invaded and destroyed. The blighted sensation which accompanies the recoil of an emotion seemed to suspend not only the energy of her spirit, but the very breath in her body. A change had passed over her heart and the world around her and the persons and events which had so recently composed her universe. She felt now that she cared for none of them, that, one and all, they had ceased to interest her; and that the things which filled their lives were all vacant and meaningless forms. It was as if the vitality of existence had been drained away, leaving an empty shell. Nothing was real, nothing was alive but the aching core of her own wounded heart.

"I don't care. I won't let it spoil my life," she resolved while she bit back a sob. "Whatever happens, I am not going to let my life be ruined." She had repeated this so often that it had begun to drone in her mind like a line out of a hymn-book; and she was still repeating it when she swept by Stephen without so much as a word or a look. A dangerous mood was upon her. Nothing mattered, she felt, if she could only prove to him that she also had been trifling; that his kiss had meant as little to her as to him; that from the beginning to the end she had been as indifferent as he was.

Her step quickened into a run; and Gershom, striding, in order to keep up with her, looked at her with the jovial laugh that she hated. "You're in a powerful hurry to-day, ain't you?" he remarked.

"I'm always in a hurry. You have to hurry to get anything out of life." As she glanced up into his admiring eyes, she found herself wondering what Stephen had thought while he watched her? She wished that it had been anybody but Gershom. He seemed an unworthy instrument of revenge, though, she reflected, with a touch of her father's sagacity, one couldn't always choose the tools one would like best. Most people would admit that he was good-looking in a common way, she supposed; and it was only of late that she had realized how essentially vulgar he was.

"I'm sorry you haven't time to listen," he said. "I have news for you." Then, as she fell into a slower step, he added, with an abrupt change to a slightly hectoring tone: "We passed that young Culpeper just now.

Did you see him?"

She shook her head disdainfully. "I wasn't looking at him."

"He may have been on his way to the mansion." There was a taunting note in his voice, as if he were trying deliberately to work her into a temper.

"It doesn't matter." She spoke flippantly. "I don't care whether he was or not."

Gershom laughed. "That sounds good to me even if I take it with a grain of salt. I was beginning to be afraid that you liked him."

She turned on him angrily. "What business is that of yours?"

His amiability, as soon as he had struck fire, became imperturbable. "Well, I've known you a long time, Patty, and I take an interest in you, you see. Now, I don't fancy this young Culpeper. He is a conceited sort of ass like his father before him, the sort that thinks all clover is his fodder."

Though Gershom would have scorned philosophy had he ever heard of it, he was well grounded in that practical knowledge of human perversity from which all philosophers and most philosophic systems have sprung. Had his next words been barbed with steel they could not have pierced Patty's girlish pride more sharply. "I reckon he imagines all he's got to do is to look sweet at a girl, and she'll fall at his feet."

Patty's eyes flashed with anger. "He is not unusual in that, is he?" she asked mockingly.

"Well, you can't accuse me of that, Patty," said Gershom, with a sincerity which made him appear less offensively oily. "I never looked long at but one girl in my life, not since I first saw you, anyway—and I don't seem ever to have had an idea that she would fall at my feet. But I didn't bring you out here to begin kidding. I want to talk to you about the Governor, and I was afraid he would catch on to something if we stayed indoors."

"About Father?" She looked at him in alarm. "Is there anything the matter with Father?"

Without turning his head, he glanced at her keenly out of the corner of his eye. It was a trick of his which always irritated her because it reminded her of the sly and furtive side of his character.

"You've a pretty good opinion of the old man, haven't you, Patty?"

"I think he is the greatest man in the world."

"And you wouldn't like him to run against a snag, would you?"

"What do you mean? Has anything happened to worry him?"

He had stopped just beyond the nearest side entrance to the Square, and he stood now, with his eyes on the automobiles before the City Hall, while he fingered thoughtfully the ornamental scarf-pin in his green and purple tie. "There's always more or less to worry him, ain't there?"

She frowned impatiently. "Not Father. He is hardly ever anything but cheerful. Please tell me what you are hinting."

"I wasn't hinting. But, if you don't mind talking to me a minute, suppose we get away from these confounded cars."

He turned east, following the iron fence of the Square until they reached the high grass bank and the old box hedge which surrounded the garden at the back of the Governor's house. At the corner of the street, which sank far below the garden terrace, he stopped again and laid a restraining hand on her arm.

"He thinks a great deal of you too."

She shook his hand from her sleeve. "Why shouldn't he? I am his only child." Then her voice hardened, and she glanced at him suspiciously. "I wish for once you would try to be honest."

"Honest?" His amusement was perfectly sincere. "I am as honest as the day, and I've always been. That's why I'm in politics."

"Then tell me what you are trying to say about Father. If there's anything wrong, I'd rather be told at once."

They were still standing on the deserted corner below the garden, and while she waited for his answer, she glanced away from him up the side street, which rose in a steep ascent from the business quarter of the town. The sun was still high over the distant housetops and the light turned the brick pavement to a rich red and shot the clouds of gray dust with silver. The neighbourhood was one which had seen better days, and some well-built old houses, with red walls and white porches, lent an air of hospitality and comfortable living to the numerous cheap boarding places that filled the street. Crowds of children were playing games or skating on roller skates over the sidewalk; and on the porches a few listless women gossiped idly; or gazed out over newspapers which they did not read.

"Well, there ain't anything wrong exactly—yet," replied Gershom.

"But there may be, you think?"

"That depends upon him. If he keeps headed the way he's going, and he's as stubborn as a mule, there'll be trouble as sure as my name is Julius."

"Is that what you've quarrelled about of late—the way he's going?"

"Bless your heart, honey, we ain't quarrelled! Has it sounded like that to you? I've just been trying to make him see reason, that's all. He ain't got a right, you know, to turn against his best friends the way he's doing. Friends are friends whether you are in office or out, and there's a lot that a man owes to the folks that have stood by him. I tell you I know politics from the bottom up, and there ain't no room in 'em for the man—I don't give a darn who he is—that don't stand by his friends. If he's the President of the United States, he'll find that he can't afford not to stand by the people who put him there!"

So this was the trouble! He had let out his grievance at last, and from the smouldering resentment in his eyes, she understood that some real or imaginary injustice had put him, for the moment at least, in an ugly temper. If he had not met her when he left the house, if he had waited to grow cool, to reflect, he would probably never have taken her into his confidence. Chance again, she thought, not without bitterness. How much of the happiness or unhappiness of life depended upon chance!

"I don't believe it," she returned emphatically. "He always stands by people."

"He used to," he replied sullenly, "but that was in the old days when he needed 'em. The truth is he's got his head turned by his election. He thinks he's so strong that he can go on alone and keep the crowd at his back; but he'll find he's mistaken, and that the crowd, when it ain't worked right from the inside, is a poor thing to depend on. The crowd does the shouting, but it's a man's friends that start the tune."

"Are you talking about the strike?" she asked. "I thought he was in sympathy with the strikers."

"Oh, he says he is, but he won't prove it."

She faced him squarely, with her head held high and her eyes cold and determined. "What do you want me to do? Please don't beat about the bush any longer."

He hesitated a moment, and she inferred that he was trying to decide how far he might venture with safety. "Well, I thought you might speak a word to him," he said. "He sets such store by what you would like. I thought you might drop a hint that he ought to stand by his friends."

"To stand by his friends—that means you," she rejoined.

"Oh, he'll know quick enough what it means! You must be smart about it, of course, but I don't mind his knowing that I've been speaking to you. It's for his own good that I'm talking—for the very minute that the fellows find out he ain't been on the square with 'em, it will be 'nothing doing' for the Governor."

"It is a threat, then?" she asked sharply.

"I'd call it something else if I were you. Look here," he continued briskly. "You'd like to see the old man go to the Senate, and maybe higher up, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, of course. What has that to do with it?"

He winked and laughed knowingly. "Well, you just take my advice and drop a hint to him about this business. Then, perhaps, you'll see."

"If he doesn't take the hint, what will you do?"

"Ask me that in the sweet bye and bye, honey!" His tone had become offensively familiar. "It's for his good, you know. If it's the last word I ever speak I'm trying to save him from the biggest snag he ever met in his life."

She had drawn disdainfully away from him; but at his last words she came a step nearer. "I'll tell him exactly what you say," she answered; and then she asked suddenly in a firmer tone: "Have you heard anything more of my aunt?"

He looked at her intently. "Why, yes. You hadn't mentioned her again, so I thought you'd ceased to be interested. Would you like to see her?" he demanded abruptly after a pause.

"How can I? I don't know where she is."

For a minute or two before replying he studied her closely. "I wish you would let your hair grow out, Patty," he remarked at the end of his examination, and there was a note of genuine feeling in his bantering. "I remember how pretty you used to look as a little girl, with your hair flying behind you like the mane of a pony."

"Let my hair alone. Do you know where my aunt is?"

He appeared to yield reluctantly to her insistence. "If you're so bent on knowing—and, mind you, I tell you only because you make me—she ain't so very far from where we are standing. I could take you to her in ten minutes."

She looked at him as if she scarcely believed his words. "You mean that she is in town?"

"Haven't you known me long enough to find out that I always mean what I say?"

"Then you can take me to her now?"

He laughed shortly, and dug the end of his walking stick between the pavement and the edge of the curbstone. "What do you reckon the Governor would say to it?"

"I needn't tell him—not just yet, anyhow. But are you really and truly sure that she is my mother's sister?"

"Well, they had the same parents, and I reckon that makes 'em sisters if anything does. I knew 'em both out yonder in California, and I never heard anybody suggest they weren't related."

"Why did she come here? Was it to see me?"

"Partly that, and partly—well, she's been pretty sick. I reckon she's likely to go off at any time, and she wanted to be back where she was born. She had pneumonia two years ago, and then again last winter. Her lungs are about used up."

"Then, if I went to see her, I'd better go now, hadn't I?"

"It would be surer. Something may happen almost any day. That's why I spoke to you."

"I am glad you did. If it isn't far, will you take me now?"

But instead of walking on with her, he dug the end of his stick more firmly between the pavement and the curbstone. "I don't want to do you any harm, Patty," he said gently at last. "It may give you a shock to see her, you know. She's been through some hard times, and she's about come to the end of her rope. Good Lord, the way life is! When I first saw her out in California she was one of the prettiest pieces of flesh I ever laid eyes on. She had something of your look, too, though you wouldn't believe it now."

But the girl had already started to cross the street. "Don't let's waste any time talking. Which way do we go?"

At her decision his hesitation vanished, and he joined her with a laugh and a flourish of the diamond ring on the little finger of his left hand. "Well, you are a sport, Patty! You always were, even when you weren't much more than knee high to a duck. If you've made up your mind to go, you won't be blaming me afterward?"

"Oh, I shan't blame you, of course. Do we turn up this street?"

"Yes, go ahead. It ain't far—just a little way up Leigh Street."

They walked on rapidly, and presently, so swift and determined was Patty's step, Gershom ceased to speak, and only glanced at her now and then in a furtive and anxious way. There was a look of tragic resolution on her small face—oh, she was meeting life in earnest, she reflected—and even to the coarse mind and the dull imagination of the man beside her, she assumed gradually the appearance of some ethereal messenger. At the moment she was thinking of Stephen, but this he did not suspect. He saw only that there was something almost unearthly in her expression; and he felt the kind of awe that came over him on Sunday when he entered a church. He wouldn't hurt the girl, he told himself, with a twinge, for a pocketful of money.

They had turned into Leigh Street, and had walked some distance in silence, when Patty asked suddenly without looking round, "Then she doesn't know I am coming?"

"I told her I'd bring you whenever I could; but she ain't looking for you this evening. There, that's the house—the one in the middle, with that wooden swing and all those kids in the yard."

He pointed to what had once been a fine old house of stuccoed brick, with a square front porch and green shutters which were sagging on loosened hinges. On the walls where the stucco had peeled away, the red brick showed in splotches, and the pillars of the porch, which had been white, were now speckled with yellow stains. Over the whole place, with its air of fallen respectability, there hung the depressing smell of mingled dust, stale cooking, and bad tobacco. A number of imposing and well-preserved houses stood on the block, for of the whole neighbourhood, it appeared to the girl, they had chosen the most dilapidated dwelling and the one which was most crowded with children.

"We're here all right. Don't go so fast," remarked Gershom, as they ascended the steps. "It ain't going to run away from you." Bending down he picked up a crying urchin from the steps. "Lost your ball, have you? Well, I expect if you dig deep enough in my pocket, you can find it again. Hello! You've got a punch, ain't you, sonny? A regular John L., I reckon." Putting the child down, he continued sheepishly to Patty: "I always had a soft spot for the kids. Never could pass one in the street without stopping."

On the porch, beside a broken perambulator, which contained a black-eyed baby with a bottle of milk, a stout man sat reading the afternoon paper, while with one hand he patiently pushed the rickety carriage back and forth. As they reached the porch, he laid aside his paper, and rose with his hand still on the perambulator.

"Oh, it's you," he said, "Mr. Gershom."

"I've brought this lady to see Mrs. Green," returned Gershom. "How is she?"

The stout man shook his head and surveyed Patty curiously but not discourteously. He had a kindly, humorous look, and she felt at once that she preferred his blunt frankness to Gershom's facetious insincerity. There was something in his face that suggested the black-eyed baby sucking placidly at the rubber nipple on the bottle of milk.

"She's worse if anything. The doctor came this morning." The baby, having dropped the bottle, lifted a despairing wail, and the father bent over and replaced the nipple gently between the quivering lips. "The rent was due yesterday," he added, "I understood that there was to be no trouble about it."

"Oh, there's no trouble about that. I'm responsible," replied Gershom quickly. He was about to pass on; but changing his mind, he stopped and drew out his pocket book. "I'll settle it now. Are there any extras?"

"Yes, she's had to have eggs and milk, and there have been medicines. It comes to twelve dollars in all. I'll show you the account."

"Very well. Get anything that she needs." Then, as Gershom followed Patty into the hall, he pointed to the fine old staircase. "It's the back room. Go straight up. You ain't timid, are you?"

"Timid? Oh, no." Running lightly up the stairs, the girl hesitated a moment before the half-open door of the room at the back of the house. Then, in obedience to a gesture from Gershom as he pushed the door wider, she crossed the threshold, and went rapidly toward a couch in front of the window. As she went forward there floated to her a heavy, sweetish scent which seemed to her to be the very breath of despair. Her first

thought was that the sun had gone under a cloud; the next instant she perceived that the window was shaded by a ragged ailantus tree and that beyond the tree there was a high brick wall which shut out the daylight. Then she looked at the woman lying under a ragged blanket on the couch; and she felt vaguely that the haggard features framed in coarse black hair awakened a troubled sense of familiarity or recognition. The next instant there returned to her the memory of her walk in the Square with Corinna a few weeks before, and of the strange woman who had looked at them so curiously.

"I have come to see you," she began gently, "Mr. Gershom brought me."

Raising her head, the woman stared at her without replying. Her eyes were dull and heavy, with drooping lids beneath which a sombre glow flickered and died down. There was a wan yellow tinge over her face; and yet now that the approach of death had refined and purified her features, she was not without a gravity of expression which made her strangely impressive, like some wax mask of an avenging Fate. With a sensation of relief, Patty's eyes wandered from the haggard face to a calla lily in a pot on the window-sill, and she noticed that it bore a single perfect blossom. While she waited, overcome by a dumbness which seemed to invade her from head to foot, her eyes clung to that calla lily as if it were her one connection with reality. All the rest, the close, dingy room, with the ailantus tree and the high wall beyond, the sickening sweetish odour with which she was unfamiliar, the waxen mask and the blank, drooping eyes of the woman; all these things seemed to exist not in her actual surroundings, but in some hideous dream from which she was struggling to awake. Somewhere long ago, in a dreadful nightmare, she had smelled that cloying scent and seen those half-shut eyes looking back at her. Somewhere—and yet it was impossible. She could only have imagined it all.

Suddenly the woman spoke in a thick voice. "You are the Governor's daughter? Gideon Vetch's daughter?"

"Yes. Mr. Gershom told me you wanted to see me."

"Mr. Gershom?" The woman's eyelids flickered and then fell heavily over her expressionless eyes. "Oh, you mean Julius. Yes, I told him I wanted to see you." A quiver of animation passed like a spasm over her features, and she inquired eagerly, "Where is he? Did he come?"

"I'm here all right," said Gershom, stepping briskly into the range of her vision.

She gazed up at him as he approached her with the look of a famished animal, a look so little human and so full of physical hunger that Patty turned her eyes again to the calla lily on the window-sill, and then to the young green on the ailantus tree and the brick wall beyond. To the girl it seemed that minutes must have gone by before the next words came. "You brought the medicine?"

"Yes, I brought it. The doctor gave it to me; but it is hard to get, and he said you were to have it only on condition that you do everything that we tell you."

"Oh, I will, I will." She reached out her hand eagerly for the package he had taken from his coat pocket; and when Patty looked at her again a curious change had passed over her face, revivifying it with the colour of happiness. "I have been in such pain—such pain," she whispered. "I was afraid it would come back before you came. Oh, I was so afraid." Then she added hurriedly: "Is that all? Did you bring nothing else?"

Though a look of embarrassment crossed his face, he carried off the difficult situation with his characteristic assurance. "The doctor sent you a little stimulant. Perhaps I'd better give you a dose now. It might pick you up." Taking a bottle from his pocket, he poured some whiskey into a glass and added a

little water from a pitcher on the table. "There, now," he remarked, with genuine sympathy as he held the glass to her lips. "You'll begin to feel better in a minute. This young lady can't stay but a little while, so you'd better try to buck up."

"I'll try," answered the woman obediently. "I'll try—but it isn't easy to come back out of hell." Lifting her head from the pillow, as if it were a dead weight that did not belong to her, she stared at Patty while her tormented mind made an effort to remember. In a minute her mouth worked pathetically, and she burst into tears. "I can't come back now, I can't come back now," she repeated in a whimpering tone. "But I'll be better before long, and then I want to see you. There are things I want to tell you when I get the strength. I can't think of them now, but they are things about Gideon Vetch."

"About Father?" asked the girl, and her voice trembled.

The woman stopped crying, and looked up appealingly, while she wiped her eyes on the ragged edge of the blanket. "Yes, about Gideon Vetch. That's his name, ain't it?"

"I wouldn't talk any more now, if I were you," said Gershom, putting his hand gently on her pillow. "We'll come again when you're feeling spryer."

The woman nodded. "Yes, come again. Bring her again."

"I'll come whenever you send for me," said Patty reassuringly; but instead of looking at the woman, she stooped over and touched the calla lily with her lips, as if it were human and could respond to her. "I want you to tell me about my mother—everything. I remember her just once, the night before they took her to the asylum. She was in spangled skirts that stood out like a ballet dancer's, and there was a crown of stars on her hair and a star on the end of the wand she carried. I remember it all just as plainly as if it were yesterday—though they tell me I was too little—"

She broke off because the woman was gazing at her so strangely. "You were too little," she cried, and burst into hysterical weeping. "I can't stand it," she said wildly. "I never had a chance, and I can't stand it."

"I think we'd better go," said Gershom. It amazed Patty to find how gentle he could be when his sympathy was touched. "I oughtn't to have brought you to-day." Turning away, he left the room hurriedly, as if the scene were too much for him.

At this the woman controlled herself with a convulsive effort. "No, I wanted to see you," she said. "You are pretty, but you aren't prettier than your mother was at your age."

For a moment the girl looked pityingly down on her. "I hope you will soon be better," she responded in a tone which she tried to make sympathetic in spite of the physical shrinking she felt. "Let me know when you wish to see me, and I will come back."

The woman shivered. "Do you mean that?" she asked. "Will you come when I send for you? I want to see you again—once—before I die."

"I promise you that I will come. I'll send you something, too, and so will Father."

"Gideon Vetch," said the woman very slowly, as if she were trying to hold the name in her consciousness before it slipped away from her. "Gideon Vetch."

As the girl broke away and ran out of the room that expressionless repetition followed her into the hall and down the staircase, growing fainter and fainter like the voice of one who is falling asleep: "*Gideon Vetch. Gideon Vetch.*"

On the porch, where the stout man had returned to his newspaper, Patty found Gershom standing beside the perambulator, with the black-eyed baby in his arms. He was gazing gravely over the round bald head, and his face wore a funereal expression which contrasted ludicrously with the clucking sounds he was making to the attentive and interested baby. When Patty joined him he put the child back into the carriage, carefully tucking the crocheted robe about the tiny shoulders. "I kind of thought the little one might like a chance to get out of that buggy," he observed, while he straightened himself briskly, and adjusted his tie.

"She must be very ill," said the girl, as they went out of the gate and turned down the street.

"A sure thing," replied Gershom concisely. Then he whistled sharply, and added, "Rotten, that's what I call it."

"She said she'd never had a chance," remarked Patty thoughtfully, "I wonder what she meant."

The funereal expression spread like a pall over Gershom's features, but his intermittent whistle sounded as sprightly as ever. "Well, how many folks in this world have ever had what you might call a decent chance?" he asked.

"I don't know. I hadn't thought." The girl looked depressed and puzzled. "It's a dreadful thing to think that nobody cares when you're dying." Then her tone grew more hopeful. "Do you suppose anybody thinks that Father never had a chance?" she asked.

Gershom broke into a laugh. "Well, if he had it, you may be pretty sure that he made it himself," he retorted.

"Then I wish he could make some for other people."

"He says he's trying to, doesn't he? But between us, Patty, my child, you won't forget what you have to say to the old man, will you?"

"What have I to say? Oh, you mean about standing by his friends?"

"That's just it. You tell him from yours truly that the best thing he can do all round is to stick fast to his friends."

"And that means the strikers?"

"It means what I tell you."

"Well, I'll repeat exactly what you say; it won't make any difference if his mind is made up."

"Maybe so. Are you going to tell him where you've been?"

"I don't know. I hate to worry him; but that poor woman must need help."

"Oh, she needs it. We all need it," remarked Gershom flippantly. Then, as they reached the entrance to the Square, he held out his hand. "Well, I'm off now, and I hope you aren't feeling any worse because of your visit. The world ain't made of honeycomb, you know, and there's no use pretending it is. But you're a darn good sport, Patty. You're as good a sport as I ever struck up with in this little affair of life."



CHAPTER XVIII

MYSTIFICATION

Walking slowly home across the Square, Patty told herself that the future had been taken out of her hands. She seemed to have been moved mentally, if not bodily, into another world, into a world where the sleepy old Square, wrapped in a soft afternoon haze, still existed, but from which Stephen Culpeper had vanished in a rosy cloud. She did not know why she had relinquished the thought of Stephen since her visit to the house in East Leigh Street; but some deep instinct warned her that she had widened the gulf between them by her excursion with Gershom. "I can't help it," she thought sensibly enough. "There wasn't anything in it before that, and I might as well go ahead and stop thinking about it." Her anger at Stephen's neglect had melted into a vague and impersonal resentment, a resentment, rather for the dying woman than for herself, against all the needless cruelties of life. Even Gershom, even the unspeakable Gershom, had had discernment enough to see that something good in that poor woman had been blighted and crushed. Was it true that no one was ever given the chance to be one's best? Was this true, not only of that dying woman, but of her father and Stephen and Corinna and herself and all human beings everywhere?

Lingering a moment near the Washington monument, she stood watching the straggling groups that were crossing the Square. Bit by bit, snatches of conversation drifted into her mind and then blew out again, leaving scarcely the shadow of an impression. "They tell me it's going up. I don't know, but I'll find out tomorrow." "I wouldn't wear one of those things for a million dollars, and he says—" "Yes, I've arranged to go unless the strike should be called next week."

The strike? Oh, she had almost forgotten it! She had almost forgotten the message she had promised to deliver to her father. With a gesture that appeared to sweep her last remaining illusion behind her, she started resolutely up the drive to the house. After all, whatever came, she would not let them think that she was either afraid of life or disappointed in love. She would not mope, and she would not show the white feather. On one point she was passionately determined—no man, by any method known to the drama of sex, was going to break her heart!

She had quickened her steps while she made her resolve; and, a minute later, she broke into a run when she saw that Corinna's car stood at the door and that Corinna waited for her in the hall. Had the girl only realized it, Corinna's heart also was troubled; and the visit was one result of the discouraging talk she had had recently with Stephen.

"I had to go down town, so I stopped on the way back to speak to you." Though she said no word of her anxiety, Patty could hear it in every note of her expressive voice and feel it in the protective pressure of her arm. "I want you to go with me to the Harrisons' dance Wednesday night, and I want you to look your very prettiest."

"But I'm not even asked."

"Oh, you are. Mrs. Harrison has just told me she was sending your invitation with a number that had not gone out." How like Corinna it was to put it that way! "They are giving it for that English girl who is staying with them. She is pretty, but you must look ever so much prettier. I want you to wear that green and silver dress that makes you look like a mermaid." The kind voice, so full of sympathy, so forgetful of self,

flooded Patty's heart like sunshine after darkness.

"I will go, if you wish me to," she answered, raising Corinna's hand to her cheek. And the thought flashed through her mind, "Stephen will be there. Even if everything is over, I'd like him to see me."

"I'll come for you a little before ten," said Corinna; and then, as the door of the library opened and Vetch came out, she added hurriedly: "I must go now. Remember to look your prettiest."

"No, don't go," begged Patty. "Father will be so disappointed." She had remembered the message, and she felt that Corinna, whose wisdom was infallible, might help her to understand it. Though it had sounded so casual on the surface, her natural sagacity detected both a warning and a menace; and the very touch of Corinna's hand, in her long white glove, was reassuring and helpful.

Whatever may have threatened Vetch, he seemed oblivious of it as he came forward with his hearty greeting. "It's queer," he said, "but something told me you were here. I looked out to make sure." His simple pleasure touched Corinna like the artless joy of a child. It was impossible to resist his magnetism, she thought, as she looked up into his sanguine face, for what was it, after all, except an unaffected enjoyment of little things, an unconquerable belief in life?

"I stopped to ask Patty about a dance," she explained. "I must go on immediately."

He glanced at the girl a little anxiously. "Is she going to a party with you? I am glad."

In spite of his buoyant manner, there was an abstracted look in his eyes, as if his mind were working at a distance while he talked. After the first minute or two Patty observed this and it helped her to make her decision. "Are you busy, Father?" she asked. "I promised Mr. Gershom that I would give you a message—such a silly message it is too."

"Gershom?" He repeated, and his face darkened. "What did he say to you? No, don't go, Mrs. Page. Come into the library, and let us have the message."

Corinna glanced uncertainly over her shoulder. "I really must be going," she murmured, and then yielding suddenly either to inclination or to the pressure of Patty's hand, she crossed the threshold of the library and walked over to the front window. Outside, beyond the yard and the grotesque fountain, she saw the splendid outline of Washington, and beyond this the faint afternoon haze above the spires and chimneys of the city. "The sun will go down soon. I must hurry," she thought; yet she stood there, without moving, looking out on the monument and the sky. For a moment she gazed in silence; then turning quickly, she glanced with smiling eyes about the small, stiffly furnished room, with the leather chairs and couch and the business looking writing-table in the centre of the floor.

"How comfortable you look here," she observed lightly, "and how business-like."

"Yes, I work here a good deal in the evenings." He turned a chair toward the window, and when she sat down, he remained for a minute still standing, with his hand on the back of the chair, smiling thoughtfully not at her, but at the disarray on his desk. The glow of pleasure which the sight of her had brought was still in his face; and she thought that she had never seen him so nearly good-looking. It occurred to her now, as it had done so often before, that in the hour of trouble he would be like a rock to lean on. However else he might fail, she surmised that in human relations he would be for ever dependable. And what was life, after all, except a complex and intricate blend of human relations? She decided suddenly and positively that she had always liked Gideon Vetch. She liked the way his broad bulging forehead swept back into his sandy hair, which was quite gray on the temples; she liked the contrast between the

quizzical humour in his eyes and the earnest expression of his generous mouth with its deep corners. He stood in her mind for the straight and simple things of life, and she had lost her way so often among the bewildering ramification of human motives. He had no trivial words, she knew. He was incapable of "making conversation"; and she, who had been bred in a community of ceaseless chatter, was mentally refreshed by the sincerity of his interest. It was as restful, she said to herself now, as a visit to the country.

"So Gershom asked you to give me a message?" remarked Vetch abruptly to Patty. "Where did you see him?"

"He joined me when I went out," replied Patty, speaking slowly and carefully with her eyes on Corinna. "I tried to slip away, but he wouldn't let me. He asked me to speak to you about something that was worrying him, and a great many others, he said. He didn't put it into words, but I think he meant the strike—"

Vetch looked up quickly. "Oh, that is worrying him, is it?"

"What is it all about, Father? Why are they going to strike?"

"Can you answer that, Mrs. Page?" The Governor turned to Corinna with a sportive gesture, as if he were casting upon her the burden of a reply. His smile was sketched so faintly about his mouth that it seemed merely to emphasize the gravity of his expression.

"I?" Corinna looked round with a start of surprise. "Why, what should I know of it?"

"Then they don't talk about it where you are?"

"Oh, yes, they talk about it a great deal." She appeared to hesitate, and then added with deliberate audacity, "but they think that you know more about it than any one else."

He did not smile as he answered her. "Do they expect the men to strike?"

Though she made a graceful gesture of evasion, she met his question frankly. "They expect them to, I gather—unless you prevent it."

A shade of irritation crossed his features. "How can I prevent it? They have a right to stop work."

"They seem to think, the people I know, that it depends upon how safe the leaders think it will be."

"How safe? I can't tie their hands, can I?"

"Of course I am only repeating what I hear." She gazed at him with friendly eyes. "No one could know less about it than I do."

"People are saying, I suppose," he continued in a tone of exasperation, "that these men had an understanding with me before I came into office. They seem to think that I can make the strike a success by standing aside and holding my hands. That, of course, is pure nonsense. If the men want to stop work, nobody has a right to interfere with them. Certainly I haven't. But have they the right—the question hangs on this point—to interfere with the farmers who want to get their crops to market as badly as the strikers want to quit work? The kind of general strike these people have in mind bears less relation to industry than it does to war; and you know what I think about war and the rights of non-combatants. They want to tie up the whole system of transportation until they starve their opponents into submission. The old damnable Prussian theory again, you see, that crops up wherever men take the stand, which they do everywhere they have the power, that might is a law unto itself. Now, I am with these men exactly half

way, and no further. As long as their method of striking doesn't interfere with the rights of the public, they seem to me fair enough. But when it comes to raising the price of food still higher and cutting off the city milk supply—well, when they talk of that, then I begin to think of the human side of it." He broke off abruptly, and concluded in a less serious tone, "that's the only thing in the whole business I care about—the human side of it all—"

A phrase of Benham's floated suddenly into her mind, and she found herself repeating it aloud: "There are no human rights where a principle is involved."

Vetch laughed. "That's not you; it's Benham. I recognize it. He's the sort that would believe that, I suppose—the sort that would write a political document in blood if he didn't have ink."

"Oh, don't!" she protested. There was a grain of truth in the epigram, but she resented it the more keenly for this.

"Well, I may have intended it as a compliment," rejoined Vetch gaily. "He would take it that way, I reckon. And, anyhow, you have heard him make worse flings at me."

She coloured, admitting and denying at the same time, the truth of his words. "You could never understand each other. You are so different."

He looked at her gravely; but even gravity could not wholly drive the gleam of humour from his eyes. "At any rate I admire Benham. I have the advantage of him there." The quickness of his wit made her smile. "But, as you say, we are different," he added after a moment. "I reckon I've turned my hand at times to jobs of which Benham would disapprove; but I'd be hanged before I'd write the greatest document ever penned in—well, in the blood of one of those squirrels out yonder in the Square!"

As he finished he turned his face toward the window, and following his gaze, she saw the sunlight sparkling like amber wine on the rich grass and the delicate green of the trees. As she looked back at him, she wondered what his past could have been—how deep, how complex, how varied was his experience of life? She was aware again of that curiously primitive attraction which she had felt the other afternoon in the shop. It was as if he appealed, not to the beliefs and sentiments with which life had obscured and muffled her nature, but to some buried self beneath the self that she and the world knew, to some ancient instinct which was as deep as the oldest forests of earth. After all, was there a hidden self, a buried forest within her soul which she had never discovered?

"But Patty has not given you her message!" she exclaimed, startled and confused by the strangeness of the sensation.

"Oh, there isn't much to tell," answered Patty, wondering if she could ever learn, even if she practised every day, to speak and move like Corinna. "It was only that you ought to stand by your friends."

"To stand by my friends," repeated Vetch; then he drew in his breath with a whistling sound. "Well, I like his impudence!" he exclaimed.

Corinna rose with a laugh. "So do I," she observed, "and he seems to possess it in abundance." Then she folded Patty in a light and fragrant embrace. "You must be the belle of the ball," she said. "I have a genius for being a chaperon."

When she had gone, and they watched her car pass the monument, the girl turned back into the hall, with her hand clinging tightly to Vetch's arm.

"Father, what do you suppose that message meant?"

"Is it obliged to mean anything?"

"Things generally do, don't they?"

Vetch smiled as he looked down at her; but his smile conveyed anxiety rather than amusement to her observant eyes. "Oh, if things are said by Gershom, they generally mean hell," he responded. "Perhaps I'll find out Thursday night; there's to be a meeting then, and it looks as if somebody might make trouble." Then he patted her shoulder. "Don't worry about Gershom, honey," he added in the way he used to speak when she fell and hurt herself as a child. "Don't worry your mind about Gershom. I'll take care of him."

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him that she was not worrying about Gershom, but about the woman dying all alone in that dark room in Leigh Street. If he had only looked less disturbed she might have done so; and when she thought of it afterward, she understood that frankness would have been by far the wiser course. However, while she wondered what she ought to say, the opportunity slipped by, and the ringing of the telephone on his desk called him away from her.

Corinna, meanwhile, was rolling down the drive over the slanting shadows of the linden trees. She looked thoughtful, for she was trying to decide what it was about Vetch that made her believe in him so profoundly when she was with him and yet begin to distrust him as soon as she got far enough away to gain a perspective? Gossip probably, she reflected. When she was with him her confidence was the natural response of her own unbiassed perceptions; when she left him she passed immediately into an atmosphere that was charged with the suspicions of other people. She remembered the stories, true or false, which had been hinted and whispered before the last election. Malicious gossip that, and as unfounded no doubt as the rest. She recalled the muttered insinuations of fraudulent political stratagems, of what Benham had called the Governor's weathercock principles. In Vetch's presence, she realized that she invariably lost sight of these structural or surface blemishes, and judged him by some standard which was different from the one she had inherited with the shape of her nose and the colour of her eyes. What troubled her was not so much the riddle of Vetch's personality as the fact that there was another mental world beyond the one she had always inhabited, and that this other world was filled, like her own, with obscure moral and spiritual images.

As she approached the club at the corner she saw Benham come out of the door; and stopping the car she waited, smiling, until he joined her. While she watched him cross the pavement, she rejoiced in the thoroughbred fineness and thinness of his appearance—in his clear-cut Roman features and in the impenetrable reticence of his expression. Yes, she loved him as well as she could love any man; and that, she told herself, with a touch of cynical amusement, was just so much and no more, just enough to bring happiness, but not enough to bring pain.

"I'll take you home," she said, as he reached her, and there seemed to her something delightful and romantic in this accidental meeting.

"What luck!" The severity melted from his features while he took his place beside her. "I was thinking only this morning that I owe a sacrifice to the god of chance. May I tell the man to drop me at my rooms?"

She nodded, watching him contentedly while he spoke to the chauffeur and then turned to look at her with his level impersonal gaze. Happiness had brought the youth back to her face. Her hair swept like burnished wings under her small close hat, and the eyes that she raised to his were dark and splendid. There was about her always in moments of happiness the look of a beauty too bright to last or to grow

old; and now, in this last romance of her life, she appeared to be drenched in autumn sunshine.

"One does want to make sacrifices," she answered. "That is the penalty of joy. One can scarcely believe in it before it goes."

"Well, I believe in this. You are very lovely. Where have you been?"

"To the Governor's. I wanted to speak to Patty. I feel sorry for Patty to-day. I feel sorry for almost every one," she added, with an enchanting smile, "except myself."

"And me. Surely you don't waste your pity on me? But what of Miss Vetch? Hasn't she her own particular happiness?"

"I wonder—" Then, without finishing her sentence, she left the subject of Patty because she surmised from Benham's tone that he would not be sympathetic. "I had a long talk with the Governor. John, what do you think will come of the strike?"

He answered her question with another. "What did he tell you?"

"Nothing except that the men have a right to strike if they wish to."

He laughed. "Well, that's safe enough. But don't talk of Vetch. I dislike him so heartily that I have a sneaking feeling I may be unjust to him."

It was so like him, that fine impersonal sense of fairness, that her eyes warmed with admiration. "That is splendid," she responded. "It is just the kind of thing that Vetch could never feel." Suddenly she knew that she was ashamed of having believed in Vetch when she contrasted him with John Benham. How could she have imagined for an instant that the Governor could stand a comparison like this?

He pressed her hand as the car stopped before the apartment house where he lived. "In a few hours I shall see you again," he said; and his voice, in its eagerness, reminded her of the voice of Kent Page when he had made love to her in her girlhood. Ah, she had learned wisdom since then! Just so much and no more, that was the secret of happiness. Give with the mind and the heart; but keep always one inviolable sanctity of the spirit—of the buried self beneath the self.

The streets were almost deserted; and as the car went on, Corinna thought that she had never seen the city look so fresh and charming. Through the long green vista of the trees, there was a shimmer of silver air, and wrapped in this sparkling veil, she saw the bronze statues and the ardent glow of the sunset. Everything at which she looked was steeped in a wonderful golden light; and this light seemed to come, not from the burning horizon, but from the happiness that flooded her thoughts. She saw the world again as she had seen it in her first youth, suffused with joy that was like the vivid freshness of dawn. The long white road, the arching trees, the glittering dust, the spring flowers blooming in gardens along the roadside, the very faces of the people who passed her; all these things at which she looked were illuminated by this radiance which seemed, in some strange way, to shine not without but within her heart. "It is too beautiful to last," she said to herself in a whisper. "It is youth, more beautiful even than the reality, come back again for an hour—for one little hour before it goes out for ever."

Then, because it seemed safer as well as wiser to be practical, to discourage wild dreaming, she tried to direct her thoughts to insignificant details. Yet even here that rare golden light penetrated to the innermost recesses of her mind; and each drab uninteresting fact glittered with a fresh interest and charm. "I forgot to order that cretonne for the porch," she thought disconnectedly, in an endeavour to conciliate the Fates by

pretending that life was as commonplace as it had always been. "That black background with the blue larkspur is pretty—and I must have the porch furniture repainted the blue-green that they do so well in Italy. That reminds me that Patty must be the belle of the dance in her green dress. I shall see that she has no lack of partners—at least I can manage that;—if I cannot make her happy. I am sorry for the child—if only Stephen—but, no—I left the book I was reading in the shop. What was the name of it? Silly and sentimental! Why will people always write things they don't mean and know are not true about love? Yes, the black background with the blue larkspur was the best that I saw. I wonder what I did with the sample. Oh, why can't everybody be happy?"

The car turned out of the road into the avenue of elms, which led to the Georgian house of red brick, with its quaint hooded doorway. In front of the door there was a flagged walk edged with box; and after the car had gone, Corinna followed this walk to the back of the house, where rows of white and purple iris were blooming on the garden terrace. For a moment she looked on the garden as one who loved it; then turning reluctantly, she ascended the steps, and entered the door which a coloured servant held open.

"A lady's in there waiting for you," said the man, who having lost the dialect, still retained the dramatic gestures of his race. "She would wait, and she says she can't go without seeing you."

With a faintness of the heart rather than the mind, Corinna looked through the doorway, and saw the face of Alice Rokeby glimmering narcissus white in the dusk of the drawing-room.



CHAPTER XIX

THE SIXTH SENSE

As Corinna went forward, with that strange premonitory chill at her heart, it seemed to her that all the fragrance of the garden floated toward her with a piercing sweetness that was the very essence of youth and spring. Through the wide-open French windows she could see the garden terrace, the pale rows of iris, and the straight black cedars rising against the pomegranate-coloured light of the afterglow. A few tall white candles were shining in old silver candlesticks; but it was by the vivid tint in the sky that she saw the large, frightened eyes of the woman who was waiting for her.

"If I had only known you were here, I should have hurried home," began Corinna cordially. Drawing a chair close to her visitor, she sat down with a movement that was protecting and reassuring. Her quick sympathies were already aroused. She surmised that Alice Rokeby had come to her because she was in trouble; and it was not in Corinna's nature to refuse to hear or to help any one who appealed to her.

Alice threw back her lace veil as if she were stifled by the transparent mesh. "In the shop there are so many interruptions," she answered. "I wanted to see you—" Breaking off hurriedly, she hesitated an instant, and then repeated nervously, "I wanted to see you—"

Corinna smiled at her. "Would you like to go out into the garden? May is so lovely there."

"No, it is very pleasant here." Alice made a vague, helpless gesture with her small hands, and said for the third time, "I wanted to see you—"

"I am afraid you are not well." Corinna spoke very gently. "Perhaps it is not too late for tea, or may I get you a glass of wine? All winter I've intended to go and inquire because I heard you'd been ill. It has been so long since we really saw anything of each other; but I remember you quite well as a little girl—such a pretty little girl you were too. You are ever so much younger, at least ten years younger, than I am."

As she rippled on, trying to give the other time to recover herself, she thought how lovely Alice had once been, and how terribly she had broken since her divorce and her illness. She would always be appealing—the kind of woman with whom men easily fell in love—but one so soon reached the end of mere softness and prettiness.

"Yes, you were one of the older girls," answered Alice, "and I admired you so much. I used to sit on the front porch for hours to watch you go by."

"And then I went abroad, and we lost sight of each other."

"We both married, and I got a divorce last year."

"I heard that you did." It seemed futile to offer sympathy.

"My marriage was a mistake. I was very unhappy. I have had a hard life," said Alice, and her lower lip, as soft as a baby's, trembled nervously. How little character there was in her face, how little of anything except that indefinable allurements of sex!

"I know," responded Corinna consolingly. She felt so strong beside this helpless, frightened woman that the old ache to comfort, to heal pain, was like a pang in her heart.

"Everything has failed me," murmured Alice, with the restless volubility of a weak nature. "I thought there was something that would make up for what I had missed—something that would help me to live—but that has failed me like everything else—"

"Things will fail," assented Corinna, with sympathy, "if we lean too hard on them."

A delicate flush had come into Alice's face, bringing back for a moment her old flower-like loveliness. Her fine brown hair drooped in a wave on her forehead, and beneath it her violet eyes were deep and wistful.

"What a beautiful room!" she said in a quivering voice. "And the garden is like one in an old English song."

"Yes, I hardly know which I love best—my garden or my shop."

The words were so far from Corinna's thoughts that they seemed to drift to her from some distant point in space, out of the world beyond the garden and the black brows of the cedars. They were as meaningless as the wind that brought them, or the whirring of the white moth at the window. Beneath her vacant words and expressionless gestures, which were like the words and gestures of an automaton, she was conscious of a profound current of feeling which flowed steadily between Alice Rokeby and herself; and on this current there was borne all the inarticulate burden of womanhood. "Poor thing, she wants me to help her," she thought; but aloud she said only: "The roses are doing so well this year. They will be the finest I have ever had."

Suddenly Alice lowered her veil and rose. "I must go. It is late," she said, and held out her hand. Then, while she stood there, with her hand still outstretched, all that she had left unspoken appeared to rush over her in a torrent, and she asked rapidly, while her lips jerked like the lips of a hurt child, "Is it true, Corinna, that you are going to marry John Benham?"

For an instant Corinna looked at her without speaking. The sympathy in her heart ceased as quickly as a fountain that is stopped; and she was conscious only of that lifeless chill with which she had entered the room. Now that the question had come, she knew that she had dreaded it from the first moment her eyes had rested on the face of her visitor, that she had expected it from the instant when she had heard that a woman awaited her in the house. It was something of which she had been aware, and yet of which she had been scarcely conscious—as if the knowledge had never penetrated below the surface of her perceptions. And it would be so easy, she knew, to evade it now as she had evaded it from the beginning, to push to-day into to-morrow for the rest of her life. Nothing stood in her way; nothing but that deep instinct for truth on which, it seemed to her now, most of her associations with men had been wrecked. Then, because she was obliged to obey the law of her nature, she answered simply, "Yes, we expect to be married."

A strangled sound broke from Alice's lips, but she bit it back before it had formed into a word. The hand that she had thrown out blindly fell on the fringe of her gown, and she began knitting it together with trembling fingers. "Has he—does he care for you?" she asked presently in that hurried voice.

For the second time Corinna hesitated; and in that instant of hesitation, she broke irrevocably with the past and with the iron rule of tradition. She knew how her mother, how her grandmother, how all the strong and quiet women of her race would have borne themselves in a crisis like this—the implications and evasions

which would have walled them within the garden that was their world. Her mother, she realized, would have been as incapable of facing the situation as she would have been of creating it.

"Yes, he cares for me," she answered frankly; and then, before the terror that leaped into the eyes of the other woman, as if she longed to turn and run out of the house, Corinna touched her gently on the shoulder. "Don't look like that!" It was unendurable to her compassionate heart that she should have brought that look into the eyes of any living creature.

She led Alice back to the chairs they had left; and when the servant came in to turn on the softly shaded lamps, they sat there, facing each other, in a silence which seemed to Corinna to be louder than any sound. There was the noise of wonder in it, and tragedy, and something vaguely menacing to which she could not give a name. It was fear, and yet it was not fear because it was so much worse. Only the blank terror in Alice's face, the terror of the woman who has lost hope, could express what it meant. And this terror translated into sound asked presently:

"Are—are you sure?"

A wave of pity surged through Corinna's heart. Her strength became to her something on which she could rest—which would not fail her; and she understood why she had had to meet so many disappointments in life, why she had had to bear so much that was almost unbearable. It was because, however strong emotion was in her nature, there was always something deep down in her that was stronger than any emotion. She had been ruled not by passion but by law, by some clear moral discernment of things as they ought to be; and this was why weak persons, or those who were the prey to their own natures, leaned on her with all their weight. In that instant of self-realization she knew that the refuge of the weak would be for ever denied her, that she should always be alone because she was strong enough to rely on her own spirit.

"Before I answer your question," she said, "I must know if you have the right to ask it."

The wistful eyes grew bright again. How graceful she was, thought Corinna as she watched her; and she knew that this woman, with her clinging sweetness, like the sweetness of honeysuckle, and her shallow violence of mood, could win the kind of love that had been denied to her own royal beauty. This other woman was the ephemeral incarnate, the thing for which men gave their lives. She was nothing; and therefore every man would see in her the reflection of what he desired.

"I have the right," she answered desperately, without pride and without shame. "I had the right before I got my divorce—"

"I understand," said Corinna, and her voice was scarcely more than a breath. Though she did not withdraw the hand that the other had taken, she looked away from her through the French window, into the garden where the twilight was like the bloom on a grape. The fragrance became suddenly intolerable. It seemed to her to be the scent not only of spring, but of death also, the ghost of all the sweetness that she had missed. "I shall never be able to bear the smell of spring again in my life," she thought. She had made no movement of surprise or resentment, for there was neither surprise nor resentment in her heart. There was pain, which was less pain than a great sadness; and there was the thought that she was very lonely; that she must always be lonely. Many thoughts passed through her mind; but beyond them, stretching far away into the future, she saw her own life like a deserted road filled with dead leaves and the sound of distant voices that went by. She could never find rest, she knew. Rest was the one thing that had been denied her—rest and love. Her destiny was the destiny of the strong who must give until they have nothing left, until their souls are stripped bare. "He must have cared for you," she said at last. Oh, how empty

words were! How empty and futile!

"He could never care again like that for any one else," replied Alice, reaching out her hand as if she were pushing away an object she feared. "Whatever he thinks now, he could never care that much again."

Whatever he thinks now! A smile tinged with bitter knowledge flickered on Corinna's lips for an instant. After all, how little, how very little she knew of John Benham. She had seen the face he turned to the world; she had seen the crude outside armour of his public conscience. A laugh broke from her at the phrase because she remembered that Vetch had first used it. This other woman had entered into the secret chamber, the hidden places, of John Benham's life; she had been a part of the light and darkness of his soul. To Corinna, remembering his reserve, his dignity, his moderation in thought and feeling, there was a shock in the discovery that the perfect balance, the equilibrium of his temperament, had been overthrown. Certainly in their serene and sentimental association she had stumbled on no hidden fires, no reddening embers of that earlier passion. Yet she understood that even in her girlhood, even in the April freshness of her beauty, she had never touched the depths of his nature. It was Alice Rokeby—frightened, shallow, desperate, deserted, whom he had loved.

"What do you want?" she asked quietly. "What do you wish me to do?"

"Oh, I don't know!" replied Alice. "I don't know. I haven't thought—but there ought to be something. There ought to be something more permanent than love for one to live by."

In her anguish she had wrung a profound truth from experience; and as soon as she had uttered it, she lifted her pale face and stared with that mournful interrogation into the twilight. Something permanent to live by! In the mute desperation of her look she appeared to be searching the garden, the world, and the immense darkness of the sky, for an answer. The afterglow had faded slowly into the blue dusk of night; only a faint thread of gold still lingered beyond the cedars on the western horizon. Something permanent and indestructible! Was this what humanity had struggled for—had lived and fought and died for—since man first came up out of the primeval jungle? Where could one find unalterable peace if it were not high above the ebb and flow of desire? She herself might break away from codes and customs; but she could not break away from the strain of honour, of simple rectitude, which was in her blood and had made her what she was.

"Yes, there ought to be something. There is something," she said slowly. Though her hand still clasped Alice Rokeby's, she was gazing beyond her across the terrace into the garden. She thought of many things while she sat there, with that look of clairvoyance, of radiant vision, in her eyes. Of Alice Rokeby as a little girl in a white dress, with a blue hair ribbon that would never stay tied; of John Benham when she had played ball with him in her childhood; of Kent Page and that young love, so poignant while it lasted, so utterly dead when it was over; of her long, long search for perfection, for something that would not pass away; of the brief pleasures and the vain expectations of life; of the gray deserted road filled with dead leaves and the sound of voices far off—Nothing but dead leaves and distant voices that went by! In spite of her beauty, her brilliance, her gallant heart, this was what life had brought to her at the end. Only loneliness and the courage of those who have given always and never received.

"There is something else," she said again. "There is courage." Then, as the other woman made no reply, she went on more rapidly: "I will do what I can. It is very little. I cannot change him. I cannot make him feel again. But you can trust me. You are safe with me."

"I know that," answered Alice in a voice that sounded muffled and husky. "I have always known that." She rose and readjusted her veil. "That means a great deal," she added. "Oh, I think it means that the world has

grown better!"

Corinna stooped and kissed her. "No, it only means that some of us have learned to live without happiness."

She went with Alice to the door, and then stood watching her descend the steps and enter the small closed car in the drive. There was a touching grace in the slight, shrinking figure, as if it embodied in a single image all the women in the world who had lost hope. "Yet it is the weak, the passive, who get what they want in the end," thought Corinna, as dispassionately as if she were merely a spectator. "I suppose it is because they need it more. They have never learned to do without. They do not know how to carry a broken heart." Then she smiled as she turned back into the house. "It is very late, and the only certain rules are that one must dine and one must dress for dinner."

A little later, when John Benham was announced and she came down to the drawing-room, her first glance at his face told her that she must be looking her best. She was wearing black, and beneath the white lock in her dark hair, her face was flushed with the colour of happiness. Only her eyes, velvet soft and as deep as a forest pool, had a haunted look.

"I have never," he said, "seen you look better."

She laughed. After all, one might permit a touch of coquetry in the final renouncement! "Perhaps you have never really seen me before."

Though he looked puzzled, he responded gaily: "On the contrary, I have seen little else for the last two or three months."

There was an edge of irony to her smile. "Were you looking at me or my shadow?"

He shook his head. "Are shadows ever as brilliant as that?"

Then before she could answer the Judge came in with his cordial outstretched hand and his air of humorous urbanity, as if he were too much interested in the world to censure it, and yet too little interested to take it seriously. His face, with its thin austere features and its kindly expression, showed the dryness that comes less from age than from quality. Benham, looking at him closely, thought, "He must be well over eighty, but he hasn't changed so much as a hair of his head in the last twenty years."

At dinner Corinna was very gay; and her father, whose habit it was not to inquire too deeply, observed only that she was looking remarkably well. The dining-room was lighted by candles which flickered gently in the breeze that rose and fell on the terrace. In this wavering illumination innumerable little shadows, like ghosts of butterflies, played over the faces of the two men, whose features were so much alike and whose expressions differed so perversely. In both Nature had bred a type; custom and tradition had moulded the plastic substance and refined the edges; but, stronger than either custom or tradition, the individual temperament, the inner spirit of each man, had cast the transforming flame and shadow over the outward form. And now they were alike only in their long, graceful figures, in their thin Roman features, in their general air of urbane distinction.

"We were talking at the club of the strike," said the Judge, who had finished his soup with a manner of detachment, and sat now gazing thoughtfully at his glass of sherry. "The opinion seems to be that it depends upon Vetch."

Benham's voice sounded slightly sardonical. "How can anything depend upon a weathercock?"

"Well, there's a chance, isn't there, that the weather may decide it?"

"Perhaps. In the way that the Governor will find to his advantage." Benham had leaned slightly forward, and his face looked very attractive by the shimmering flame of the candles.

"Isn't that the way most of us decide things," asked Corinna, "if we know what is really to our advantage?"

As Benham looked up he met her eyes. "In this case," he answered, with a note of austerity, as if he were impatient of contradiction, "the advantage to the public would seem to be the only one worth considering."

For an instant a wild impulse, born of suffering nerves, passed through Corinna's mind. She longed to cry out in the tone of Julius Gershom, "Oh, damn the public!"—but instead she remarked in the formal accents her grandmother had employed to smooth over awkward impulses, "Isn't it ridiculous that we can never get away from Gideon Vetch?"

The Judge laughed softly. "He has a pushing manner," he returned; and then, still curiously pursuing the subject: "Perhaps, he may get his revenge at the meeting Thursday night."

"Is there to be a meeting?" retorted Corinna indifferently. She was thinking, "When John is eighty he will look like Father. I shall be seventy-eight when he is eighty. All those years to live, and nothing in them but little pleasures, little kindnesses, little plans and ambitions. Charity boards and committee meetings and bridge. That is what life is—just pretending that little things are important."

"That's the strikers' meeting," the Judge was saying over his glass of sherry. "The next one is John's idea. We hope to arbitrate. If we can get Vetch interested there may be a settlement of some sort."

"So it's Vetch again! Oh, I am getting so tired of the name of Gideon Vetch!" laughed Corinna. And she thought, "If only I didn't have to play on the flute all my life. If I could only stop playing dance music for a little while, and break out into a funeral march!"

"He has already agreed to come," said Benham, "but I expect nothing from him. I have formed the habit of expecting nothing from Vetch."

"Well, I don't know," replied the Judge. "We may persuade him to stand firm, if there hasn't been an understanding between him and those people." The old gentleman always used the expression "those people" for persons of whose opinions he disapproved.

"You know what I think of Vetch," rejoined Benham, with a shrug.

It seemed to Corinna, watching Benham with her thoughtful gaze, that the subject would never change, that they would argue all night over their foolish strike and their tiresome meeting, and over what this Gideon Vetch might or might not do in some problematic situation. What sentimentalists men were! They couldn't understand, after the experience of a million years, that the only things that really counted in life were human relations. They were obliged to go on playing a game of bluff with their consecrated superstitions—playing—playing—playing—and yet hiding behind some graven image of authority which they had built out of stone. Sentimental, yes, and pathetic too, when one thought of it with patience.

When dinner was over, and the Judge had gone to a concert in town, Corinna's mockery fell from her, and she sat in a long silence watching Benham's enjoyment of his cigar. It occurred to her that if he were stripped of everything else, of love, of power, of ambition, he could still find satisfaction in the masculine habit of living—in the simple pleasures of which nothing except physical infirmity or extreme poverty can

ever deprive one. Moderate in all things, he was capable of taking a serious pleasure in his meals, in his cigar, in a dip in a swimming pool, or a game of cards at the club. Whatever happened, he would have these things to fall back upon; and they would mean to him, she knew, far more than they could ever, even in direst necessity, mean to a woman.

The long drawing-room, lighted with an amber glow and drenched with the sweetness of honeysuckle, had grown very still. Outside in the garden the twilight was powdered with silver, and above the tops of the cedars a few stars were shining. A breeze came in softly, touching her cheek like the wing of a moth and stirring the iris in a bowl by the window. The flowers in the room were all white and purple, she observed with a tremulous smile, as if the vivid colours had been drained from both her life and her surroundings. "What a foolish fancy," she added, with a nervous force that sent a current of energy through her veins. "My heart isn't broken, and it will never be until I am dead!"

And then, with that natural aptitude for facing facts, for looking at life steadily and fearlessly, which had been born in a recoil from the sentimental habit of mind, she said quietly, "John, Alice Rokeby came to see me this afternoon."

He started, and the ashes dropped from his cigar; but there was no embarrassment in the level glance he raised to her eyes. Surprise there was, and a puzzled interrogation, but of confusion or disquietude she could find no trace.

"Well?" he responded inquiringly, and that was all.

"You used to care for her a great deal—once?"

He appeared to ponder the question. "We were great friends," he answered.

Friends! The single word seemed to her to express not only his attitude to Alice Rokeby, but his temperamental inability to call things by their right names, to face facts, to follow a straight line of thought. Here was the epitome of that evasive idealism which preferred shams to realities.

"Are you still friends?"

He shook his head. "No, we've drifted apart in the last year or so. I used," he said slowly, "to go there a great deal; but I've had so many responsibilities of late that I've fallen into the habit of letting other interests go in a measure."

It was harder even than she had imagined it would be—harder because she realized now that they did not speak the same language. She felt that she had struck against something as dry and cold and impersonal as an abstract principle. A ludicrous premonition assailed her that in a little while he would begin to talk about his public duty. This lack of genuine emotion, which had at first appeared to contradict his sentimental point of view, was revealed to her suddenly as its supreme justification. Because he felt nothing deeply he could afford to play brilliantly with the names of emotions; because he had never suffered his duty would always lie, as Gideon Vetch had once said of him, "in the direction of things he could not hurt."

"It is a pity," she said gently, "for she still cares for you."

The hand that held his cigar trembled. She had penetrated his reserve at last, and she saw a shadow which was not the shadow of the wind-blown flowers, cross his features.

"Did she tell you that?" he asked as gently as she had spoken.

"There was no need to tell me. I saw it as soon as I looked at her."

For a moment he was silent; then he said very quietly, as one whose controlling motive was a hatred of excess, of unnecessary fussiness or frankness: "I am sorry."

"Have you stopped caring for her?"

The shadow on his face changed into a look of perplexity. When he spoke, she realized that he had mistaken her meaning; and for an instant her heart beat wildly with resentment or apprehension.

"I am fond of her. I shall always be fond of her," he said. "Does it make any difference to you, my dear?"

Yes, he had mistaken her meaning. He was judging her in the dim light of an immemorial tradition; and he had seen in her anxious probing for truth merely a personal jealousy. Women were like that, he would have said, applying, in accordance with his mental custom, the general law to the particular instance. After all, where could they meet? They were as far divided in their outlook on life as if they had inhabited different spiritual hemispheres. A curiosity seized her to know what was in his mind, to sound the depths of that unfathomable reserve.

"That is over so completely that I thought it would make no difference to you," he added almost reproachfully, as if she, not he, were to be blamed for dragging a disagreeable subject into the light.

Fear stabbed Corinna's heart like a knife. "But she still loves you!" she cried sharply.

He flinched from the sharpness of her tone. "I am sorry," he said again; but the words glided, with a perfunctory grace, on the surface of emotion. Suppose that what he said was true, she told herself; suppose that it was really "over"; suppose that she also recognized only the egoist's view of duty—of the paramount duty to one's own inclinations; suppose—"Oh, am I so different from him?" she thought, "why cannot I also mistake the urging of desire for the command of conscience—or at least call it that in my mind?" For a minute she struggled desperately with the temptation; and in that minute it seemed to her that the face of Alice Rokeby, with its look of wistful expectancy, of hungry yearning, drifted past her in the twilight.

"But is it obliged to be over?" she asked aloud. "I could never care as she does. I have always been like that, and I can't change. I have always been able to feel just so much and no more—to give just so much and no more."

He looked at her attentively, a little troubled, she could see, but not deeply hurt, not hurt enough to break down the wall which protected the secret—or was it the emptiness?—of his nature.

"Has the knowledge of my—my old friendship for Mrs. Rokeby come between us?" he asked slowly and earnestly.

While he spoke it seemed to her that all that had been obscure in her view of him rolled away like the mist in the garden, leaving the structure of his being bare and stark to her critical gaze. Nothing confused her now; nothing perplexed her in her knowledge of him. The old sense of incompleteness, of inadequacy, returned; but she understood the cause of it now; she saw with perfect clearness the defect from which it had arisen. He had missed the best because, with every virtue of the mind, he lacked the single one of the heart. Possessing every grace of character except humanity, he had failed in life because this one gift was

absent.

"All my life," she said brokenly, "I have tried to find something that I could believe in—that I could keep faith with to the end. But what can one build a world on except human relations—except relations between men and women?"

"You mean," he responded gravely, "that you think I have not kept faith with Mrs. Rokeby?"

"Oh, can't you see? If you would only try, you must surely see!" she pleaded, with outstretched hands.

He shook his head not in denial, but in bewilderment. "I realized that I had made a mistake," he said slowly, "but I believed that I had put it out of my life—that we had both put it out of our lives. There were so many more important things—the war and coming face to face with death in so many forms. Oh, I confess that what is important to you, appears to me to be merely on the surface of life. I have been trying to fulfil other responsibilities—to live up to the demands on me—I had got down to realities—"

A laugh broke from her lips, which had grown so stiff that they hurt her when she tried to smile. "Realities!" she exclaimed, "and yet you must have seen her face as I saw it to-day."

For the third time, in that expressionless tone which covered a nervous irritation, he repeated gravely, "I am sorry."

"There is nothing more real," she went on presently, "there is nothing more real than that look in the face of a living thing."

For the first time her words seemed to reach him. He was trying with all his might, she perceived, he was spiritually fumbling over the effort to feel and to think what she expected of him. With his natural fairness he was honestly struggling to see her point of view.

"If it is really like that," he said, "What can I do?"

All her life, it seemed to Corinna, she had been adjusting the difficulties and smoothing out the destinies of other persons. All her life she had been arranging some happiness that was not hers. To-night it was the happiness of Alice Rokeby, an acquaintance merely, a woman to whom she was profoundly indifferent, which lay in her hands.

"There is something that you can do," she said lightly, obeying now that instinct for things as they ought to be, for surface pleasantness, which warred in her mind with her passion for truth. "You can go to see her again."



CHAPTER XX

CORINNA FACES LIFE

AT nine o'clock the next morning Corinna came through the sunshine on the flagged walk and got into her car. She was wearing her smartest dress of blue serge and her gayest hat of a deep old red. Never had she looked more radiant; never had she carried her glorious head with a more triumphant air.

"Stop first at Mrs. Rokeby's, William," she said to the chauffeur, "and while I am there you may take this list to market."

As the car rolled off, her eyes turned back lovingly to the serene brightness of the garden into which she had infused her passion for beauty and order and gracious living. Rain had fallen in the night, and the glowing borders beyond the house shone like jewels in a casket. Beneath the silvery blue of the sky each separate blade of grass glistened as if an enchanter's wand had turned it to crystal. The birds were busily searching for worms on the lawn; as the car passed a flash of scarlet darted across the road; and above a clear shining puddle clouds of yellow butterflies drifted like blown rose-leaves.

"How beautiful everything is," thought Corinna. "Why isn't beauty enough? Why does beauty without love turn to sadness?" Her head, which had drooped for a moment, was lifted gallantly. "It ought to be enough just to be alive and not hungry on a morning like this."

The house in which Mrs. Rokeby lived appeared to Corinna, as she entered it presently, to have given up hope as utterly as its mistress had done. Though it was nearly ten o'clock, the front pavement had not been swept, the hall was still dark, and a surprised coloured maid, in a soiled apron, answered the doorbell.

"Poor thing," thought, Corinna. "I always heard that she was a good housekeeper. It is queer how soon one's state of mind passes into one's surroundings. I wonder if unhappiness could ever make me so indifferent to appearances?" To the maid, who knew her, she said, "I think Mrs. Rokeby will see me if she is awake. It is only for a minute or two."

Then she went into the drawing-room, where the shades were still down, and stood looking at the furniture and the curtains which were powdered with dust. On the table, where the books and photographs were disarranged and a fancy box of chocolates lay with the top off, there was a crystal vase of flowers; but the flowers were withered, and the water smelt as if it had not been changed for a week. Over the mantelpiece the long gilt-framed mirror reflected, through a gray film, the darkened room with its forlorn disarrangement. The whole place had the vague depressing smell of closed rooms, or of dead flowers, the very odour of unhappiness.

"Poor thing!" thought Corinna again. "That a man should have the power to make anybody suffer like this!" And beneath her sense of fruitless endeavour and wasted romance, there awoke and stirred in her the dominant instinct of her nature, the instinct to bring order out of confusion, to make the crooked straight, to change discord into harmony, that irresistible instinct for things as they ought to be. She longed to fling up the shades, to let in the sunshine, to drive out the dust and cobwebs, to put fresh flowers in the place of the dead ones. She longed, as she said to herself with a smile, "to get her hands on the room." If she could only change all this hopelessness into happiness! If she could only restore pleasure here, or at least the

semblance of peace! "It is just as well that all of us can't feel things this much," she reflected.

"Mrs. Rokeby ain't dressed, but she says would you mind coming up?" The maid, having attired herself in a clean apron and a crooked cap, stood in the doorway. As Corinna followed her, she led the way up the narrow stairs into the bedroom where Alice was waiting.

"I thought you wouldn't be dressed," began Corinna cheerfully, "but it's the only time I have free, and I wanted to see you this morning."

"It is so good of you," responded Alice, putting out her hand. "Everything looks dreadful, I know; but I haven't been well, and one of the servants has gone to a funeral in the country."

"It doesn't matter," Corinna hesitated an instant, "only I wish you would make some one throw out those dead flowers downstairs."

"I haven't been in the room for a week," replied Alice, dropping back on the couch as if her strength had failed her. "I don't seem to care about the house or anything else."

As soon as her surprise at Corinna's visit had faded, she sank again into a listless attitude. Her figure grew relaxed; the faint animation died in her face; and she gazed at her visitor with a look of passive tragedy, which made Corinna, who was never passive, feel that she should like to shake her. Her soft brown hair, as fine as spun silk, was tucked under a cap of old lace, and beneath the drooping frill her melancholy features reminded Corinna of a Byzantine saint. Over her nightgown, she had thrown on a Japanese kimono of ashen blue, embroidered in plum blossoms which looked wilted. Everything about her, Corinna thought, looked wilted, as if each inanimate object that surrounded her had been stricken by the hopelessness of her spirit. To Corinna's energetic temperament, there was something positively immoral in this languid resignation. "Un-happiness like this is contagious," she thought. "And all because one man has ceased to love her! What utter folly!" Aloud she said only, "I came to ask you to go with me to the Harrisons' dance."

"To-morrow? Oh, Corinna, I couldn't!"

"Do you remember that blue dress—the one that is the colour of wild hyacinths?"

"Yes, but I couldn't wear it again, and I haven't anything else."

"Well, I like you in that, but wear whatever you please as long as it is becoming. You must look ethereal, and you must look happy. Men hate a sad face because it seems to reproach them, and, even if they murder you, they resent your reproaching them."

There was a deliberate purpose in her levity, for an intuition to which she trusted was warning her that there are times when the only way to treat refractory circumstances is to bully them into submission. "If you once let life get the better of you, you are lost," she said to herself.

"You can't understand," Alice was murmuring while she wiped her eyes. "You have always had what you wanted."

Corinna laughed. "I am glad you see it that way," she rejoined, "but you would be nearer the truth if you had said I'd always wanted what I had."

"It seems to me that you've had everything."

"Very likely. The lot of another person is one of the mountains to which distance lends enchantment."

"You mean that you haven't been happy?"

"Oh, yes, I've been happy. If I hadn't been, with all I've had, I should be ashamed to admit it."

But Alice was in a mood of mournful condolence. She had pitied herself so overwhelmingly that some of the sentiment had splashed over on the lives of others. It was her habit to sit still under affliction, and when one sits still, one has a long time in which to remember and regret.

"Your marriage must have been a disappointment to you," she said, "but you were so brave, poor dear, that nobody suspected it until you were separated."

"I am not a poor dear," retorted Corinna, "and there were a great many things in life for me besides marriage."

"There wouldn't have been in my place," insisted Alice, with a submissive manner but a stubborn mind.

Corinna gazed at her speculatively for a moment; and in her speculation there was the faintest tinge of contempt, the contempt which, in spite of her pity, she felt for all weakness. "I shouldn't have got into your place," she responded presently, "and if I ever found myself there by mistake, I'd make haste to get out of it."

"But suppose you had been like me, Corinna?" The words were a wail of despair.

A laugh rippled like music from Corinna's lips. It was cruel to laugh, she knew, but it was all so preposterous! It was turning things upside down with vehemence when one tried to live by feeling in a world which was manifestly designed for the service of facts. "You ought to have gone on the stage, Alice," she said. "Painted scenery is the only background that is appropriate to you."

Alice sighed. She looked very pretty in her shallow fashion, or Corinna felt that she couldn't have borne it. "You are awfully kind, Corinna," she returned, "but you have so little sentiment."

"I know, my dear, but I have some common sense which has served me very well in its place." As Corinna spoke she got up and roamed restlessly about the room, because the sight of that passive figure, wrapped in wilted plum blossoms, made her feel as if she wanted to scream. "You can't help being a fool, Alice," she said sternly, "and as long as you are a pretty one, I suppose men won't mind. But you must continue to be a pretty one, or it is all over with you."

The face that Alice turned on her showed a curious mixture of humility over the criticism and satisfaction over the compliment. "I know I've lost my looks dreadfully," she replied, grasping the most important point first, "and, of course, I have been a fool about John. If I hadn't cared so much, things might have been different."

Corinna stopped her impatient moving about and looked down on her. "I didn't mean that kind of fool," she retorted; but just what kind of fool she had meant, she thought it indiscreet to explain.

Suddenly, with a dash of nervous energy which appeared to run like a stimulant through her veins, Alice straightened herself and lifted her head. "It is easy for you to say that," she rejoined, "but you have never been loved to desperation and then deserted."

"No," responded Corinna, with the ripe judgment that is the fruit of bitter experience, "but, if I were ever

loved to desperation, I should expect to be. Desperation does things like that."

"You couldn't bear it any better than I can. No woman could."

"Perhaps not." Though Corinna's voice was flippant, there was a stern expression on her beautiful face—the expression that Artemis might have worn when she surveyed Aphrodite. "But I should never have been deserted. I should have taken good care to prevent it."

"I took care too," retorted Alice, with passion, "but I couldn't prevent it."

"Your measures were wrong. It is always safer to be on the side of the active rather than the passive verb."

With a careless movement, Corinna picked up her beaded bag, which she had laid on the table, and turned to adjust her veil before the mirror. "If you will let me manage your life for a little while," she observed, with an appreciative glance at the daring angle of the red hat, "I may be able to do something with it, for I am a practical person as well as a capable manager. Father calls me, you know, the repairer of destinies."

"If I thought it would do any good, I'd go to the ball with you," said Alice eagerly, while a delicate colour stained the wan pallor of her face.

"Do you really think," asked Corinna brightly, "that John, able politician though he is, is worth all that trouble?"

"Oh, it isn't just John," moaned Alice; "it is everything."

"Well, if I am going to repair your destiny, I must do it in my own practical way. For a time at least we will let sentiment go and get down to facts. As long as you haven't much sense, it is necessary for you to make yourself as pretty as possible, for only intelligent women can afford to take liberties with their appearances. The first step must be to buy a hat that is full of hope as soon as you can. Oh, I don't mean anything jaunty or frivolous; but it must be a hat that can look the world in the face."

A keen interest awoke in Alice's eyes, and she looked immediately younger. "If I can find one, I'll buy it," she answered. "I'll get dressed in a little while and go out."

"And remember the hyacinth-blue dress. Have it made fresh for to-morrow." Turning in the doorway, Corinna continued with humorous vivacity, "There is only one little thing we must forget, and that is love. The less said about it the better; but you may take it on my authority that love can always be revived by heroic treatment. If John ever really loved you, and you follow my advice, he will love you again."

With a little song on her lips, and her gallant head in the red hat raised to the sunlight, she went out of the house and down the steps into her car. "Fools are very exhausting," she thought, as she bowed to a passing acquaintance, "but I think that she will be cured." Then, at the sight of Stephen leaving the Culpeper house, she leaned out and waved to him to join her.

"My dear boy, how late you are!" she exclaimed, when the car had stopped and he got in beside her.

"Yes, I am late." He looked tired and thoughtful. "I stopped to have a talk with Mother, and she kept me longer than I realized."

"Is anything wrong?"

He set his lips tightly. "No, nothing more than usual."

Corinna gazed up at the blue sky and the sunlight. Why wouldn't people be happy? Why were they obliged to cause so much unnecessary discomfort? Why did they persist in creating confusion?

"Well, I hope you are coming to the dance to-morrow night," she said cheerfully.

"Yes. Mother has asked me to take Margaret Blair."

"I am glad. Margaret is a nice girl. I am going to take Patty Vetch."

He started, and though she was not looking at him, she knew that his face grew pale. "Don't you think she will look lovely, just like a mermaid, in green and silver?" she asked lightly.

"I don't know," he answered stiffly. "I am trying not to think about her."

Corinna laughed. "Oh, my dear, just wait until you see her in that sea-green gown!"

That he was caught fast in the web of the tribal instinct, Corinna realized as perfectly as if she had seen the net closing visibly round him. Though she was unaware of the blow Patty had dealt him, she felt his inner struggle through that magical sixth sense which is the gift of the understanding heart, of the heart that has outgrown the shell of the personal point of view. If he would only for once break free from artificial restraints! If he would only let himself be swept into something that was larger than his own limitations!

"I am very fond of Patty," she said. "The more I see of her, the finer I think she is."

His lips did not relax. "There is a great deal of talk at the club about the Governor."

"Oh, this strike of course! What do they say?"

"A dozen different things. Nobody knows exactly how to take him."

"I wonder if we have ever understood him," said Corinna, a little sadly. "I sometimes think—" Then she

broke off hurriedly. "No, don't get out, I'll take you down to your office. I sometimes think," she resumed, "that none of us see him as he really is because we see him through a veil of prejudice, or if you like it better, of sentiment—"

Stephen laughed without mirth. "I don't like it better. I'd like to get into a world—or at least I feel this morning that I'd like to get into a world where one was obliged to face nothing softer than a fact—"

Corinna looked at him tenderly. She had a sincere, though not a very deep affection, for Stephen, and she felt that she should like to help him, as long as helping him did not necessitate any emotional effort. "Has it ever occurred to you," she asked gently, "that the trouble with you, after all, is simply lack of courage?" At the start he gave, she continued hastily, "Oh, I don't mean physical courage of course. I do not doubt that you were as brave as a lion when it came to meeting the Germans. But there are times when life is more terrible than the Germans! And yet the only courage we have ever glorified is brute courage—the courage of the lion. I know that you could face machine guns and bayonets and all the horrors of war; but it seems to me that you have never had really the courage of living—that you have always been a little afraid of life."

For a long while he did not answer. His eyes were on the sky; and she watched the expression of irritation, amazement, dread, perplexity, and shocked comprehension, pass slowly over his features. "By Jove, I've got a feeling that you may be right," he said at last. "You probed the wound, and it hurt for a minute; but it may heal all the quicker for that. You've put the whole rotten business into a nutshell. I'm a coward at bottom, that's the trouble with me. Oh, like you, of course, I'm not talking about actual dangers. They are easy enough, for one can see them coming. It's not fear of the Germans. It's fear of something that one can't touch or feel—that doesn't even exist—the fear of one's imagination. But the truth is that I've funk'd things for the last year or so. I've been in a chronic blue funk about living."

She smiled at him brightly. "It is like a bit of thistle-down. Bring it out into the air and sunlight, and it will blow away."

"I wonder if you're right. Already I feel better because I've told you; and yet I've gone in terror lest my mother should discover it."

When she spoke again she changed the subject as lightly as if they had been discussing the weather. "You used to be interested in public matters. Do you remember how you talked to me in your college days about outstripping John in the race? You were full of ideas then, and full of ambition too." She was touching a string that had never failed her yet, and she waited, with an inscrutable smile, for the response.

"I know," he answered, "but that was in another life—that was before the war."

"Do those ideas never come back to you? Have you lost your ambition?"

"I can't tell. I sometimes think that it died in France. I got to feel over there that these political issues were merely local and temporary. Often, the greater part of the time, I suppose, I feel like that now. Then suddenly all my old ambition comes back in a spurt, and for a little while I think I am cured. While that lasts I am as eager, as full of interest, as I used to be. But it dies down as suddenly as it sprang up, and the reaction is only indifference and lassitude. I seem to have lost the power to keep a single state of mind, or even an interest."

"But do you ever think seriously of the part you might take in this town?"

The look of immobility passed from his face; his eyes grew warmer, and it seemed to her that he became

more alive and more human. "Oh, I think a great deal. My ideas have changed too." He was talking rapidly and without connection. "I am not the same man that I was a few years ago. I may be wrong, but I feel that I've got down to a firmer basis—a basis of facts." Then he turned to her impulsively, "I wouldn't say this to any one else, Corinna, because no one else would understand what I mean—but I've learned a good deal from Gideon Vetch."

"Ah!" Her eyes were smiling. "I think I know what you mean."

"Of course you know. But imagine Father! He would think, if I told him, that it was a symptom of mental derangement—that some German shell had left a permanent dent in my brain."

"Perhaps. Yet I am not sure that you understand your father. I think he is more like you than you fancy; that if you once pierced his reserve, you would find him a sentimentalist at heart. There is your office," she added, "but you must not get out now. We will turn back for a quarter of an hour." She spoke to the chauffeur, and then said to Stephen, with a sensation of unutterable relief, "a quarter of an hour won't make any difference at the office to-day."

"Perhaps not when I've lost three hours already. I sometimes think they would never notice it if I stayed away all the time. But what I mean about Vetch is simply that he has set me thinking. He does that, you know. Oh, I admit that he is mistaken—or downright wrong—in a number of ways! He is too sensational for our taste—too flamboyant; but one can't get away from him. He has shaken the dust from us; he has jolted us into movement. I have a feeling somehow that his personality is spread all over the place—that we are smeared with Gideon Vetch, as the darkeys would say."

He was already a different Stephen from the one who had got into her car an hour ago, and she breathed a secret prayer of thanksgiving.

"I think even John feels that now and then," she said, and a moment afterward, "Is it possible, do you suppose, that we shall find when it is too late that this Gideon Vetch is the stone that the builders rejected? A ridiculous fancy, and yet who knows, it might turn out to be true. Stranger things have happened than that!"

"It may be. One never can tell." Then he laughed with tolerant affection. "I've found out the trouble with John."

"The trouble with John?" Her voice trembled.

"Yes, the trouble with John is that he lacks blood at the brain. He is trying to make a living organism out of a skeleton—to build the world over on a skull and cross-bones—and it can't be done. I admire John as much as I ever did. He is as logical as a problem in geometry. But Vetch is nearer to the truth of things. Vetch has the one attribute that John needs to make him complete."

She nodded. "I know. You mean feeling?"

"Human sympathy—the sympathy that means imagination and insight. That is the only power that Vetch has, but, by Jove, it is the greatest of all! It is the spirit that comprehends, that reconciles, and recreates. Both Vetch and John have failed, I think; Vetch for want of education, system, method, and John because, having all this essential framework, he still lacked the blood and fibre of humanity. In its essence, I suppose it is a difference of principle, the old familiar struggle between the romantic and the realistic temperament, which divides in politics into the progressive and the conservative forces. There is nothing in history, I learned that at college, except the war between these two irreconcilable spirits.

Irreconcilable, they call them, and yet I wonder, I wonder more and more, if this is not a misinterpretation of history? It seems to me that the leader of the future, even in so small a community as this one, must be big enough to combine opposite elements; that he must take the good where he finds it; that he must vitalize tradition and discipline progress—"

"You mean that he must accept both the past and the future?" While her heart craved the substance of truth, she dispensed platitudes with a benevolent air.

"How can it be otherwise? That, it seems to me, is the only logical way out of the muddle. The difficulty, of course, is to remain practical—not to let the vision run away with one. It will require moderation, which Vetch has not, and adaptability, which John has never learned."

"And never will learn," rejoined Corinna. "He is made of the mettle that breaks but does not bend."

"Like my father; like all those who have petrified in the shape of a convention. And yet the new stuff—the ideas that haven't turned to stone—are full of froth—they splash over. Take Vetch and this strike, for instance. I myself believe that he wants to do the right thing, to protect the public at any cost; but he has gone too far; he has splashed over the dividing line between principle and expediency. Will he be able to stand firm at the last?"

"Father says there is to be a meeting Thursday night."

"Yes, and he'll be obliged to come to some decision then, or at least to drop a hint as to the line he intends to pursue. I am afraid there will be trouble either way."

"The Governor shows the strain," said Corinna. "I saw him yesterday."

"How can he help it? He has got himself into a tight place. Oh, there are times when temporizing is more dangerous than action! It's hard to see how he'll get out of it unless he cuts a way, and if he does that, he'll probably lose the strongest support he has ever had."

Stephen's face was transfigured now. It had lost the look of dryness, of apathy; and she watched the glow of health shine again in his eyes as it used to shine when he was at college. So it was not emotion that was to restore him! It was the ancient masculine delusion, as invulnerable as truth, that the impersonal interests are the significant ones. Well, she was not quarrelling with delusions as long as they were beneficent! And since it was impossible for her fervent soul to care greatly for general principles, or to dwell long among impersonal forms of thought, she found herself regarding this public crisis, less as a warfare of political theories, than as a possible cure for Stephen's condition. For the rest, except for their results, beneficial or otherwise, to the individual citizen, problems of government interested her not at all. The whole trouble with life seemed to her to rise, not from mistaken theory, but from the lack of consideration with which human beings treated one another. Happiness, after all, depended so little upon opinions and so much upon manners.

"Throw yourself into this work, Stephen," she urged. "It is a splendid opportunity."

He smiled at her in the old boyish way. "An opportunity for what?"

"For—" It was on the tip of her tongue to say "for health"; but she checked herself, remembering the incurable distaste men have for calling things by their right names, and replied instead, "an opportunity for usefulness."

His smile faded, and he turned on her eyes that were almost melancholy, though the fire of animation still warmed them. "I am interested now. I care a great deal—but will it last? Haven't I felt this way a hundred times in the last six months, only to grow indifferent and even bored within the next few hours?"

She looked at him closely. "Isn't there any feeling—any interest that lasts with you?"

He hesitated, while a burning colour, like the flush of fever, swept up to his forehead. "Only one, and I am trying to get over that," he answered after a moment.

"If it is a genuine feeling, are you wise to get over it?" she asked. "Genuine feeling is so rare. I think if I could feel an overwhelming emotion, I should hug it to my heart as the most precious of gifts."

"Even if everything were against it?"

Her head went up with a dauntless gesture. "Oh, my dear, what is everything?" It was a changed voice from the one in which she had lectured Alice Rokeby an hour ago. "Feeling is everything."

"It is real," he replied, looking away from her eyes. "I am sure of that because I have struggled against it. I can't explain what it is; I don't know what it was that made me care in the beginning. All I know about it is that it seems to give me back myself. It is only when I let myself go in the thought of it that I become really free. Can you understand what I mean?"

"I can," assented Corinna softly; and though she smiled there was a mist over her eyes which made the world appear iridescent. "Oh, my dear, it is the only way. Throw away everything else—every cause, every conviction, every interest—but keep that one open door into reality."

The car stopped before his office, and she held out her hand. "I shall see you to-morrow night?"

He glanced back merrily from the pavement. "Do you think I shall let you escape me?" Then he turned away and went, with a firm and energetic step, into the building, while Corinna took out her shopping list and studied it thoughtfully.

"Back to the shop," she said at last. "I have had enough for one morning." As the car started up the street, a smile stirred her lips, "I shall have three unhappy lovers on my hands for the dance to-morrow." Then she laughed softly, with a very real sense of humour, "If I am going to sacrifice myself, I may as well do it in the grand manner," she thought, for Corinna had a royal soul.



CHAPTER XXI

DANCE MUSIC

At breakfast the next morning, Mrs. Culpeper observed, with maternal solicitude, that Stephen was looking more cheerful. While she poured his coffee, with one eye on the fine old coffee pot and one on the animated face of her son, she reflected that he appeared to have come at last to his senses. "If he would only stop all this folly and settle down," she thought. "Surely it is quite time now for him to become normal again." As she looked at him her expression softened, in spite of her general attitude of disapprobation, and the sharp brightness of her eyes gave place to humid tenderness. Of all her children he had long been her favourite, for the reason, perhaps, that he was the only one who had ever caused her any anxiety; and though she would have gone to the stake cheerfully for all and each of them, there would have been a keener edge to the martyrdom she suffered in Stephen's behalf.

"Be sure and make a good breakfast, Mr. Culpeper," she urged, glancing down the table to where her husband was dividing his attention between the morning paper and his oatmeal. "My poor father used to say that if he didn't make a good breakfast he felt it all day long."

"He was right, my dear. I have no doubt that he was right," replied Mr. Culpeper, in the tone of solemn sentiment which he reserved for deceased parents. Though he was dyspeptic by constitution, and inclined to gout and other bodily infirmities, he applied himself philosophically to a heavy breakfast such as his wife's father had enjoyed.

"Stephen is looking so well this morning," remarked Mrs. Culpeper in a sprightly voice. "He has quite a colour."

Mr. Culpeper rolled his large brown eyes, as handsome and as opaque as chestnuts, in the direction of his son. Though he would never have observed the improvement unless his wife had called his attention to it, his kind heart was honestly relieved to discover that Stephen looked better. He had worried a good deal in his sluggish way over what he thought of as "the effect of the war" on his son. With the strong paternal instinct which beheld every child as a branch on a genealogical tree, he had been as much disturbed as his wife by the gossip which had reached him about the daughter of Gideon Vetch.

"Feeling all right, my boy?" he inquired now, in the tone of indulgent anxiety which, from the first day of his return, had exasperated Stephen so profoundly.

"Oh, first rate," responded the young man lightly. "Is there anything you would like me to help you about?"

"No, there's nothing I can't attend to myself—" Mr. Culpeper had begun to reply, when catching sight of his wife's frowning face, he continued hurriedly: "Unless you would care to glance over that deed about those lots of your mother's?"

Stephen smiled, for he had seen the warning change in his mother's expression, and he was thinking that she was still a remarkably pretty woman. "With pleasure," he returned. "I shall be busy all day, but I'll look it over to-morrow. To-night I am going to the Harrisons' dance."

"Oh, you're going!" exclaimed Mary Byrd, who had come in late and was just taking her seat. "I suppose

Mother is making you take Margaret Blair?"

Again Mrs. Culpeper made a vague frowning movement of her eyebrows and gently shook her head; but the gesture of disapproval to which her husband had responded obediently was entirely wasted upon her youngest daughter. "You needn't shake your head at me, Mother," she remarked lightly. "Of course I know you are making him take her when he would rather a hundred times go with Patty Vetch."

The frown on Mrs. Culpeper's face turned to a look of panic. "Mary Byrd, you are impossible," she said sternly.

"I saw Cousin Corinna yesterday," observed Victoria indiscreetly. "She is going to take Patty Vetch."

Mrs. Culpeper said nothing, but her fine black brows drew ominously together. She had worked so busily over the coffee urn and the sugar bowl that she had not had time to eat her breakfast, and the oatmeal in the plate before her had grown stiff and cold before she tasted it. When Stephen stooped to kiss her cheek before going out, she looked up at him with a proud and admiring glance. "I hope you remembered to order flowers for Margaret?"

He laughed. It was so characteristic of her to feel that even his love affairs must be managed! "Yes, I ordered gardenias. Is that right?"

When she nodded amiably, he turned away and went out into the hall, where he found his father waiting. "I wanted to see you a minute without your mother," explained Mr. Culpeper, in a voice which sounded husky because he tried to subdue it to a whisper. "It's just as well, I think, that your mother shouldn't know that I'm having those houses you looked at attended to."

"Oh, you are!" returned Stephen, with a curious mixture of thankfulness and humility. So the old chap was the best sport of them all! In his slow way he had accomplished what Stephen had merely talked about. For the first time it occurred to the young man that his father was not by any means so obvious or so simple as he had believed him to be. Had Corinna spoken the truth when she called him a sentimentalist at heart?

"It's better not to mention it before your mother," Mr. Culpeper was saying huskily, while Stephen wondered. "She's the kindest heart in the world. There isn't a better woman on earth; but she'd always think the money ought to go to one of the married children. She couldn't understand that it's good business to keep up the property. Women have queer ideas about business."

"Well, you're a brick, Father!" exclaimed the young man, and he meant it from his heart. His voice trembled, and he put his hand on his father's arm for a minute as he used to do when he was a child. Words wouldn't come to him; but he was deeply touched, and it seemed to him that the barrier which had divided him from his family had suddenly fallen. Never since his return from France had he felt so near to his father as he felt at that moment.

"Well, well, I thought you'd like to know," rejoined Mr. Culpeper, and his voice also shook a little. "I must be getting down town now. May I take you in my car?"

"No, I rather like the walk, sir. It does me good." Then, without a word more, but with a smile of sympathy and understanding, they parted, and Stephen went out of the house and descended the steps to the street.

It was true, as his mother had observed, that he was happier to-day than he had been for weeks; but this

happiness was founded upon what Mrs. Culpeper would have regarded as the most reprehensible of deceptions. He was happier simply because, in spite of everything he had done to prevent it, Fate had decreed that he was soon to see Patty again. The longing of the past few weeks was to be appeased, if only for an hour, and he was to see her again! He did not look beyond the coming night. He did not attempt to analyse either his motive or his emotions. The future was still obscure; life was still evolving its inscrutable problem; but it was enough for him, at the moment, to know that he should see her again. And this certainty, coming after the hungry pain of the last three weeks, brought a glow to his eyes and that haunting smile, like the smile of memory, to his lips.

The light that Corinna had kindled illumined not a political career, but the small vivid image of Patty. Wherever he looked he saw her flitting ahead of him, a figure painted on sunlight. He had never found her so desirable as in those few days since he had irrevocably given her up. His self-denial, his vain endeavours to avoid her and forget her, seemed merely to have poured themselves into the deep rebellious longing of his heart. He lived always now in that hidden country of the mind, where the winds blew free and strong and the sun never set on the endless roads and the far horizon.

And yet, so inexplicable are the laws of the mind, this escape from the tyranny of convention, from the irksome round of practical details, recoiled perversely into an increased joy of living. Because he could escape at will from the routine, he no longer dreaded to return to it. The light which irradiated the image of Patty transfigured the events and circumstances amid which he moved. It shed its glory over external incidents as well as into the loneliest vacancy, the deserted places, of his being. Everything around and within him, the very youth in his soul, became more intense in the hours when he allowed this emotion to assume control of his thoughts. Just to be alive, that was enough! Just to be free again from the sensation of stifling in trivial things, of suffocating in the monotony which rushed over one like a torrent of ashes. Just to escape with Patty into that wild kingdom of the mind where the sun never set!

When he returned home that evening, his mother met him as he entered the hall, and followed him upstairs.

"It is a beautiful evening for the dance, dear. They are having the garden illuminated."

Though he smiled back at her, his smile had that dreamy remoteness, that look of meaning more than it revealed, which was bewildering to an acute and practical intelligence. From long and intimate association with her husband, Mrs. Culpeper was accustomed to dealing with ponderous barriers to knowledge; but this plastic and variable substance of Stephen's resistance, gave her an uncomfortable feeling of helplessness. Even when her son acquiesced, as he did usually in her demands, she suspected that his acquiescence was merely on the surface, that in the depths of his mind he was, as she said to herself resentfully, "holding something back."

"Margaret is looking so sweet," she began in her smoothest tone. "Of course she isn't the beauty that Mary Byrd is, but, in her quiet way, she is very handsome."

"No, she isn't the beauty that Mary Byrd is," conceded Stephen, so pleasantly that she realized he was repeating parrot-like the phrase she had uttered. His thoughts were somewhere else, she observed bitterly; it was perfectly evident that he was not paying the slightest attention to anything that she said.

"You must use your father's car," she remarked, as amiably as before. "It is better to have a chauffeur, and Mary Byrd is going with Willy Tarleton."

"And the other girls?" he asked, for her words appeared at last to have penetrated the haze that enveloped his mind.

"Harriet is spending the night with Lily Whittle, and she will go from there. Of course Victoria has given up dancing since she came home from France, and poor Janet stopped going to parties the year she came out."

This pitiless maternal classification of Janet aroused his amusement. "Well, I'd be glad to take Janet anywhere, even if her nose is a little longer than Mary Byrd's," he retorted. "She's the jolliest of the lot, and she seems to me very well contented as she is."

"Oh, she is," assented his mother eagerly. "I always tell her that her disposition is worth a fortune; and she has a very good figure too. But, of course, a pretty face is the most important thing before marriage and the least important thing afterward," she added shrewdly, as she left him at his door.

In a dream he dressed himself and went down to the dining-room; in a dream he sat through the slow ceremonious supper; in a dream he got into his father's car; and in a dream he stopped for Margaret and drove on again with her fragrant presence beside him. When he entered the glaring, profusely decorated house of the Harrisons, he felt that he was still only half awake to the actuality.

The May night was as warm as summer, and swinging garlands of ferns and peonies concealed electric fans which were suspended from the ceiling. In the midst of the strong wind of the whirring fans, the dancers in the two long drawing-rooms appeared to be blown violently in circles and eddies, like coloured leaves in a high wind. For a few minutes after Stephen had entered, the rooms seemed to him merely a brilliant haze, where the revolving figures appeared and vanished like the colours of a kaleidoscope. Near the door he became aware of the resplendent form of his hostess, stationed appropriately against a background of peonies; and after she had greeted him with absent-minded cordiality, he passed with Margaret in the direction of the thundering sounds which came from the bank of ferns behind which the musicians were hidden.

"Shall we try this?" he shouted into Margaret's ear.

She shook her head. "It's one of those horrid new things." Her high, clear tones pierced the din like the music of a flute. "Let's wait until they play something nice. I hate jazz."

She was looking very pretty in a dress like a white cloud, with garlands of tiny rosebuds on the skirt; and he thought, as he looked at her, that if she had only been a trifle less fastidious and refined, she might easily have won the reputation of a beauty. Nothing but a delicate superiority to the age in which she had been born, stood in the way of her success. Sixty years ago, in modest crinolines, she might have made history; and duels would probably have been fought for her favour. But other times, other tastes, he reflected.

For the rest of the dance, they sat sedately between two bay-trees in green tubs that occupied a corner of the room. Then "something nicer" started,—a concession to Mrs. Harrison's mother, who shared Margaret's disapproval of jazz,—and Stephen and Margaret drifted slowly out among the revolving couples. After the third dance, relief appeared in the person of the young clergyman, who had come to look on; and leaving Margaret with him between the bay-trees, Stephen started eagerly to search for Patty where the dancers were thickest.

Across the room, he had already caught a glimpse of Corinna, in a queenly gown of white and silver brocade. She had stopped dancing now; and standing between Alice Rokeby and John Benham, she was glancing brightly about her, while she waved slowly a fan of white ostrich plumes. Among all these fresh young girls, she could easily hold her own, not because of her beauty, but because of that deeper

fascination which she shed like a light or a perfume. She had the something more than beauty which these girls lacked and could never acquire—a legendary enchantment, the air of romance. Was this the result, he wondered now, of what she had missed in life rather than of what she had attained? Was it because she had never lived completely, because she had preferred the dream to the event, because she had desired and refrained, because she had missed both enchantment and disenchantment—was it because of the profound inadequacy of experience, that she had been able to keep undimmed the glow of her loveliness? It was not that she looked young, he realized while he watched her, but that she looked ageless and immortal, a creature of the spirit. While he gazed at her across the violent whirl of colours in the ballroom, he remembered the evening star shining silver white in the afterglow. Perhaps, who could tell, she may have had the best that life had to give?

Making his way, with difficulty, through the throng, he followed Corinna's protecting gaze, until he saw that it rested on Alice Rokeby, who was wearing a dress that reminded him of wild hyacinths. For a moment, the sight of this other woman's face, with its soft, hungry eyes, and its expression of passive and unresisting sweetness, gave him a start of surprise; and he found himself knocking awkwardly against one of the dancers. Something had happened to her! Something had restored, if only for an evening, the peculiar grace, the appealing prettiness, too trivial and indefinite for beauty, which he recalled vividly now, though for the last year or two he had almost forgotten that she ever possessed it. Yes, something had changed her. She looked to-night as she used to look before he went away, with a faint flush over her whole face and those soft flower-like eyes, lifted admiringly to some man, to any man except Herbert Rokeby. Then, as he disentangled himself from the whirl, and went toward Corinna, she came a step or two forward, and left John Benham and Alice Rokeby together.

"Everything is going well," she said; and he noticed, for the first time, that her charming smile was tinged with irony, as if the humour of the show, not the drama, were holding her attention. "I am having a beautiful time."

He glanced over her shoulder. "What have you done to Mrs. Rokeby?"

She shook her head, with a laugh which, he surmised sympathetically, was less merry than it sounded. "That is my secret. I have a magic you know—but she looks well, doesn't she? I did her hair myself. If you could have seen the way she had it arranged! That dress is very becoming, I think, it makes her eyes look like frosted violets. Her appearance is a success—but 'More brain, O Lord, more brain!'"

"Do you suppose that type will ever pass?" he asked.

She met his inquiring look with eyes that were golden in the coloured light. "Do you suppose that women will ever mean more to men than pegs on which to hang their sentiments? Alice and her kind will always be convenient substitutes for a man's admiration of himself."

"Which he calls love, you think?"

"Which he probably calls by the most romantic name that occurs to him. Have you seen Patty?"

Before he could reply, she turned away to speak to some one who was approaching on her other side; and a minute later, with a joyous smile at Stephen, she floated off in the dance. Was she really as happy as she looked, or was it only a gallant pretence, nothing more?

He had not found Patty yet; and while he stood there, with his eyes eagerly searching the revolving throng for her face, he had a singular visitation, a poignant sense that some rare and beautiful event was eluding

him in its flight, a feeling that the wings of the moment had brushed him like feathers as it sped by into experience. Once or twice in his life before he had received this impression; first in his boyhood when he rose one morning at sunrise to go hunting, and again in France after he had come out of the trenches. Now it was so vivid that it brought with it a sensation of fear, as if happiness itself were escaping his pursuit. He felt that his heart was burning with impatience, and there was a persistent hammering in his ears as if he had been running. What finding her would mean, what the future would bring, he did not know, he did not even seek to discover. All he understood was that the old indifference, the old apathy, the old subjective, tormenting egoism, had given place to a consuming interest, an impassioned delight. He felt only that he was thirsty for life, and that he must drink deep to be satisfied.

Then, suddenly, it seemed to him that the music grew softer and slower, and the wind-blown throng faded from him into a rosy haze. From the centre of the room, borne round and round like a flower on a stream, he saw her face and her romantic eyes looking at him with a deep expectancy that brought a pang to his heart. Her head was thrown back; the short black hair blew about her like mist; and her cheeks and lips were glowing with geranium red. At that instant she was not only the girl he loved—she was youth and spring and adventure.

The impatience had died now; the burning of his heart was cooled; and life had grown miraculously simple and easy. He knew at last what he wanted. His strength of purpose, his will to live had returned to him; and he felt that he was cured; that he was completely himself for the first time since his return. The dark depression, the shadows of the prison, were behind him now. Straight ahead were the roads of that hidden country, and for the first time he saw them flushed with an April bloom.

Then the music stopped; the throng scattered; and she came toward him with a tall young man, very slim and nimble, whose name was Willy Tarleton. In her dress of green and silver, with a wreath of leaves in her hair, she reminded him again of a flower, but of a flower of foam. As he held out his hand the dance began again; Willy Tarleton vanished into air; and Patty stood looking at him in silence. After the tumult of his impatience, it seemed to him that when they met, they must speak words of profound significance; but all he said was,

"It is so warm in here. Will you come out on the porch?"

She shook her head. "I thought you were with Miss Blair?"

"I am—I was—but I must speak to you before I go back. Come on the porch where it is so much quieter."

The deep expectancy was still in her eyes. "I have promised every dance. Mrs. Page saw that my card was filled in the beginning. Why don't you ask some of the girls who haven't any partners? It is so dreadful for them. If men only knew!"

"I don't know, and I don't care. I want you. If you will come on the porch for just three minutes—"

"Yes, it is quieter," she assented, and passed, with a dancing step, through the French window out on the long porch which was hung with Chinese lanterns. Beyond was the wide lawn, suffused with a light that was the colour of amethyst, and beyond the lawn there was a narrow view of Franklin Street, where the flashing lamps of motor cars went by, or shadowy figures moved for a little space in obscurity. From this other world, now and then, the sharp sound of a motor horn punctuated the monotonous rhythm of the music within the house; while under the Chinese lanterns, where the shadows of the poplar leaves trembled like flowers, the struggle in Stephen's heart came to an end—the struggle between tradition and life, between the knowledge of things as they are and the vision of things as they ought to be, between the

conservative and the progressive principle in nature. After the long insensibility, spring was having her way with him, as she was having it with the grass and the flowers and the bloom on the trees. It was one of those moments of awakening, of ecstatic vision, which come only to introspective and imaginative minds—to minds that have known darkness as well as light. In that instant of realization, he knew, beyond all doubt, that he stood not for the past, but for the future, that he stood not for philosophy, but for adventure—for the will to be and to dare. He would choose, once for all, to take the risk of happiness; to conquer inch by inch a little more of the romantic wilderness of wonder and delight. While he stood there, looking down into her eyes, these impressions came to him less in words than in a glorious sense of youth, of power, of security of spirit.

"I looked for you so long," he said, and then breathlessly, as if he feared lest she might escape him, "Oh, Patty, I love you!"

Before she could reply, before he could repeat the words that drummed in his brain, the door into the present swung open, and the dream world, with its flower-like shadows and its violet dusk, vanished.

"Patty!" called Corinna's voice. "Patty, dear, I am looking for you." Corinna, in her rustling white and silver brocade, stepped from the French window out on the porch. "Some one has sent for you—your aunt, I think they said, who is dying—"

The girl started and drew back. Her face changed, while the light faded from her eyes until they became wells of darkness. "I know," she answered. "I must go. I promised that I would go."

"My car is waiting. I will take you," said Corinna.

She turned to enter the house, and Patty, without so much as a look at Stephen's face, went slowly after her.



CHAPTER XXII

THE NIGHT

As the car passed through the deserted streets, Corinna placed her hand on Patty's with a reassuring pressure. Without appearing to do so, she was studying the girl's soft profile, now flashing out in a sudden sharp light, now melting back again into the vagueness of the shadows. What was there about this girl, Corinna asked herself, which appealed so strongly to the protective impulse in her heart? Was it because this undisciplined child, with that curious sporting instinct which supplied the place of Victorian morality, represented for her, as well as for Stephen, some inarticulate longing for the unknown, for the adventurous? Did Patty's charm for them both lie in her unlikeness to everything they had known in the past? In Corinna, as in Stephen, two opposing spirits had battled unceasingly, the realistic spirit which accepted life as it was, and the romantic spirit which struggled toward some unattainable perfection, which endeavoured to change and decorate the actuality. More than Stephen, perhaps, she had faced life; but she had not accepted it without rebellion. She had learned from disappointment to see things as they are; but deep in her heart some unspent fire of romance, some imprisoned esthetic impulse, sought continually to gild and enrich the experience of the moment. And this girl, so young, so ingenuous, so gallant and so appealing, stood in Corinna's mind for the poetic wildness of her spirit, for all that she had seen in a vision and had missed in reality.

When the car reached the Square, it turned sharply north. Sometimes it passed through lighted spaces and sometimes through pools of darkness; and as it went on rapidly, it seemed to Corinna that it was the one solid fact in a night that she imagined. Patty was very still; but Corinna felt the warm clasp of her hand, and heard her soft breathing, which became a part of the muffled undercurrent of the sleeping city. In all those closely packed houses, where the obscurity was broken here and there by a lighted window, other human beings were breathing, sleeping, dreaming, like Patty and herself, of some impractical and visionary to-morrow. Of something which had never been, but still might be! Of something which they had just missed, but might find when the sun rose again! Of a miracle that might occur at any moment and make everything different! It was after midnight; and to Corinna it seemed that the darkness had released the collective spirit of the city, which would retreat again into itself with the breaking of dawn. Once a cry sounded far off and was hushed almost immediately; once a light flashed and went out in the window beneath a roof; but as the car sped on by rows of darkened tenements, the mysterious penumbra of the night appeared to draw closer and closer, as if that also were a phantom of the encompassing obscurity.

"Is this the aunt you told me of, Patty?" asked Corinna abruptly.

"Yes, I went to see her once—not long ago. I promised her that I'd come back when she sent for me. She wanted to tell me something, but she was so ill that she couldn't remember what it was. It was about Father, she said."

"Stephen will come for us after he has taken Margaret home. I gave him the number."

Patty turned and gave her a long look. They were passing under an electric light at the time, and Corinna thought, as she looked into the girl's face, that all the wistful yearning of the night was reflected in her eyes. What had happened, she wondered, to change their sparkling brightness into this brooding expectancy.

The car stopped before the house to which Patty had come with Gershom; and as they got out, they saw that it was entirely dark except for the dim flicker of a jet of gas in the hall. By the pavement a car was standing, and from somewhere at the back there came the sound of a baby crying inconsolably in the darkness. While they entered the hall, and went up the broad old-fashioned flight of stairs, that plaintive wail followed them, growing gradually fainter as they ascended, but never fading utterly into silence. When they reached the second storey, and turned toward the back of the house, a door at the end of the passage opened, and an old woman, with a hunch back, and a piece of knitting in her gnarled hands, came slowly to meet them. Standing there under the jet of gas, which flickered with a hissing noise, she looked at them with glassy impersonal eyes and a face that was as austere as Destiny. Afterward, when Corinna thought over the impressions of that tragic night, she felt that they were condensed into the symbol of the old woman with the crooked back, and the thin crying of the baby which floated up from the darkness below.

"We came to see Mrs. Green," explained Corinna.

The old woman nodded, and as she turned to limp down the passage, her ball of gray yarn slipped from her grasp and rolled after her until Corinna recovered it. In silence the cripple led the way, and in silence they followed her, until she opened the closed door at the end of the hall, and they entered the room, with the sickening sweetish smell and the window which gave on the black hulk of the ailantus tree. From behind a screen, which was covered with faded wall paper, the figure of the doctor emerged while they waited, an ample middle-aged man, with the air of having got into his clothes in a hurry and the face of a pragmatic philosopher. He motioned commandingly for them to approach; and going to the other side of the screen, they found the dying woman gazing at them with eager eyes.

"She is doing nicely," remarked the doctor, with the cheerful alacrity of one in whom familiarity has bred contempt of death. "Keep her quiet. One can never tell about these cases."

He made an explanatory gesture in the direction of his pocket. "I'll go down on the porch and smoke a cigar, and then if she hasn't had a relapse, I think it will be safe for me to go home. You can telephone if you need me. I am only a few blocks away." He went out with a brisk, elastic step, while his hand began to feel for the end of the cigar in his pocket.

"She's bad now," said the old woman. "It's the medicine, but she'll come to in a minute." She brought two wooden chairs with broken legs to the foot of the bed. "You'd better sit down. It may be a long waiting."

"I hope she'll know me," returned Patty. "She must have wanted to see me, or she wouldn't have sent." Her eyes left the stricken face and clung to the calla lily on the window-sill, as they had done that afternoon when she came here with Gershom. The single blossom on the lily had not faded; it was still as perfect as it had been then—only two days ago!—and not one of the closed buds had begun to open beside it.

"Oh, she wanted to see you," answered the old woman, in a croaking voice which seemed to Corinna to contain a sinister note. "As long as she was able to keep on her feet she used to go and sit in the Square just to watch you come out—"

"Do you mean that she cared for me like that?" asked the girl, in a hushed incredulous tone. "Was she really fond of me?"

The cripple turned her glassy eyes on the fresh young face. "Well, I don't know that she was fond," she responded bleakly, "but when you're as bad off as that, there ain't many things that you can think of."

A murmur fell from the lips of the dying woman, while she rolled her head slowly from side to side, as if she were seeking ease less from physical pain than from the thought in her mind. Her thick black hair, matted and damp where it had been brushed back from her forehead, spread like a veil over the pillow; and this sombre background lent a graven majesty to her features. At the moment her head appeared as expressionless as a mask; but in a few minutes, while they waited for returning consciousness, a change passed slowly over the waxen face, and the full colourless lips began to move rapidly and to form broken and disconnected sentences. For a time they could not understand; then the words came in a long sobbing breath. "It has been too long. It has been too long."

"That goes on all the time," said the old woman. "I've been up with her for three nights, and she rambles almost every minute. But sick folks are like that," she concluded philosophically. She had not laid down her knitting for an instant; and standing now beside the bed, she jerked the gray yarn automatically through her twisted fingers. The clicking of the long wooden needles formed an accompaniment to the dry, hard sound of her words.

"Why doesn't some one hush that child?" asked Corinna impatiently. Through the open window a breeze entered, bringing the thin restless wail of the baby.

"The mother tries, but she can't do anything. She thinks the milk went wrong and gave it colic."

The woman on the bed spoke suddenly in a clear voice. "Why doesn't he come?" she demanded. Raising her heavy lids she looked straight into Corinna's eyes, with a lucid and comprehending expression, as if she had just awakened from sleep.

Holding her knitting away from the bed with one hand, and bending over, until her deformed shape made a hill against the bedpost, the old woman screamed into the ear on the pillow, as if the hearer were either deaf or at a great distance. Though her manner was not heartless, it was as impassive as philosophy.

"He is coming," she shrieked.

"Is he bringing the child?"

"She is already here. Can't you see her there at the foot of the bed?"

The large black eyes, drained of any human expression, turned slowly toward the figure of Patty.

"But she is a little thing," said the woman doubtfully. "She is not three years old yet. What has he done with her? He told me that he would take care of her as if she belonged to him."

The old hunchback, bending her inscrutable face, screamed again into the ear on the pillow.

"That was near sixteen years ago, Maggie," she said. "Have you forgotten?"

The woman closed her eyes wearily. "Yes, I had forgotten," she answered. "Time goes so."

But it appeared to Corinna, sitting there, with her eyes on the strip of sky which was visible through the window, that time would never go on. A pitiless fact was breaking into her understanding, shattering wall after wall of incredulity, of conviction that such a thing was too terrible to be true. She longed to get Patty away; but when she urged her in a whisper to go downstairs, the girl only shook her head, without moving her eyes from the haggard face on the pillow. The minutes dragged by like hours while they waited there, in hushed suspense, for they scarcely knew what. Outside in the backyard, the flowering ailantus tree shed a disagreeable odour; downstairs the feeble crying, which had stopped for a little while, was beginning

again. While she remained motionless at the foot of the bed, wild and rebellious thoughts flocked through Corinna's mind. If she had only held back that message! If she had only kept Patty away until it was too late! She thought of the girl a few hours ago, flushed with happiness, dancing under the swinging garlands of flowers, to the sound of that thunderous music. Dancing there, with the restless pleasure of youth, while in another street, so far away that it might have been in a distant city, in a different world even, this woman, with the face of tragedy, lay dying with that fretful wail in her ears. A different world it might have been, and yet what divided her from this other woman except the blind decision of chance, the difference between beauty and ugliness, nothing more. In this dingy room, smelling of dust and drugs and the heavy odour of the ailantus tree, she felt a presence more profoundly real, more poignantly significant, than any material forms—the presence of those elemental forces which connect time with eternity. This little room, within its partial shadow, like the shadow of time itself, was touched with the solemnity of a cathedral. It seemed to Corinna, with her imaginative love of life, that a window into experience had opened sharply, a wall had crumbled. For the first time she understood that the innumerable and intricate divisions of human fate are woven into a single tremendous design.

While they waited there in silence the hours dragged on like years. At last the woman appeared to sleep, and when she opened her eyes again, her gaze had become clear and lucid.

"Have you sent for them?" she asked.

"Yes, I sent for them," answered the old woman, lowering her voice to a natural pitch. "The girl is here."

"Patty? Where is she?"

Drawing her hand from Corinna's clasp, Patty moved slowly to the head of the bed, and standing there beside the deformed old woman, she looked down on the upturned face.

"I came as I promised. Can I help you?" she asked; and her voice was so quiet, so repressed, that Corinna looked at her anxiously. How much had the girl understood? And, if she understood, what difference would it make in her life—and in Stephen's life?

"I couldn't tell you the other day because of Julius," said the woman, in a strangled tone. "I couldn't say things before Julius." Then, glancing toward the door, she asked breathlessly, "Didn't Gideon Vetch come with you?"

"Father?" responded Patty, wonderingly. "Do you want Father to come?"

A smile crossed the woman's face, and she made a movement as if she wanted to raise her head. "Do you call him Father?" she returned in a pleased voice.

At the question, Corinna sprang up and made an impulsive step forward. "Oh, don't!" she cried out pleadingly. "Don't tell her!"

"But he is my father," Patty's tone was stern and accusing. "He is my father."

The smile was still on the woman's face; but while Corinna watched it, she realized that it was unlike any smile she had ever seen before in her life—a smile of satisfaction that was at the same time one of relinquishment.

"They thought I was married to him," she said slowly. "Julius thought, or pretended to think, that he could harm him by making me swear that I was married to him. They gave me drugs. I would have done anything

for drugs—and I did that! But the old woman there knows better. She's got a paper. I made her keep it—about Patty—"

"Don't!" cried Corinna again in a sharper tone. "Oh, can't you see that you must not tell her!"

For the first time the woman turned her eyes away from the girl. "It is because of Gideon Vetch," she answered slowly. "I may get well again, and then I'll be sorry."

"But he would rather you wouldn't." Corinna's voice was full of pain. "You know—you must know, if you know him at all, that he would rather you spared her—"

"Know him?" repeated the woman, and she laughed with a dry, rattling sound. "I don't know him. I never saw him but once in my life."

"You never saw him but once." The words came so slowly from Patty's lips that she seemed to choke over them. "But you said that you knew my mother?"

Again the woman made that dry, rattling sound in her chest. "Your mother never saw him but once," she answered grimly. "She never saw him but once, and that was for a quarter of an hour on the night they were taking her to prison. I would never have told but for Julius," she added. "I would never have told if they hadn't tried to make out that I knew him, and that he was really your father. It would ruin him, they said, and that was what they wanted. But when they bring it out, with the paper they got me to sign, I want you to know that it is a lie—that I did it because I'd have died if I hadn't got hold of the drugs—"

"But he is my father," repeated Patty quite steadily—so steadily that her voice was without colour or feeling.

The only reply that came was a gasping sound, which grew louder and louder, with the woman's struggle for breath, until it seemed to fill the room and the night outside and even the desolate sky. As she lay back, with the arm of the old cripple under her head and her streaming hair, the spasm passed like a stain over her face, changing its waxen pallor to the colour of ashes, while a dull purplish shadow encircled her mouth. For a few minutes, so violent was the struggle for air, it appeared to Corinna that nothing except death could ever quiet that agonized gasping; but while she waited for the end, the sound became gradually fainter, and the woman spoke quite plainly, though with an effort that racked not only her strangled chest, but her entire body. Each syllable came so slowly, and now and then so faintly, that there were moments when it seemed that the breath in that tormented body would not last until the words had been spoken.

"You were going on three years old when he first saw you. They were taking me away to prison—that's over now, and it don't matter—but I hadn't any chance—" The panting began again; but by force of will, the woman controlled it after a minute, and went on, as if she were measuring her breath inch by inch, almost as if it were a material substance which she was holding in reserve for the end. "Your father died the first year I married him, and things went from bad to worse—there's no use going over that, no use—They were taking me to prison from the circus, and I had you in my arms, when Gideon Vetch came by and saw me—" Again there was a pause and a desperate battle for air; and again, after it was over, she went on in that strangled whisper, while her eyes, like the eyes of a drowning animal, clung neither to Patty nor Corinna, but to the austere face of the old hunchback. "'What am I to do with the child?' I asked, and he stepped right out of the circus crowd, and answered 'Give me the child. I like children'—" An inarticulate moan followed, and then she repeated clearly and slowly. "Just like that—nothing more—'Give me the child. I like children.' That was the first time I ever saw him. He had come to see some of the people in

the circus, and I've never seen him since then except in the Square. The trial went against me, but that's all over. Oh, I'm tired now. It hurts me. I can't talk—"

She broke into terrible coughing; and the old woman, dropping her knitting for the first time since they had entered the room, seized a towel from a chair by the bed. "Talking was too much for her," she said. "I thought she'd pull through. She was so much better—but talking was too much."

"She is so ill that she doesn't know what she is saying," murmured Corinna in the girl's ear. "She is out of her mind."

"No, she isn't out of her mind," replied Patty quietly. "She isn't out of her mind." In her ball gown of green and silver, like the colours of sunlit foam, with a wreath of artificial leaves in her hair, her loveliness was unearthly. "It is every bit true. I know it," she reiterated.

"She's bleeding again," muttered the old woman. "You'd better find the doctor. I ain't used to stopping hemorrhages." Then, as Corinna went out of the room, she added querulously to Patty: "She didn't have no business trying to talk; but she would do it. She said she'd do it if it killed her—and I reckon she don't mind much if it does—She'd have killed herself sooner than this if I'd let her alone." From the street below there came the sound of a motor horn; then the noise of a car running against the curbstone; and then the opening and shutting of a door, followed by rapid footsteps on the stairs.

"That's the doctor now, I reckon," remarked the old woman; but the words had scarcely left her lips when the door opened, and Corinna came back into the room with Gideon Vetch.

"Where is Patty?" he asked anxiously. "She oughtn't to be here."

"Yes, I ought to be here," answered Patty. As she turned toward Gideon Vetch, she swayed as if she were going to fall, and he caught her in his arms. "Go home, daughter," he said almost sternly. "You oughtn't to be here. Mrs. Page, can't you make her go home?"

"I have tried," responded Corinna; then a moan from the bed reached her, and she turned toward the woman who lay there. To die like that with nobody caring, with nobody even observing it! Exhausted by the loss of blood, the woman had fallen back into unconsciousness, and the towel the old cripple held to her lips was stained scarlet.

"The doctor had gone to bed. He will come as soon as he gets dressed," said Corinna. "He warned us to keep her quiet."

"If he don't hurry, she'll be gone before he gets here," replied the old woman, looking round over her twisted shoulder.

"Oh, Father, Father!" cried Patty, flinging her arms about his neck; and then over again like a frightened child, "Father, Father!"

He patted her head with a large consoling hand. "There, there, daughter," he returned gently. "A little thing like that won't come between you and me."

With his arm still about her, he drew her slowly to the bedside, and stood looking down on the dying woman and the old cripple, who hovered over her with the stained towel in her hand.

"I don't even know her name," he said, and immediately afterward, "She must have had a hell of a life!" Though there was a wholesome pity in his voice, it was without the weakness of sentimentality. He had

done what he could, and he was not the kind to worry over events which he could not change. For a few minutes he stood there in silence; then, because it was impossible for his energetic nature to remain inactive in an emergency, he exclaimed suddenly, "The doctor ought to be here!" and turning away from the bed, went rapidly across the room and through the half open door into the hall.

Outside the darkness was dissolving in a drab light which crept slowly up above the roofs of the houses; and while they waited this light filled the yard and the room and the passage beyond the door which Gideon Vetch had not closed. Far away, through the heavy boughs of the ailantus tree, day was breaking in a glimmer of purple-few birds were twittering among the leaves. Along the high brick wall a starved gray cat was stealing like a shadow. Drawing her evening wrap closer about her bare shoulders, Corinna realized that it was already day in the street.

"She's gone," said the old hunchback, in a crooning whisper. Her twisted hand was on the arm of the dead woman, which stretched as pallid and motionless as an arm of wax over the figured quilt. "She's gone, and she never knew that he had come." With a gesture that appeared as natural as the dropping of a leaf, she pressed down the eyelids over the expressionless eyes. "Well, that's the way life is, I reckon," she remarked, as an epitaph over the obscure destiny of Mrs. Green.

"Yes, that's the way life is," repeated Corinna under her breath. Already the old cripple had started about her inevitable ministrations: but when Corinna tried to make Patty move away from the bedside, the girl shook her head in a stubborn refusal.

"I am trying to believe it," she said. "I am trying to believe it, and I can't." Then she looked at them calmly and steadily. "I want to think it out by myself," she added. "Would you mind leaving me alone in here for just a few minutes?"

Though there was no grief in her voice—how could there be any grief, Corinna asked herself?—there was an accent of profound surprise and incredulity, as of one who has looked for the first time on death. Standing there in her spring-like dress beside the dead woman who had been her mother, Corinna felt intuitively that Patty had left her girlhood behind her. The child had lived in one night through an inner crisis, through a period of spiritual growth, which could not be measured by years. Whatever she became in the future, she would never be again the Patty Vetch that Corinna and Stephen had known.

Yes, she had a right to be alone. Beckoning to the old woman to follow her, Corinna went out softly, closing the door after her.



CHAPTER XXIII

THE DAWN

Outside in the narrow passage, smelling of dust and yesterday's cooking, the pallid light filtered in through the closed window; and it seemed to Corinna that this light pervaded her own thoughts until the images in her mind moved in a procession of stark outlines against a colourless horizon. In this unreal world, which she knew was merely a distorted impression of the external world about her, she saw the figure of the dead woman, still and straight as the effigy of a saint, the twisted shape of the old hunchback, and after these the shadow of the starved cat stealing along the top of the high brick wall. What was the meaning in these things? Where was the beauty? What inscrutable purpose, what sardonic humour, joined together beauty and ugliness, harmony and discord, her own golden heritage with the drab destinies of that dead woman and this work-worn cripple?

"I can't stand it any longer," she thought. "I must breathe the open air, or I shall die."

Then, just as she was about to hurry toward the stairs, she checked herself and stood still because she realized that the old woman had followed her and was droning into her ear.

"Yes, ma'am, that's the way life is," the impersonal voice was muttering, "but it ain't the only way that it is, I reckon. I sees so many sick and dying folks that you'd think I was obliged to look at things unnatural-like. But I don't, not me, ma'am. It ain't all that way, with nothing but waiting and wanting, and then disappointment. Even Maggie had her good times somewhere in the past. You can't expect to be always dressed in spangles and riding bareback, that's what I used to say to her. You've got to take your share of bad times, same as the rest of us. And look at me now. I've done sick nursing for more'n fifty years—as far back as I like to look—but it ain't all been sick nursing. There's been a deal in it besides.

"Naw'm, I've got a lot to be thankful for when I begin to take stock." Her wrinkled face caught the first gleam of sunlight that fell through the unwashed window panes. "I've done sick nursing ever since I was a child almost; but I've managed mighty well all things considering, and I've saved up enough to keep me out of the poor house when I get too old to go on. When I give up I won't have to depend on charity, and the city won't have to bury me either when I'm dead. And I've got a heap of satisfaction out of my red geraniums too. I don't reckon you ever saw finer blooms—not even in a greenhouse. Naw'm, I ain't been the complaining sort. I've got a lot to be thankful for, and I know it."

Her old eyes shone; her sunken mouth was trembling, not with self-pity, Corinna realized, with a pang that was strangely like terror, but with the courage of living. The pathos of it appeared intolerable for a moment; and gathering her cloak about her, Corinna felt that she must cover her eyes and fly before she broke out into hysterical screaming. Then the terror passed; and she saw, in a single piercing flash of insight, that what she had mistaken for ugliness was simply an impalpable manifestation of beauty. Beauty! Why it was everywhere! It was with her now in this squalid house, in the presence of this crippled old woman, unmoved by death, inured to poverty, screwing, grinding, pinching, like flint to the crying baby, and yet cherishing the blooms of her red geranium, her passionate horror of the poor house, and her dream of six feet of free earth not paid for by charity at the end. Yes, that was the way of life. Blind as a mole to the universe, and yet visited by flashes of unearthly light.

"Thank you," said Corinna hurriedly. "I must go down. I must get a breath of air, but I will come back in a little while." Then she started at a run down the stairs, while the old woman gazed after her, as if the flying figure, in the cloak of peacock-blue satin and white fur, was that of a demented creature. "Air!" she repeated, with scornful independence. "Air!", and turning away in disgust, she limped painfully back to wait outside of the closed door. Here, when she had seated herself in a sagging chair, she lifted her bleak eyes to the smoke-stained ceiling, and repeated for the third time in a tone of profound contempt: "Air!"

At the foot of the stairs, Corinna ran against Gideon Vetch. "She died soon after you went out," she said, "but Patty is still there."

"I'll go up to her," he answered; and then as he placed his foot on the bottom step, he looked back at her, and added, "I tried to spare her this."

She assented almost mechanically. Fatigue had swept over her from head to foot like some sinister drug and she felt incapable of giving out anything, even sympathy, even the appearance of compassion. "Then it is all true?" she asked. "Patty is not your child?"

A shadow crossed his face, but he did not hesitate in his reply. "I never had a child. I was never married."

"You took her like that—because the mother was going to prison?"

He nodded. "She was a child. What difference did it make whether she was mine or not? She was the nicest little thing you ever saw. She is still."

"Yes, she is still. But you never knew what became of the mother?"

"I didn't know her real name. I didn't want to. The circus people called her Queenie, that was all I knew. She'd stuck a knife into a man in a jealous rage, and he happened to die. They said the trial would be obliged to go against her. I was leaving California that night, and I brought the child with me. I have never been back—" He spread out his broad hand with a gesture that was strangely human. "You would have done it in my place?"

She shook her head. "No, I should have wanted to, but I couldn't. I am not big enough for that."

He was already ascending the stairs, but at her words, he turned and smiled down on her. "It was nothing to make a fuss about," he said. "Anybody would have done it."

Then he mounted the stairs lightly for his great height, taking two steps at a time, while she passed out on the porch where Stephen was waiting for her. As he rose wearily from the wicker rocking chair beside the empty perambulator, she felt as if he were a stranger. In that one night she seemed to have put the whole universe between her and the old order that he represented.

"I kept my car waiting for you," he began. "It was better to let your man go home."

She smiled at him in the pale light, and he broke out nervously: "You look as if you would drop. What have they done to you?" Though she wore the cloak of peacock-blue over her evening gown, the pointed train wound on the floor behind her, and the fan of white ostrich plumes, which she had forgotten to leave in the car, was still in her hand. Her face was wan and drawn; there were violet circles under her eyes; and she looked as if she had grown ten years older since the evening before. It was the outward impression of the night, he knew. In this house one passed back again into the power of time; youth could not be prolonged here for a single night.

"I don't know what it means," he said, with a mixture of exasperation and curiosity. "I wish you would tell me what it means."

"I feel," she answered, in an expressionless tone, as if the insensibility of her nerves had passed into her voice, "that I have faced life for the first time."

"Tell me what it means," he reiterated impatiently.

Dropping into the chair from which he had risen, she drew her train aside while the doctor passed them hurriedly, with a muttered apology, and went into the house. Then, leaning forward, with the fan clasped in her hands, and her eyes on the straight deserted street, which ended abruptly on the brow of a hill, she repeated word for word all that the dying woman had said. The sun had not yet risen, but a faint opalescent glow suffused the sky in the east, and flushed with a delicate colour the round cobblestones in the street and the herring-bone pattern of the pavement, where blades of grass sprouted among the bricks. Though she did not look up at Stephen's face, she was aware while she talked of some subtle emanation of thought outside of herself, as if the struggle in his mind had overflowed mechanical processes and physical boundaries, and was escaping into the empty street and the city beyond. And this silent struggle, so charged with intensity that it produced the effect of a cry, became for her merely a part, a single voice, in that greater struggle for victory over circumstances which went on ceaselessly day and night in the surrounding houses. Everywhere about her there was the vague groping toward some idea of freedom, toward independence of spirit; everywhere there was this perpetual striving toward a universe that was larger. The dwellers in this crowded house, with their vision of space and sunlight; the village with its vision of a city; the city with its vision of a country; the country with its vision of a republic of the world—all these universal struggles were condensed now into the little space of a man's consciousness. To Corinna, in whose veins flowed the blood of Malvern Hill and Cold Harbor, it seemed that the greater victory must lie with those who charged from out the cover of philosophy into the mystery of the unknown. If she had been in Stephen's place, she knew that she should have taken the risk, that she should have flung herself into the enterprise of life as into a voyage of discovery. Yet, at the moment, appreciating all that it meant to him, she asked herself if she had been wise to let him see the thought in her mind. For an instant, after telling him, she hesitated, and in this instant Stephen spoke.

"So he isn't her father?"

"No, he isn't her father. He had never seen her mother; he did not even know her name, for he met the woman by accident when she was arrested in the circus. Patty was over two years old then—about two and a half, I think. Gideon Vetch took the child because of an impulse—a very human impulse of pity—but he knew nothing of her parentage. He knows nothing now, not even her real name. It is much worse than we ever imagined. Try to understand it. Try to take it in clearly before you act rashly. There is still time to weigh things—to stop and reflect. Nothing whatever is known of Patty's birth, except that her father, so the woman said, died in the first year of their marriage, before the child was born, and less than two years later the mother was sent to prison for killing another man—"

She broke off hurriedly, wiping her lips as if the mere recital of the sordid facts had stained them with blood. It all sounded so horrible as she repeated it—so incredibly evil!

"Oh, my dear boy, try to take it in however much it may hurt you," she pleaded, turning a coward not on her own account, not even on his, but for the sake of something deeper and more sacred which belonged to them both and to the tradition for which they stood. A passionate longing seized her now to protect Stephen from the risk that she had urged him to take.

"I understand. It is terrible for her," he answered.

"I hate you to see Patty. Poor child, she looks seared." Then a possible way occurred to her, even though she hated herself while she suggested it. "I am not sure that it is wise for you to wait. There are so many things you must think of. There is first of all your family—"

He laughed shortly. "It is late in the day to remember that."

"I know." A look of compunction crossed her face. "Forgive me."

"Of course I think of them," he said presently. "Poor Dad. He is the best of us all, I believe." Though there was an expression of pain in his eyes, she noticed that the unnatural lethargy, the nervous irritation, had disappeared. He looked as if a load had dropped from his shoulders.

As with many women who have reconciled themselves to the weakness of a man, the first sign of his strength was more than a surprise, it was almost a shock to her. She had believed that her knowledge of him was perfect; yet she saw now that there had been a single flaw in her analysis, and that this flaw was the result of a fundamental misconception of his character. For she had forgotten that, conservative and apparently priggish as he was, he was before all things a romantic in temperament; and the true romantic will shrink from the ordinary risk while he accepts the extraordinary one. She had forgotten that men of Stephen's nature are incapable of small sacrifices, and yet at the same time capable of large ones; that, though they may not endure petty discomforts with fortitude, they are able, in moments of vivid experience, to perform acts of conspicuous and splendid nobility. For the old order was not merely the outward form of the conservative principle, it was also the fruit of heroic tradition.

"You must think it over, Stephen," she pleaded. "Go away now, and try to realize all that it will mean to you."

"Thinking doesn't get me anywhere," he replied. His face was pale and thoughtful; and Corinna knew, while she watched him, that he had found freedom at last; that he had come into his manhood. "I've made my choice, and I'll stand by it to-day even if I regret it to-morrow. You've got to take chances; to leave the safe road and strike out into open country. That's living. Otherwise you might as well be dead. I can't just cling like moss to institutions that other people have made; to the things that have always been. I've got to take chances—and I'm enough of a sport not to whine if the game goes against me—"

The part of Corinna's nature that was not cautious, but reckless, the part in her whose source was imagination and impulse, thrilled in sympathy with his resolve. Though she gazed down the straight deserted street, her eyes were looking beyond the sprouting weeds and the cobblestones to some starry flower which bloomed only in an invisible world.

"I understand, dear," she answered softly. "I can't tell whether or not it is the safe way; but I know it is the gallant way."

"It is the only way," he responded steadily. "If I am ever to make anything of my life, this is the test. I see that I've got to meet it. I shall probably have to meet it every day of my life—but, by Jove, I'll meet it! Patty isn't just Patty to me. She is strength and courage. She is the risk of the future. I suppose she is the pioneer in my blood, or my mind. I can't help what she came from, nor can she. I've got to take that as I take everything else, with the belief that it is worth all the cost. The thing I feel now is that she has given me back myself. She has given me a free outlook on life—"

He stopped abruptly, for there was the sound of footsteps in the house, and after a minute or two, Patty and

Gideon Vetch came out on the porch. The girl looked, except for the red of her mouth, as if the blood had been drawn from her veins, and her eyes were like dark pansies. All the light had faded from them, changing even their colour.

"Patty," said Stephen; and he made a step toward her, with his hands outstretched as if he would gather her to him. Then he stopped and fell back, for the girl was shrinking away from him with a look of fear.

"I can't talk now," she answered, smiling with hard lips. "I am tired. I can't talk now." Running ahead she went down the steps, through the gate, and into Vetch's car which was standing beside the curbstone.

"She's worn out," explained Vetch. "I'll take her home, and you'd better try to get some sleep, Mrs. Page. You look as tired as Patty."

"Let me go with you," returned Corinna. "Your car is closed, and Patty and I are both bareheaded." For a moment she turned back to put her hand on Stephen's arm. "I must sleep," she said. "I shan't go to the shop to-day."

Vetch was waiting at the door of the car, and when she stumbled over her train, she fell slightly against him. "How exhausted you are," he observed gently, "and what a rock you are to lean on!"

She looked at him with a smile. "Those are the very words I've used about you."

He laughed and reddened, and she saw the glow of pleasure kindle in his unclouded blue eyes. "Even rocks crumble when we put too much weight on them," he responded, "but since you have done so much for us, perhaps you may be able to convince Patty that nothing can make any difference between her and me. Won't you try to see that, daughter?"

"Oh, Father!" exclaimed Patty with a sob, "it makes all the difference in the world!"

"There it is," said Vetch with anxious weariness. "That is all I can get out of her."

"She is so tired," replied Corinna. "Let her rest." Though her gaze was on the street, she saw still the dusk beyond the ailantus tree and the old woman, with the crooked back, pressing down the eyelids over those staring eyes.

They did not speak again through the short drive; and when they reached the house and entered the hall, Patty turned for the first time to Corinna. "I can never tell you," she began, "I can never tell you—" Then, with a strangled sob, she broke away and ran to the staircase beyond the library.

"Let her rest," said Corinna, as Vetch came with her on the porch. "Leave her to herself. She needs sleep, but she is very young—and for youth there is no despair that does not pass."

"You are as tired as she is," he returned.

She nodded. "I am going home to sleep, but the look of that child worries me."

"I kept it from her for sixteen years," he said slowly, "and she found out by an accident."

"I never suspected, or I might have prevented it."

"No, I trusted too much to chance. I have always trusted to chance."

"I think," she said, "that you have trusted most to your good instincts."

He smiled, and she saw that he was deeply touched. "Well, I'm trusting to them now," he responded. "They have led me between two extremes, and it looks as if they had led me into a nest of hornets. I've got them all against me, but it isn't over yet, by Jove! It is a long road that has no turning—"

They had descended the steps together, and walking a little way beyond the drive, they stood in the bright green grass looking up at the clear gold of the sunrise.

"There is a meeting to-night," she said.

"Of the strikers—yes, I may win them. I can generally win people if they let me talk—but the trouble goes deeper than that. It isn't that I can't carry them with me for an hour. It is simply that I can't make any of them see where we are going. It is a question not of loyalty, but of understanding. They can't understand anything except what they want."

"Whether you win or not," she answered, "I am glad that at last I am on your side."

His face lighted. "On my side? Even if it means failure?"

As she looked up at him the sunrise was in her face. The sky was turning slowly to flame-colour, and each dark pointed leaf of the magnolia tree stood out illuminated against a background of fire. "It may be failure, but it is magnificent," she said.

He was smiling down on her from his great height; and while she stood there in that clear golden air, she felt again, as she had felt twice before when she was with him, that beneath the depth of her personal life, in that buried consciousness which belonged to the ages of being, something more real than any actual experience she had ever known was responding to the look in his eyes and the sound of his voice. All that she had missed in life—completeness, perfection—seemed to shine about her for an instant before it passed on into the sunlight. A fancy, nothing more! A fading gleam of some lost wildness of youth! For if she had spoken the thought in her mind while she stood there, she would have said, "Give me what I have never had. Make me what I have never been." But she did not speak it; the serene friendliness of her look did not alter; and the impulse vanished as swiftly as the shadow of a bird in flight.

"I thank you," he answered in a low voice. "I shall remember that."

The moment had passed, and she held out her hand with a smile. "I shall come to stay with Patty while you are at the meeting to-night," she said; and then, as she turned away to the car, he walked beside her in silence.

A little later, when she looked back from the gate, she saw him standing in the bright grass with the sunrise above his head.



CHAPTER XXIV

THE VICTORY OF GIDEON VETCH

That evening, when Corinna got out of her car before the Governor's house, Stephen Culpeper opened the door, and came down the steps.

"I waited for you," he said; and then as the car moved away, he took her hand and turned back to the porch.

"I couldn't come before," explained Corinna. "I had a headache all day, and it kept me in bed. Have you seen Patty?"

"I have seen her, but that is all. I can do nothing with her."

"But she cares for you."

"She doesn't deny it. That's not the trouble. Something about Vetch stands in the way. I can't make out what she means."

"Let me talk to her," responded Corinna reassuringly. "Is the Governor here?"

"No, he has gone to the strikers' meeting. They must reach some decision to-night it appears. I have talked with him, and I believe he will stand firm whatever happens. It means, I think, that his career is over."

"It is too late for him to win over the conservative forces?"

"It was always too late. In a battle of extremes the most dangerous position is in the centre."

"He told me something like that once. The trouble with him is that he hasn't a point of view, but a vision. He sees the whole, and politics is only a little part of it."

"Yes, he sees a human fight, while they are trying to make a political squabble. He may win them over to-night, but this is only the beginning. The real fight is against individual self-interest." He laughed in an undertone. "I remember he told me once that the only trouble with Christianity was the Christians. 'You can't have Christianity', he said, 'until Christians are different'. That's just as true, of course, of politics. The only trouble with politics is the politicians."

"Well, it's a muddle," she responded impatiently. "However you look at it. Come back in an hour or two, and I may be able to help you." Her cheerful smile shone on him for an instant; then she entered the house and closed the door after her.

In one of the worn leather chairs in the library, Patty was sitting perfectly still, with her eyes fixed on the orderly row of papers on the Governor's desk. She wore a white dress with a black ribbon at her waist, and in the dim light, with her pale face and her cloudy hair, she had a ghostly look as if she would turn to mist at a touch. When Corinna entered, she rose and held out her hands. "You are so good," she said. "I never dreamed that any body could be so good and so beautiful too!"

"My dear," began Corinna brightly, and while she spoke she drew the girl to the leather-covered couch by

the window, and sat down still holding the cold hands in her warm ones. "So you are going to marry Stephen."

"I can't," replied Patty, and she turned her face slightly away as if she shrank from meeting Corinna's eyes. "I can't after what I know. I can't do it because of Father."

"Because of your father?" repeated Corinna. "But surely your father wishes you to be happy?"

"Oh, I know he does. It isn't that. But this will all come out. That is what Julius Gershom meant when he threatened. They are trying to do him some harm—Father, I mean—"

"I understand that, but still how in the world—"

Before she could finish her sentence Patty interrupted in an hysterical voice—the voice of youth that is always dramatic: "Nobody will ever mean as much to me as Father does," she cried. "I know that now. I've known it ever since I found out that he began it just out of kindness—that I had no claim on him of any kind—"

"That is natural, dear, but still I don't understand."

Rising from the couch, Patty moved to a chair in front of Corinna, and sinking into it, began nervously plaiting and unplaiting a fold of her white dress. "I can do anything with Julius Gershom if I am nice to him," she murmured. "If he stands by Father most of the others will also."

With a gasp Corinna sat up very straight and tried to see Patty's eyes in the obscurity. What sordid horror was the child facing now? What unspeakable degradation? "You can't think of marrying Gershom, Patty!" she exclaimed, with a gesture of loathing. "You must be out of your mind even to dream of it!"

"I can make him do anything I want if I will promise to marry him," she answered in a steady voice, though a shiver of aversion passed over her.

Corinna drew her breath sharply, restraining at the same time an impulse to laugh. Oh, the mock heroics of youth! Of youth with its fantastic heroism and its dauntless inexperience! "If you only knew," she breathed indignantly, "if you only knew what marriage means!"

Patty turned and gave her a long look. "I could do more than that for Father," she answered.

So this was the other side of Gideon Vetch—of that man of ignoble circumstances and infinite magnanimity! How could any one understand him? How, above all, could any one judge him? How could one fathom his power for good or for evil? She beheld him suddenly as a man who was inspired by an exalted illusion—the illusion of human perfectibility. In the changing world about her, the breaking up and the renewing, the dissolution and readjustment of ideals; in the modern conflict between the spirit that accepts and the spirit that rejects; in this age of destiny—was not an unconquerable optimism, an invincible belief in life, the one secure hope for the future? It is the human touch that creates hope, she thought; and the power of Gideon Vetch was revealed to her as simply the human touch magnified into a force.

She became aware after a minute that Patty was speaking. "I can never tell you—I can never tell any one what he used to be to me when I was a little girl, and he was very poor. Sometimes—for a long time—I couldn't have a nurse, and he would dress and undress me, and leave me with the neighbours when he went away to work. I can see him now heating milk for me over an old oil lamp. Once when I was ill he

sat up night after night with me. Oh, I don't mean that he was perfect, but that he was kind—always. I know the quarrels he had—that he has still with the people who won't go his way. The one thing he can't forgive in people is that they never forget themselves, that they never think of anything except what they want. That angers him, and he flies out. I know that. But there's no use trying I can't make anybody, I can't make even you, know all that he did for me—" The words ended in tears; and she sat there, lost in memory, while the dim light seemed to absorb her white dress and her pale features and the small hand that lay on the fringe of her black sash.

"My dear, my dear," murmured Corinna because she could think of no words that sounded less ineffectual.

There was a ring at the doorbell while she spoke and after a pause which appeared to her interminable, she heard the shuffling tread of old Abijah, and then the clear tone of Stephen's voice, followed immediately by another speaker who sounded vaguely familiar, though she could not recall now where she had listened to him before. It was not Julius Gershom, she knew, though it might be some man that she had heard at a meeting.

"Let me speak to Mrs. Page first," said Stephen. "Ask her if she will come into the drawing-room."

For an instant Corinna hung back, with the chill of dread at her heart; and in that instant Patty flew past her like a startled spirit, while the ends of her black sash streamed behind her. With the penetrating insight of love the girl had surmised, had seen, had understood, before a word of explanation had reached her, before even the door had swung open, and she had met the blanched faces of the men in the hall. "It is Father," she said quietly. "They have hurt him. Oh, I knew all the time that they were going to hurt him!"

Corinna, standing close at her side without touching her, for some intuition told her that the girl did not wish any support, was aware of the faces of these men, flickering slowly, like glimmering ashen lights, out of the shadows in the hall—first Stephen's face, with its shocked compassionate eyes; then the face of old Darrow, rock-hewn, relentless; then the face of her father, which even tragedy could not startle out of its ceremonious reserve; and beyond these familiar faces, it seemed to her that the collective face of the crowd gazed back at her with an expression which was one neither of surprise nor terror, but of the stony fortitude of the ages. Beyond this there was the open door and the glamour of the spring night, and in the night another group with its dark burden.

"I met them just outside, and they told me," said Stephen. "Gershom thinks it was an accident, but we shall never know probably. Two opposing sides were fighting it out. A question had come up—nobody can remember what it was—nothing important, I think—but two men came to blows and he got in between them—he stood in the way—and somebody shot him—"

He was talking, Corinna realized, in an effort to hold Patty's gaze, to divert her eyes by the force of his look from the burden which the men were bringing slowly up the steps outside and into the hall.

"Nobody meant to harm him," said Gershom suddenly, speaking from the edge of the group. "The pistol went off by mistake. He got in the way before any one saw him—" But from his look, Corinna knew that it was not an accident, that they had shot him because he came between them and the thing that they wanted.

The slow steps crossed the hall into the library, and above the measured beat and pause of the sound, Corinna heard the voice of Vetch as distinctly as if he were standing there before her in the centre of the group. "The loneliest man on earth is the one who stands between two extremes." Yes, at the end as well as at the beginning, he had stood between two extremes! Then Patty's cry of anguish floated to her from the room across the hall into which they had taken him. "Father! Father!" Only that one word over and over

again. "Father! Father!" Only that one word uttered steadily and softly in a tone of imploring helplessness like the wail of a frightened child. It never ceased, this piteous sobbing, until at last the doctor went out, and left Corinna alone with the girl and Gideon Vetch. Then Patty fell on her knees beside the couch where he lay, and a silence that was almost suffocating closed over the room.

The house had become very still. While Corinna waited there at Patty's side, the only noise came from the restless movement of the city, which sounded far off and vaguely ominous, like the disturbance in a nightmare from which one has just awakened. She had turned off the unshaded electric light; and for a few minutes Patty knelt alone in a merciful dimness, which left her white dress and the composed features of the dead man the only luminous spots in the room. It was as if these two pallid spaces were living things in the midst of inanimate darkness. For a moment only this impression lasted, for overcome by the pathos of it, Corinna crossed the room with noiseless footsteps and lighted the wax candles on the mantelpiece.

Death had come so suddenly that, lying there in the trembling light of the candles, Vetch appeared to be merely resting a moment in his energetic career. His rugged features still wore their look of exuberant vitality, of triumphant faith. There was about him even in death the radiance of his indestructible illusion. As Corinna looked down on him, it seemed incredible to her that he should not stretch himself in a moment, and rise and go out again into the struggle of living. It seemed incredible that his work should be finished for ever when he was still so unspent, so full of tireless activity. Was death always like this—a victory of material and mechanical forces? An accident, an automatic gesture, and the complex power which stood for the soul of Gideon Vetch was dissolved—or released. The crumbling of a rock, the falling of a leaf! Her eyes left the face of the dead man, left Patty's bowed head at her side, and travelled beyond the open window into the glamour and mystery of the night, and beyond the night into the sky—

There was a knock at the door, and she turned away and went out to join the men in the hall. What had it meant to them, she wondered. How much had they understood? How much had they ever understood of that symbol of a changing world which they had loved and hated under the name of Gideon Vetch?

"Give her a few minutes more," she said. "Leave her alone with him."

There were four men waiting—her father, Stephen, old Darrow, and Julius Gershom—and these four, she felt, were the men who had known Vetch best, and who, with the exception of Darrow, had perhaps understood least what he meant. No one had understood him, least of all, she saw now, had she herself understood him—

Gershom spoke first. "He was the biggest man we've ever had," he said, "and we never doubted it—" Yet he had never for an instant, Corinna knew, seen Vetch as he really was, or recognized the end for which he was fighting.

"He was the only one who could have held us together," sighed old Darrow, and his face looked as if a searing iron had passed over it. "This will put us back at least fifty years—"

The Judge was gazing through the open door out into the night, where lamps shone in the Square and a luminous cloud hung over the city, that city which was outgrowing its youth, outgrowing the barriers of tradition, outgrowing alike the forces of reaction and the forces of progress.

"A few months," he said slowly, "and nothing accomplished that one can point out and say that we owe directly to him. Yet I doubt if a single one of us will ever forget him. I doubt if a single one of us will ever be exactly, in every little way, just what we should have been if we had never known Vetch, or spoken to him. The merest ripple of change, perhaps, but it counts—it counts because in touching him we touched a

humanity that is as rare as genius itself." Yet they had killed him, Corinna knew, because they could not understand him!

For a moment there was silence, and then Stephen spoke in a whisper: "There are some things that you can't see until you stand far enough away from them. I doubt if any of us really saw him until to-night. To-morrow he will begin to live." As he lifted his eyes to Corinna's face, she saw in them a fidelity that pledged itself to the future.

"Go to Patty," she whispered. "Go to her and repeat what you have said to us." Putting her hand on his arm, she led him into the room where the girl was kneeling, and then drew back while he went quickly forward. Watching from the threshold, she saw Patty look up uncertainly, and rise slowly from the floor where she had been kneeling; she saw Stephen put out his arms with a movement of love and pity; and she saw the girl hesitate for an instant, and then turn to his clasp as a hurt child turns for comfort. That was youth, that was the future, thought Corinna, and closing the door softly, she left them together. Yes, youth was for the future, and for herself, *she* realized with a pang, were the things that she had never had in the past. Only the things that she had never had were really hers! Only the unfulfilled, she saw in that moment of illuminating insight, is the permanent.

Passing the group in the hall, she went out on the porch, and looked with swimming eyes over the fountain into the Square. Beyond the white streams of electricity and the black patterns of the shadows, she saw the sharp outlines of the city, and beyond that the immense blue field of the sky sown thickly with stars. Life was there—life that embraced success and failure, illusion and disillusion, birth and death. In the morning she would go back to it—she would begin again—in the morning she would will herself to pick up the threads of middle age as lightly as Stephen and Patty would pick up the threads of youth. To-morrow she would start living again—but to-night for a few hours she would rest from life; she would look back now, as she had looked back that morning, to where a man was standing in the bright grass with the sunrise above his head.

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